

IMAGERY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE FEMALE BODY IN EARLY MODERN
CATHOLIC EUROPE

by

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by

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ABSTRACT

IMAGERY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE FEMALE BODY IN EARLY MODERN CATHOLIC EUROPE

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This thesis examines the use of violence, particularly sexual violence, in imagery created for the two major patrons of the Early Modern period, the Catholic Church and the courts of Catholic Europe. Changes in theological practice, as well as the reality of violence surrounding the Counter Reformation, led to the Catholic Church using violent imagery of martyrs as tools for devotion, as well as a reinforcement of beliefs about virginity. Sovereigns utilized sexually violent mythological imagery as propaganda, identifying themselves as the abducting heroes and the abducted figures as their subjects. While these images were certainly erotic, they were not only so; instead, these were complex, multivalent images which reflected the values and ideals of their patrons.

INTRODUCTION

The use of violence, specifically sexual violence, against the female body has been a popular subject in Western art for centuries. However, images depicting this violence reached both new levels of popularity and developed new meanings in Early Modern Catholic Europe, specifically within the late sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries and dependent upon the context of the images. The religious, economic, social, and political upheaval of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, as well as the subsequent European Wars of Religion, contributed to an environment in which sexually violent works became complex, multivalent images serving a variety of functions dependent upon their setting and use. These images were widespread among both major patrons of the time, the Catholic church and the various courts of Catholic majority principalities. Specifically, violence against the female body in art was present both in religious martyr imagery and scenes of mythological and historical rape and abduction commissioned by the aristocracy.

This thesis will examine the complexities and creation of meanings through the use of violent images of the female nude by both the Catholic Church and aristocratic patrons. Upon first view, these images appear to have a clearly defined purpose and function as dictated by the subject matter depicted and location of the

work. For example, the martyrdom of a female saint depicted within a church fresco or the abduction of one of Jupiter's many lovers shown in a monumental work within an estate both appear to have simple interpretations. However, in reality these objects are indicative of the intersection of their social, historical, and religious contexts, and of the powerful forces attempting to shape the rapidly changing society of Early Modern Europe. As such, their insertion of sexual violence into scenes where it is not necessarily required, or the intentional selection of sexually violent tales for illustration, reflects in some way the values and self-view of their patrons. The decision to include or emphasize sexual violence within these scenes is not incidental, rather it is purposeful by both artist and patron. Within religious works especially, there is no textual reason to emphasize a sensual undertone to the torture of the saints, yet it is seen time and again in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In thesis I will examine the following questions: what messages did visual representations of violence involving the female nude convey in seventeenth-century Catholic Europe? In addition, how did visually similar imagery signify differing ideas in various settings? What was the purpose of choosing sexually violent imagery over other equally suitable categories of images? Selected works will be situated within the context of a period of great change and conflicts, including: the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation, known as the Counter-Reformation, the European Wars of Religion, including the Thirty Years War, as well as the dawn of European colonialism. Within this period of intense

religious conflict and warfare, sexually violent imagery took on multiple meanings which defied simple iconographic or allegorical interpretation. A conscious decision was made by both patrons and artists to select imagery of violence against the female body over other forms of imagery, indicating that the inclusion of sexual violence communicated meanings that other imagery would not. I will therefore examine the construction and shaping of gender roles in the context of the seventeenth century, in particular the ways in which these works reflect male values and fears.

The first part of this thesis will explore the Catholic Church and its role in commissioning images depicting sexual violence as a response to the Protestant Reformation. Protestant doctrine largely dismissed the use of imagery in worship, viewing the veneration of relics and use of large-scale works as tantamount to idolatry. In contrast, the Catholic Church viewed art as a valuable and necessary element of worship, using images for both devotional and evangelical functions. Relics served as miraculous objects as well as tools for divine intervention, while other artworks such as paintings, sculptures, and even buildings such as cathedrals and chapels were viewed as visible forms of tangible devotion. However, Protestants were not the only source of criticism in regards to imagery, excess, and propriety. Especially in areas in which Catholics and Protestants co-mingled, there was a call for a clarification of church doctrine in regards to images.¹

¹ Jesse Locker, "Introduction: Rethinking Art After the Council of Trent," in *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance: After Trent* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019) 3.

The 1545-1563 Council of Trent, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis, was called in order to define church doctrine and establish the Catholic response to the Reformation, known historically as the Counter-Reformation. While discussed late in the Council's talks, images were among the elements of faith codified through this process. However, the given edict was vague, only detailing that art was to be clear, decorous, and not so beautiful as to inspire the viewer to lust. While later writers and clergy attempted to clarify this statement, most succeeded only in listing what artists were to avoid, rather than what they should depict. In reality, this ambiguity gave artists an amount of freedom in depiction of religious figures; this freedom furthermore led to the license for artists to depict scenes of violent martyrdom, especially of female saints, with a decidedly sensual undertone. With the rules for images unclearly defined, other religious orders, such as the emerging Jesuits, would have profound impact on both the depiction of martyrdom and the intended result of interaction with religious artwork.

In the context of the Counter-Reformation and the beginnings of global missionary work, martyrdom had transformed from a relic of the past to an actual possibility for the faithful, leading to a change in the function of works dedicated to martyrs. Violence and gore, both sexualized and not, became fixtures in certain instances of martyr art to an almost grotesque degree. As an example of gory depictions of martyrdom, I will examine the frescos of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome. Painted in the late sixteenth century, these images appear to be a response

not only to the threat posed by the Protestant Reformation, but as a devotional and meditative tool in line with the increasingly popular Jesuit teachings. These striking frescoes depict several gruesome and violent scenes of martyrdom, often with multiple scenes occurring simultaneously.

