“WOMAN WHY WEEPEST THOU?” MARY MAGDALENE, THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF HOLY TEARS IN LATE MEDIEVAL DEVOTIONAL PAINTING

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Saint Mary Magdalene, you came with springing tears to the spring of mercy, Christ; from him your burning thirst was abundantly refreshed; through him your sins were forgiven; by him your bitter sorrow was consoled.¹

When the risen Christ appeared to a weeping and distraught Mary Magdalene in the garden, she was lamenting the loss of her master. Through her veil of tears, Christ revealed himself to her and instructed her to tell the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:15–18). The response to her tears was the opportunity to behold and interact with Christ. This example of a repentant sinner who, through her tears, was granted an encounter with Christ is a powerful one and it becomes an increasingly popular theme in mysticism and northern devotional painting of the later Middle Ages.² Equally powerful and popular were images and visions of the grief-stricken Virgin Mary witnessing her son’s agonizing death


² In this essay, I am only considering the visual tradition of the late medieval period in Northern Europe. For an examination of holy tears and the Italian response, see the following essays by Federica Veratelli: “Lacrime dipinte, lacrime reali. Rappresentare il dolore nel Quattrocento: modello fiammingo, ricezione italiana,” Storia dell’arte 113/114 (2006): 5–34, and “Iconografia del dolore. Ricerche sulla rappresentazione dell’immagine di sofferenza nel Quattrocento: il caso delle Fiandre e la ricezione Italiana,” Critica d’arte 67/ no. 23–24 (2004): 28–48. I would like to thank Laura Gelfand for bringing these two essays to my attention.

on the cross. Representations of the weeping Magdalene, lamenting her sins and her loss, and her contra-counterpart, the sorrowing Virgin Mary mourning her son’s sacrifice for humanity, provided the beholder with a visual and an emotive paradigm. The sorrowing Virgin represented the ideal example of sinless grief and the Magdalene was the model of tear-laden penitent behavior. Their power lay in their tears; they drew from the beholder an emotional response and could even act as agents for a vision. For the viewer, following their example reaped its own rewards, specifically the hope of salvation and the potential to participate directly in the Marys’ grief as a co-mourner and eyewitness to Christ’s Passion.

**The Power of Tears**

...she went to the church...where this creature saw a fair image of our Lady called a pity [Pietà]. And through the beholding of that pity, her mind was all wholly occupied in the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the compassion of our Lady, Saint Mary, by which she was compelled to cry full loudly and weep full sorely, as though she should have died.

Then came to her the lady's priest, saying “Damsel, Jesus is dead long since.”

When her crying was ceased, she said to the priest, “Sir, his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day.”

These are the words of the fifteenth-century visionary mystic, Margery Kempe, recalling her experience of meditating on an image of the dead Christ and his sorrowing mother. She empathized with the Virgin’s pain and sorrow to the point of imitating her with a fit of unrestrained sobbing. As a result, Margery experienced Christ’s death as if she herself were an eyewitness. Margery’s reaction to seeing the Pietà is unusual, but only in terms of its documentation as few medieval documents survive to inform us of a spectator’s reaction to a devotional image. Margery’s

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4 Other reports on tearful viewer responses to images include the story of Saint Francis’ vision of a painted image of Christ crucified speaking to him, “Francis, go repair my house...” From then on, according to Thomas of Celano, Saint Francis “could never keep himself from weeping, even bewailing in a loud voice the Passion of Christ which was always, as it were, before his mind.” (Thomas of Celano, *Second Life of Saint Francis* cited in Elkins, *Pictures and Tears*, 153), and the anecdotal dialogue between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna on Flemish painting, “Flemish painting...will, generally speaking...please