The threat to the bodies of female virgin martyrs became a prominent artistic theme in the chaotic environment of the Counter Reformation. Violations of the bodies of virgin martyrs such as Saint Agatha were meant to inspire the viewer to piety in the face of horrors. The stated intent is for the viewers to sympathize with the great suffering and trauma of Saint Agatha. Furthermore, by contemplating her suffering, they are to be inspired to bravery in the face of the religious turmoil of the day. However, as mentioned previously, these images could have multiple, layered meanings, some of which appear at odds with each other. While these works were intended to enhance the piety of viewers, there are also sexual underpinnings of both the tales themselves and their depictions. Some artists chose to downplay this aspect as much as possible, while others emphasized the latent sexuality of their works.

The second part of this thesis will explore the courts of Catholic Europe as major artistic patrons of sexually violent subject matter. As stated previously, the seventeenth century was a time of great political, as well as religious, change. The various political powers, including major monarchies such as Spain and France, and the numerous small kingdoms that constituted the Holy Roman Empire, were in near-constant war with each other over both territory and religion. In this chaotic

environment, the elite utilized art to project an image of authority. Artwork depicting acts of sexual violence was particularly appealing as an allegorical representation of the ruler and his people.

Although the religious works discussed above contained undercurrents of sensuality, secular works created for the courts were free to depict overt eroticism. Often this eroticism is displayed in the form of scenes of rape or abduction, in which a (usually) divine or heroic man is abducting a (again, typically) mortal woman. These works could serve a variety of functions, from images of eroticism to marriage instruction for the elite. Of paramount concern to this work, however, is the use of these images as political works to reinforce the absolutist dominion of sovereign over people. However, not all scenes of abduction and rape were viewed favorably; the semi-mythological tale of Tarquin and Lucretia, for example, was not viewed as an allegorical representation of the sovereign. Patrons wished to be pictorially associated with Jupiter as a reinforcement of their own divine right to rule.

Peter Paul Rubens, one of the most prominent artists in this elite circle, will serve as a case study. Rubens enjoyed a unique position among seventeenth-century artists; he was not only an accomplished and prolific artist, but also a diplomat to the Spanish and French courts, as well as a master of allegorical mythological works. This thesis will focus primarily on his work for the Spanish royal family, especially the decorations of Torre de la Parada, a hunting lodge built for Philip IV. While Rubens was by no means alone in his depiction of sexual violence, the sheer number

of paintings he and his workshop produced depicting sexually violent acts, as well as his unique position, warrants examination, especially when one considers the power and influence of his patrons. Rubens created scenes for these patrons that reflected the world not as it was, but as the patrons would ideally envision it. His works provided a reinforcement of his patrons' views of themselves, the world, and their place within it.

In contrast to the Church-commissioned works these courtly commissions were far more overtly sexual. In this instance, there was no need to appeal to the Council of Trent's concept of decorum, clarity, or to invoke a feeling of piety. This does not mean that these works are any less nuanced, however. Rather than appealing to the religious devotion of viewers, these works were often intended to allegorically represent not only mythological scenes, but the state itself. Without the titles to provide context, one could be forgiven for assuming that many of these courtly images are merely erotic, rather than depicting scenes of sexual violence. The aggressors, often mythological figures, are shown favorably, even heroically. Women, in contrast, are shown as either eager participants or bystanders in their own narratives. The heroic aggressors were often equated with the state or sovereign themselves, with the ravished women representing vanquished foes, or the divine right of the sovereign to his dominion. In other instances, the female figure could represent the subjects, again creating an allegorical scene which reinforced the right of the commissioner to rule. The use of allegory alongside eroticism by Rubens provides further insight to the intentions of his patrons.

Again, Rubens was not creating reflections of courtly life as it actually appeared. Rather, he was constructing heterosexual male power fantasies for the elite of the elite. His works reflect the world which his patrons wished to be reality, in which their power and dominion were akin to heroic ancient kings and gods. The male rulers saw themselves as akin to these mythological figures, with dominion over women in art being representative of their rule over the state. In the context of the rapid change and violence of both the Counter Reformation and the Thirty Years War, as well as social change, the elite welcomed art which reinforced the hegemony of their own power.

VIOLENCE AGAINST MARTYRS

When examining art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is paramount to first understand the religiously and consequently politically chaotic environment in which these works were produced. Early Modern Europe was full of religious and political strife, which often escalated to full-blown war. Much of this violence was tied to the cataclysmic events of the Protestant Reformation and subsequent Counter-Reformation. The influence and power of the Catholic Church over Western Europe prior to the Protestant Reformation cannot be overstated. The Church was involved with every aspect of parishioners' lives, and in addition, was considered the primary institution of authority. An example of the level of importance of the Church can be found in the fact that largely, birth records are unknown; instead, baptism records serve as the first legal records of individuals' existence. Time was measured by prayer cycles, just as the year was measured by saintly feasts. God, and by extension the Church, was the supreme authority, over even that of royalty. However, the Church was not without controversy or corruption; criticism by discontented clergy had been growing throughout the late fifteenth and into the sixteenth century.²

² Lewis Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 48-50.

The Reformation and Catholic Response

This discord came to a head with Martin Luther's publishing of his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517, a list of complaints against the Catholic Church.³ Originally intended to serve as a call for reform rather than a splitting from the Catholic Church itself, Luther listed a number of complaints; chief among these grievances was the sale of Indulgences, a method to reduce punishments for sins, specifically to reduce the time spent in Purgatory after death.⁴ In Luther's view, the forgiveness of sins was granted by God alone, and for the Church to offer a reduction of punishment was tantamount to heresy, in addition to leading to financial corruption.⁵ While this may appear to be a theological quibble, this protest against the sale of Indulgences was merely one of several revolutionary ideas put forth by Luther. Luther also advocated for reliance on scripture alone over clergy, and that salvation was obtained solely from grace, and not in any way affected by the commission of good works by the faithful.⁶ When Luther refused to recant or denounce his beliefs, he was excommunicated by Pope Leo X, as well as banished from the Holy Roman Empire.⁷ However, Luther's excommunication and banishment did little to stop the rapidly-spreading Protestant Reformation.

Just as the power and influence of the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation cannot be overstated, neither can the existential danger the Protestant

³ Lewis Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation*, 66.

⁴ Spitz, 66-68.

⁵ Ibid., 72-73.

⁶ Ibid., 64-65.

⁷ Ibid., 73-74.

Reformation posed not only to the authority of the church, but to the Church's continued existence. Despite Luther's banishment, the Reformation spread throughout Central Europe, gaining converts and meeting fierce resistance throughout modern day Germany and France.⁸ As the Reformation spread, other reformers such as John Calvin also spoke against the Church, creating their own movements which fall under the wider umbrella of the Protestant Reformation.⁹ The growing influence and threat of the Reformation necessitated a formal Catholic response.

Authorities in Rome both felt threatened by the growing popularity of Protestantism, and that Luther and other reformers were advocating heretical beliefs. They quickly mounted an organized response, known as the Counter-Reformation. The Counter-Reformation consisted of a variety of approaches, including Catholic education, a revitalization of doctrine, and in some cases, all-out war. However, Catholic authorities also recognized that some criticisms were not without merit, leading to a need for internal reform. In 1545, Pope Paul III called the Council of Trent, a meeting of clergy to discuss the response to the Reformation, as well as address internal issues within the church and codify Catholic doctrine. Among the topics discussed within the eighteen-year span of the Council was the purpose of images within the Counter-Reformation.

⁸ Spitz, 88-90.

⁹ Ibid., 96.

Religious Imagery and the Counter Reformation

While the edicts put forth by the Council of Trent had profound impacts on western religious art, images and their use were not a prominent concern of the Council. The Council of Trent was far more concerned with other theological aspects such as monastic vows, general reform, and the reinforcement of the veracity of Transubstantiation, or the belief that the wine and bread of the Eucharist became the literal blood and flesh of Christ.¹⁰ The use of images in worship was simply not of high priority to the majority of the Council until 1576, when a group of French cardinals joined.¹¹ Unlike their peers, who hailed from overwhelmingly Catholic areas such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal, these French clergymen had direct experience with Protestant criticisms of Catholic art, which in some areas went as far as iconoclasm.¹²

Beyond disagreements in taste and the purpose of religious art, Protestants and Catholics were at odds on a more fundamental and theological level. While not all Protestants were strict iconoclasts, as a whole the group had strong theological differences with the Catholics in regards to the role images played in worship. Protestant reformers felt that the abundance of images and ornamentation in the Catholic Church amounted to idolatry, a point which the Catholic church vigorously

¹⁰ Jesse Locker, "Introduction: Rethinking Art After the Council of Trent," in *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance : After Trent* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019)2-3.

¹¹ Locker, "Introduction," 3.

¹² Locker, "Introduction," 3.
Lewis Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation*, 97.

contested.¹³ The worship of relics, the remains or effects of deceased saints, was seen as particularly problematic for Protestants. The veneration of body parts of saints and other holy objects, encased in lavish reliquaries, was viewed as akin to idol worship. However, for the Catholic faithful, the veneration of relics was an essential component of their faith; the veneration of relics was not one of worship, but as a tool for appealing for saintly intercession and the receipt of miracles. The concept that these holy objects were not conduits for divine power, but rather mere human remains and cultural artifacts, would have been an unthinkable proposition.

Prior to the Protestant Reformation, art was one of the primary tools of the Catholic Church, ostensibly serving as a method for illiterate audiences to understand their own faith. However, large religious commissions, often coming from wealthy clergy or secular patrons wishing to demonstrate their piety, were perceived by Protestants as serving more to reflect the wealth and influence of the patron rather than the might of the Lord. Instead of earthly representations of heaven or displays of spiritual majesty, elaborately decorated cathedrals and crowded frescos instead were advertising for the clergy and wealthy local families. In addition, the two religious factions were in disagreement over what exactly was necessary for the salvation of souls, works or faith alone. For the Catholic Church, works such as commissioning a chapel or donating for the construction of a cathedral were not only public good deeds, but actions which assisted in their own salvation. For Protestants, however, earthly deeds or any form of human

¹³ Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, 63.

intervention could not in any way alter punishment or bestow salvation, as these actions were both limited to God alone.

Protestant reformers were not the only ones who called for reform in the use of religious art however; there were calls within the Catholic Church to codify a sense of propriety and holiness within art. In addition, some religious leaders became concerned with propriety in sacred spaces, especially given Renaissance artists' desire to depict the perfect human form in their works. The ideal human body, based on Renaissance interpretations of Classical Greco-Roman art, was by definition, nude. Humanist artists of the Renaissance depicted biblical figures as heroic nudes, with no textual justification for their nudity. This level of gratuitous nudity outside of instances justified by the story, such as Adam and Eve, was increasingly becoming a problem for church officials.¹⁴ Michelangelo in particular caused controversy with his *Last Judgement* for the Sistine Chapel altar wall, in which nearly every figure is nude. In addition to concerns over unnecessary nudity, complicated, nearly chaotic compositions had become increasingly popular with elite patrons, reducing the clarity of religious images. While the High Renaissance is associated with mathematical perfection and organized, clear compositions, the later Renaissance and emergence of Mannerism saw artists demonstrating their skills with highly stylized figures and occasionally crowded compositions.¹⁵

Venetian artist Paolo Veronese's 1573 *Last Supper* contained so many extraneous

¹⁴ Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, 63.

¹⁵ Walter Friedlaender, "Foreword," in *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) xiv-xvi.

figures, luxurious surfaces, and competing perspectives that he was called before the Inquisition and forced to change the title to a far less sacred scene of *Feast at the House of Levi*.¹⁶ The Protestant Reformation viewed these works as signs of excess and materialism, seeing it as indicative of the overall degradation and corruption of the Church.¹⁷

Due to these internal and external criticisms and pressures, the Council of Trent released an edict on images in their final session.¹⁸ The edict establishes the efficacy of continued use and veneration of holy imagery in the church, with the added clarification that divinity is not within the objects themselves, and therefore there is no worship of idols as accused by the Protestants.¹⁹ In addition, the venues in which images are useful or appropriate is defined, with a strong warning about usage outside of these guidelines.²⁰ The primary instructions in regards to images are as follows,

Furthermore, in the invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, all superstition shall be removed, all filthy quest for gain eliminated, and all lasciviousness avoided, so that images shall not be painted and adorned with a seductive charm, or the celebration of saints and the visitation of relics be perverted by the people into boisterous festivities

¹⁶ Edward Grasman, "On Closer Inspection - The Interrogation of Paolo Veronese." *Artibus Et Historiae* 30, no. 59 (2009): 125-34.

¹⁷ The rejection of traditional patrons in Protestant areas would lead to the innovations in portraiture, especially group portraiture, and still lives in the Dutch Republic.

¹⁸ Locker, "Introduction: Rethinking Art After the Council of Trent," 3.

¹⁹ Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, 64.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

and drunkenness, as if the festivals in honor of the saints are to be celebrated with revelry and with no sense of decency. Finally, such zeal and care should be exhibited by the bishops with regard to these things that nothing may appear that is disorderly or unbecoming and confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing disrespectful . . .²¹

While the Council of Trent was successful in establishing guidelines for religious art, namely that art was to be clear, decorous, and not to be so beautiful as to arise in the viewer a feeling of lust, these guidelines were vague. Rather than provide artists with clear instructions for creating appropriate works, the edict put forth by the council of Trent instead only provided examples of what artists were not to do.²² Artists were tasked with creating works which inspired others to piety, yet were given no guidance on how to accomplish this from the church, or what an image that inspired others to piety would even resemble. Instead, individual writers and commentators were instead left to attempt to create clarity out of the ambiguity of the Council of Trent.

Commentators such as Gabriele Paleotti, the Bishop of Bologna, attempted to clarify what constituted appropriate imagery. Paleotti took particular offense with images which were obscure for obscurity's sake, confusing due to the artist including confusing imagery as a form of displaying their skills, or images which

²¹ Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, 65.

²² Jan de Jong, "Cultivating Piety. Religious Art And Artists After The Council Of Trent.," in *Meditatio Refashioning the Self: Theory and Practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern Intellectual Culture*, vol. 17, 2011, 370.

were obscure due to a lack of skill on the part of the artist.²³ Paleotti did not reject all forms of intentional obscurity in art; in fact he praised certain forms of mystery, such as those used to demonstrate the holiness of a subject by veiling the concept from the viewer.²⁴ Despite his efforts to clarify the rules of the Council of Trent, Paleotti has again failed to define how artists can achieve the creation of artwork that inspires piety within the viewer. Instead, he has further defined pitfalls for the artists to avoid.

The exact parameters of devotion-inspiring art continued to elude both artists and commentators. However, there was a growing consensus that properly devotional works could not be too ornate or decorative, as the beauty of the image itself could obscure the image's devotional potential.²⁵ Nor is a particular style or genre of image found to be more effective at inciting devotion than another.²⁶ However, certain artists such as Fra Angelico, active in the early fifteenth century, and Fra Bartolommeo, active in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, were held up as examples of artist who were capable of creating such devotional works.²⁷

In comparison to the complex, highly detailed works popular during the latter half of the sixteenth century, Angelico and his contemporaries appear simplistic and modest. However, in a time in which the highly rendered and idealized figures of the Late Renaissance were beginning to be criticized as an

²³ Gabriele Paleotti, William McCuaig, and Paolo Prodi, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, Texts & Documents (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012) 251,253.

²⁴ Paleotti, McCuaig, and Prodi, *Discourse*, 252.

²⁵ De Jong, "Cultivating Piety. Religious Art And Artists After The Council Of Trent." 368.

²⁶ De Jong, 372.

²⁷ De Jong, 378.

obstruction to the viewer's understanding and piety, the simplicity of Fra Angelico's works were not a detriment, but a merit. In addition to the clarity found in his images, Fra Angelico's personal devotion and piety was viewed as seeping into his works, increasing their potential to be used as a devotional aid.²⁸ However, devotional impact was not necessarily tied to Fra Angelico personally crafting a piece; a copy of his work, updated to reflect the tastes of the time, could still be a powerful devotional image.²⁹

Additionally, the potential of an image to inspire piety was not defined solely by style or artist; the single most important factor was, in reality, the viewer.³⁰ While a simple and clear style certainly aided in the path to a devotional experience, it was ultimately up to the viewer to contemplate and internalize the image.³¹ The focus on contemplation and devotion in regards to images becomes particularly relevant when viewed alongside violent martyr imagery of the Counter-Reformation.

Devotion and Martyrdom: The Frescoes of Santo Stefano Rotondo

Martyr imagery, always a vital element of Catholic iconography, increased in importance during the Counter Reformation. Religious turbulence and violence had a profound impact on the faithful. For both Protestants and Catholics, martyrdom was no longer a relic of the distant past, but instead a very real possibility. Religious

²⁸ De Jong, 381.

²⁹ De Jong, 386.

³⁰ De Jong, 387.

³¹ De Jong, 388.

violence erupted soon after the start of the Reformation. While a degree of religious freedom was found in certain areas, this was entirely at the discretion of the reigning noble, and could change with the ruling regime. Some areas, such as Austria, underwent multiple changes in official religion, or in the degree to which the minority faith was allowed autonomous practice.³² Forced conversions were not uncommon. These religious changes were rarely simple exchanges of one doctrine for another. Rather, the new religious power often persecuted followers and desecrated the sacred areas of the former sect.

In Austria, for example, Bishop Martin Brenner, on the orders of Archduke Ferdinand II, not only ran Lutheran ministers out of town and closed Protestant schools, but also removed bodies interred in Protestant graveyards, tossing the cadavers into a local river.³³ In 1572, nineteen Dutch Catholic clerics, many of them Franciscans, were hanged in the city of Brielle by militant Calvinists for refusal to deny the Transubstantiation and authority of the Pope.³⁴ While relatively small-scale events such as these were common, religious violence went still further, from localized violence to all-out war. From these religious conflicts sprung the European Wars of Religion, including the Thirty Years War, which will be discussed in further detail below.

³² Peter Hamish Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011) 58-72.

³³ Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 71-72.

³⁴ Christopher MacEvitt, "EPILOGUE.: The Afterlife of the Martyrs," in *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans: Islam, the Papacy, and an Order in Conflict* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 192-93.

For Catholics, this religious turmoil after centuries of practical religious hegemony was tantamount to a second wave of martyrdom, akin to the famed martyrs in the second and third centuries. It is unsurprising, then, that worship of the martyrs in predominantly Catholic nations greatly increased as the century wore on. Veneration of saints had remained an essential element of Catholic worship, but changes in devotional practice, as well as the religious turmoil of the day, led to a renewed interest in early martyrs, as well as significant shifts in the depictions of the martyred saints. For the first time in several generations, Catholics were in danger of losing their lives for their faith, especially when proselytizing in areas not under Catholic control. With martyrdom a concrete possibility, martyred saints became role models for the persecuted faithful.

Imagery of the martyrs reflected this increase in potential violence. What could perhaps be coined as the iconic iterations of the martyrs followed a set formula; the martyr was depicted holding a palm frond, the symbol of martyrdom, alongside the method of their martyrdom. Following this convention, Saint Catherine of Alexandria would be depicted with a wheel, Saint Lawrence with a grill, and Saint Bartholomew with his own flayed skin. Depictions of the saints' biographical stories and miracles were also common. While certain saints' depictions were undeniably violent in and of themselves, several were highly symbolic, relying on the viewer's knowledge of Catholic canon and symbolism.

However, these symbolic or biographical depictions of the saints were not the only method of representation. Existing simultaneously to these iconic

depictions, artists also represented these bloody stories in a far more visceral fashion. Violence in Christian religious art was hardly an invention of the Counter Reformation; even excluding the martyrs, the crucifixion of Christ was a violent form of execution and a mainstay of Christian iconography.³⁵ Violent scenes of death had been an accepted form of martyr imagery for centuries. However, in the late sixteenth century, martyr imagery reached a previously unseen level of gore in depictions of violence against the body of the martyr. This shift towards increasingly graphic depictions, fueled by changing theology and threat of physical violence, is best exemplified in Santo Stefano Rotondo, a small church in Rome.

Santo Stefano Rotondo is a small, centrally planned fifth-century church located in Rome, and dedicated to Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr. The most notable feature of S. Stefano Rotondo, however, lies in its striking and haunting frescoes. Commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII in the late sixteenth century, the paintings were completed by Niccolò Circignani, also known as Pomarancio, and his workshop. Antonio Tempesta completed a slightly later series of four scenes, including a Massacre of the Innocents and Passion of Christ.³⁶ The most striking frescos, however, are a series of thirty some images of early martyrs.³⁷ Rather than depicting the relatively serene traditional martyrdom portraits described previously, Circignani instead displayed multiple brutal scenes of death and torture.

³⁵ Jill Burke, "Sex and Spirituality in 1500s Rome: Sebastiano Del Piombo's Martyrdom of Saint Agatha," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 3 (September 2006) 482.

³⁶ Kirstin Noreen, "Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphi: Jesuit Iconography and the Counter- Reformation," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1998) 696.

³⁷ Noreen, "Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphi," 691.

Each martyr's death scene is shown in exacting, excruciating detail, with painted labels included to identify the suffering saints. The level of gore included in these frescos was shocking to viewers, even centuries later. When visiting in the nineteenth century, novelist Charles Dickens wrote,

These represent the martyrdoms of saints and early Christians; and such a panorama of horror and butchery no man could imagine in his sleep, though he were to eat a whole pig raw, for supper. Grey-bearded men being boiled, fried, grilled, crimped, singed, eaten by wild beasts, worried by dogs, buried alive, torn asunder by horses, chopped up small with hatchets: women having their breasts torn with iron pinchers, their tongues cut out, their ears screwed off, their jaws broken. . .³⁸

The carnage depicted in these frescoes, however, did not spring apropos of nothing; rather, the frescos in Santo Stefano Rotondo are visual products of the previously discussed religious turmoil, as well as internal Catholic changes in practice. While the Protestant Reformation was viewed as an extreme and heretical step, many within the Catholic Church recognized the need for serious reform. A major factor pushing for reform was the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, a religious order founded shortly before the calling of the Council of Trent, and the order occupying Santo Stefano Rotondo at the time of the frescoes' creation. Founded by Saint Ignatius as well as Peter Farber and Francis Xavier, part of the Jesuit teachings' focus on a highly individualized approach to spirituality and piety. Saint Ignatius wrote a guide

³⁸ Charles Dickens and Kate Flint, *Pictures from Italy* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998) 195-196.

to this new, introspective approach titled *Spiritual Exercises*, which details the ways in which the reader can improve their own spiritual practice.

These instructions are extensive, including multiple hour prayer sessions meant to occur thrice daily. The primary concept of interest to Santo Stefano Rotondo, however, is the idea of “application of the senses.”³⁹ In short, readers were intended to place themselves within the Gospels, to imagine what they might taste, see, or hear, how they would have experienced the events of the life of Christ. They were not only to read scripture, but to attempt to place themselves within the suffering of Christ in order to better understand the gravity of the sacrifice of crucifixion. It is no great leap for the pious to take this level of contemplation and apply it not only to Christ, but to the saints as well. The frescoes of Santo Stefano Rotondo, therefore, do not merely depict martyrs in wanton carnage; rather, the violent images were meant to be used as meditative tools, in order to allow the viewer to truly sympathize with the plight of the saints.⁴⁰

This intensely contemplative view of spirituality is a hallmark of Jesuit preaching. Keeping in mind that Jesuits came to Santo Stefano Rotondo in approximately 1579, roughly contemporaneously to the frescoes, the series can be viewed as a manifestation of Jesuit spirituality. The frescoes reflect a growing trend in response to the Reformation; increasingly personal and intimate spirituality, perhaps in direct response to the Protestant claim that individuals could find

³⁹ Louis J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Newman Press, 1951).

⁴⁰ Kirstin Noreen, “Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphi: Jesuit Iconography and the Counter-Reformation,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1998), 696.

salvation through faith alone.⁴¹ The intentional, purposeful viewing of and meditating upon the scenes depicted in Santo Stefano Rotondo reinforced the need for ritual, albeit an incredibly personal and introspective version.

Although Santo Stefano Rotondo contains approximately thirty martyr frescoes, we will examine two depictions as examples of the whole of the church interior, that of Saints Margaret and Cecilia. Saint Margaret, a fourth century virgin saint, is depicted in the midst of one of her tortures.⁴² She is bound by the wrists and ankles to a table, which appears to in fact be a rack, as a kneeling man is adjusting the setting of the device. The saint is clothed only from the waist down, allowing a second man to mutilate her breasts with a wooden and metal tool, perhaps a form of hoe. A third man, dressed in priestly garments, angrily gestures towards a small idol in his hands. A small crowd, including a young child has gathered to watch the proceedings, which Circignani may have intended to take place within a temple. According to the Golden Legend, a collection of stories of saints, Saint Margaret was raised by her Christian adoptive mother, and made a vow of virginity out of piety. However, Olybrius, a Roman governor, wished to marry her, and demanded that she renounce her Christian faith. When she refused, he ordered her tortured and killed.

A female virgin saint dying because of her refusal to convert or renounce her faith to a pagan man who wishes to wed her is a staple of early Christian saints, and will be examined throughout this paper. Despite being married to Valarian, also an

⁴¹ Noreen, "Ecclesiae Militantis Triumph," 704.

⁴² Figure 1

early saint, Saint Cecilia also falls into this category. While married, Cecilia and Valerian never consummated their relationship, allowing her to remain a virgin. The concept of virginity as a means of obtaining sanctity, a way for women to practically undo the original sin of Eve, was widely-held throughout the Catholic world. For the female martyrs, virginity was a hallmark of their purity and holiness, nearly as important to their martyrdom as their belief in Christ, the actual crime at hand in the eyes of Roman authorities. The importance of virginity, especially to female devotion after the legalization of Christianity by Constantine in 311 CE, will be discussed more thoroughly at a later point.

Circignani has depicted a more chaotic scene for the death of Cecilia than for Margaret.⁴³ Cecilia is shown in a bath as the Roman authorities attempt to boil her alive. According to legend, when this did not work, Cecilia was struck thrice in the neck with a sword, but survived for three days before finally passing. Rather than attempt to show this series of events, Circignani has compounded the two events, depicting Cecilia as bleeding from the neck as the simultaneous boiling attempt occurs. To the right of the bath can be seen a young man with a sword, apparently the inefficient executor. Behind the foreground figures, however, are several other scenes of martyrdom. In fact, Circignani included so many scenes within a single image that he has alphabetically labeled the individual scenes. Unfortunately, a transcript of the accompanying inscriptions has proved practically impossible to find outside of Italy.

⁴³ Figure 2

These two examples of scenes of violence against the female body were intended not merely to shock or repulse the viewer, but to encourage a deeply personal sense of piety and empathy with the tortured saints in keeping with Jesuit spirituality. Viewers were intended to internalize these images, to see themselves in these martyred saints and draw strength for their own struggles. However, the use of these increasingly graphic images were not limited to viewers who could appreciate them in person.

The Jesuits focused on missionary work, both in the far more Protestant north and in the recently established colonies.⁴⁴ For conversion efforts, however, a visual element was needed. Again, the grisly frescoes at Santo Stefano Rotondo were utilized. A series of prints by Giovanni Battista Cavalleiri, partially consisted of the Santo Stefano Rotondo frescoes, *Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphi* was published in 1583.⁴⁵ These easily reproducible images transformed the spiritual experience of viewing the Santo Stefano Rotondo frescoes into a portable experience.⁴⁶ These visual aids served a vital role not only for Jesuit missionaries, but for Jesuit colleges established in Protestant areas as well. These institutions were tasked both with education, and with conversion of wayward souls. Public memorialization of martyred saints served to remind viewers of what exactly the Jesuits and Church viewed was at stake as a result of the Reformation; nothing less than the lives of the

⁴⁴ Noreen, "Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphi," 692.

⁴⁵ Noreen, 689.

⁴⁶ Ibid.,. 692-3.

faithful, and as a result, the structure of the church itself.⁴⁷ Depictions of the martyrs, even violent depictions as found in Santo Stefano Rotondo, served to reinforce the Catholic faith itself, as well as remind the faithful of the vast trials their forbearers had gladly undergone. When used as an assistive tool for emotional penance or contemplation, violence becomes not only permissible, but widely utilized. While images were expected to be decorous and clear, violence and gore were entirely permissible, and in fact useful as a devotional tool for understanding the depth of the suffering of the saints.

As shown by the frescos in Santo Stefano Rotondo, veneration of the saints was considered an essential element of the Catholic response against the Reformation. The gory depictions shown in Santo Stefano Rotondo was, however, not the only mode of representing saints. As demonstrated by the frescoes of Saint Margaret and Saint Cecilia, violence beyond what was strictly necessary for depicting the martyrdom of the saints was a conscious choice made by artists in an attempt to better elicit piety from the viewer. Imagery of violence against the female body would continue to be a central element of religious art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly in the case of female virgin martyr saints such as Saint Agatha. The meanings of these objects, however, was not limited to devotional practice; whether by design or accident, these works also provide a window into female morality and the contemporary importance of virginity.

⁴⁷ Noreen, "Ecclesiae Militantis Triumphi," 699.

Saint Agatha and the Sensualizing of Violence

A martyr from the third century, Saint Agatha's story is fairly standard for an early female saint; she is thrown into a brothel, and her breasts mutilated before death, for her refusal to marry a pagan Roman prefect. The refusal to marry a pagan admirer, and subsequent violent punishment for this refusal, is a common theme among many other early female saints, such as Catherine of Alexandria, Agnes, and Cecelia. While it has been established that violence was a common feature of martyr imagery, images of Saint Agatha in particular underwent a change in the sixteenth century. Rather than merely depicting the saint in garish agony, images of Saint Agatha began to take on a decidedly sexual undertone. This increased sensuality, as well as a contrary example, can be found in a selection of works by Sebastiano del Piombo, Andrea Vaccaro, Massimo Stanzione, and Francisco Zurbaran. These images display not only changes in depiction of the saints, but a layered interpretation of both religious and erotic imagery.

According to the *Acta Sanctorum*, Agatha is desired by Quintianus, the prefect of Sicily. When she rejects his offer of marriage, he has her thrown into a brothel run by a woman named Aphrodisia, who has her own nine daughters working as prostitutes. When Agatha does not relent even after this indignity, Quintianus orders her to be whipped, burned, and to have her breasts removed with pincers. Following this violence, she is thrown into prison, where she is miraculously healed by a vision of St. Peter. Quintianus witnesses this miraculous healing, but his opinion is not swayed, and he returns Agatha to prison, where she later dies. Again, this is an

almost formulaic story, which shares many plot points in common with the tales of saints such as Agnes and Margaret.

In each of these saint's stories, it is not necessarily the fact that they are Christians which leads to violence. They are only brought before authorities after they reject a pagan man. They suffer in defense of their virginity as much, if not more, than for their faith in Christ, living up to the Christian feminine ideal of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁸ The violence female virgin martyrs underwent was often sexually charged, as in the mutilation of Saint Agatha and the threatened forced prostitution of Agatha and Agnes. While dying for one's faith was not necessarily a common reality in the Early Modern period prior to the religious violence surrounding the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, devotion to virginity and to a general denial of the self was an action one could theoretically undertake. For the faithful of the Early Modern period, the time of organized, wide-spread religious persecution for their faith in Christ had long since passed, despite the religious violence between Catholics and Protestants. Most faithful, women especially, had no way to obtain the devotion and sanctity of saints, nor to deny the association of their very bodies with sexual sin, other than an almost supernatural devotion to virginity.⁴⁹

Virginity was not only a sign of devotion, but in fact offered women a tangible way in which to rid themselves of the sin inherently associated with their gender.⁵⁰

Saint Jerome wrote, "As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is as different

⁴⁸ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

⁴⁹ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 70-71.

⁵⁰ Warner, 73.

from a man as is body from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will be ceased to be called woman and will be called man.”⁵¹ The very nature of womanhood was (and to a degree still is) associated with inherent, original sin. However, if a woman were to deny her supposedly carnal nature, and instead retain the perceived wholeness of her virginity, she could free herself from the consequences of her gender and instead find a sort of paradoxical freedom. Virginity itself was seen as allowing saints to withstand the extreme violence inflicted upon their bodies before death. Through the denial of sexual sin, which was associated with femininity itself as an embodiment of luxury and vice, female virgin martyrs were able to withstand tortures that in many cases appeared to be directly related to their capacity (but ultimate denial) of sexuality.

It is useful to examine a contemporary, non-sexual representation of Saint Agatha in order to better understand the ways in which these sexualized representations broke from established norms. An alternative representation can be found in Francisco Zurbaran’s 1633 painting of Saint Agnes.⁵² In general, Spanish artists such as Zurbaran did not experiment with the sensuality visible in some Italian works. Zurbaran presents his Saint Agatha as a young woman in contemporary dress, standing against a non-descript dark background. She has a serene expression on her face, betraying nothing of the suffering described in the saint’s story. In fact, the only hint of her mutilation and martyrdom are the pair of

⁵¹ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 73.

⁵² Figure 3

breasts she holds on a platter, the symbol of her martyrdom. Allegorical, symbolic representations of martyrdom such as this, often with little implied or overt violence, was a valid option for artists in the Early Modern period. As is evident by the date of the Zurbaran painting these works were still being completed, even as other artists began to create more violent and sexualized images. The continued use of this “iconic” depiction of Saint Agatha contemporaneously to Italian artists creating scenes of sensual torture illustrates that artists were not required to add sensuality to scenes of violence; rather, this inclusion was a deliberate choice.

Imagery of Saint Agatha began to take on sexual elements beginning with Sebastiano del Piombo’s 1520 *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*.⁵³ Unlike the other images to be discussed, this work was completed prior to the Council of Trent’s edict on images. However, its combination of beauty and sensuality in the depiction of a sacred figure is indicative of many internal criticisms of religious art, and is representative of the sexually violent versions to follow.⁵⁴ Prior to Piombo’s depiction, images of Saint Agatha either showed the moment following her mutilation, with an emphasis on her pain and suffering, or in the fifteenth century, the beauty of the saint is emphasized and the breasts are shown intact.⁵⁵ While certainly focused on the beauty of the saint’s torso, Piombo’s work depicts the twisting of the breasts and the moment before mutilation, a novel representation.⁵⁶

⁵³ Figure 4

⁵⁴ Burke, “Sex and Spirituality in 1500s Rome: Sebastiano Del Piombo’s Martyrdom of Saint Agatha,” 489-490.

⁵⁵ Burke, 489.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 484.

This is not the only novel element of Piombo's work; in this depiction, the sensual nature of exposed breasts is acknowledged. While this was arguably a devotional image, it is also an undeniably erotic image. Rather than solely being called to identify with and pity the saint, the (presumably male) viewer is invited to partake in the violence. In discussing the sensuality of this image, Jill Burke writes, "This painting, it seems, allows the viewer to identify equally with the saint or her tormentor."⁵⁷

In addition to identifying with either saint or tormentor, this work also serves as a form of religious temptation, Burke argues.⁵⁸ The Renaissance drive for beauty and perfection in the nude beyond what nature was capable of producing, when combined with a holy figure, created a controversy for viewers. Erasmus complained about painters whose depictions of Saint Agatha in particular did not stir the viewer towards piety, but lust.⁵⁹ However, if a viewer were capable of seeing past the sensuality of the saint's depiction, and instead still turn their thoughts to heaven, the sensuality becomes not a hinderance to the piety of the viewer, but a tool of proving one's devotion. This is but a small example of the multitude of functions and meanings present in a single religious image. This layering of meanings is present in a range of sixteenth and seventeenth century Saint Agatha images. As examples of this layered meaning and increased depiction of sensuality

⁵⁷ Jill Burke, 484.

⁵⁸ Burke, 490-492.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 490.

around the nude body of the saint, I will examine the works of Andrea Vaccaro and Massimo Stanzione.

Andrea Vaccaro, an artist working in Spanish-controlled Naples, was particularly fond of Saint Agatha as a subject. He painted her no less than three times from roughly 1635-1640. The first of these images I will examine, *Saint Agatha* (1635, Museo del Prado), shows the saint standing alone in a bare room, presumably her prison cell.⁶⁰ Her clothing has been pulled aside, showing one bare shoulder, but not falling so low as to expose her breasts. A shaft of light falls across the saint, illuminating her face and exposed décolletage. Her bare skin is by far the brightest and most highlighted part of the image, as the majority of the scene is obscured in darkness. Notable on her white chemise is a small amount of bright red blood, which has soaked into the fabric of both the gown and a golden shawl. Agatha looks heavenward, completely ignoring her open wound. Her pose is more reminiscent of Titian's famous *Penitent Magdalene* than of the suffering saints tortured in Santo Stefano Rotondo. Rather than depicting a symbolic representation of the saint, Vaccaro instead has chosen a specific moment in her story, as she sits in her prison cell following her mutilation.

This particular scene was one Vaccaro would return to, in *Saint Agatha in Her Cell* (1635), from the same five-year period.⁶¹ In this work, Saint Agatha is again shown in a prison cell, although this time she is not standing, but rather partially

⁶⁰ Figure 5

⁶¹ Figure 6

lying down, supporting herself on her bed. She is the only figure visible in the scene, which utilizes an even stronger sense of tenebrism. Her right hand clutches her wounded breast, while her shackled left hand rises, perhaps in greeting. From this pose, it could be inferred that this is the moment Saint Peter appears in her cell to miraculously heal her of her wounds. Again, she is partially undressed, this time in simpler, undefined white and maroon drapery. Blood has once again soaked into her white clothing, as well as dripped onto the ground. The saint appears noticeably frailer in this work, her eyes no longer bright and raised to heaven, but rather dark and unfocused, only partially open. In this work, Vaccaro appears to focus less on the saint's supernatural devotion in the face of pain, but rather her very terrestrial experience of that pain. While the wound itself is still hidden, the effects of her mutilation and torture are made clear by the suffering evident in her face.

The final work by Vaccaro, *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha* does not show Agatha in her cell or wounded, but rather in the moment before her mutilation.⁶² Saint Agatha is depicted with her hands bound behind her, surrounded by a small crowd of men, one of whom is holding an ominous pair of black pincers. She is once again partially dressed, although in this work she is shown stripped to the waist, her breasts exposed. The soft rendering of her fair flesh stands in stark contrast to the gleaming metal of the pincers about to tear into her body. Again, her pale, exposed body is a focal point of the work, being both located in the center of the painting and by far the lightest part of the image. An older, bearded man appears to plead with

⁶² Figure 7

the saint, pointing heavenward. In a pose striking similar to the first painting examined, Agatha seems to ignore the crowd around her, instead looking upwards towards heaven, the image of saintly courage.

A final example of this new style of depicting Saint Agatha can be found in a small seventeenth-century work by Massimo Stanzione, a Neapolitan artist.⁶³ Stanzione also painted Saint Agatha multiple times throughout his career, some of which more closely followed the example illustrated by Zurbaran. This work, however, has far more in common with the work of Vaccaro. Again, the subject is Saint Agatha following the removal of her breasts. The saint stands in front of an indistinguishable background, her face turned away from the viewer and her gaze directed towards heaven. Stanzione sparingly lit the work, leaving Agatha's fair skin and light chemise as the only illuminated surfaces emerging from the dark background. Again, Agatha is partially clothed, her clothing pooling around her elbows and hands, which are delicately crossed over her chest. The most striking aspect, however, is the blood seeping into her white shift and staining her hands. Stanzione has depicted a far bloodier scene than any of Vaccaro's three versions.

I have selected these works to show not only the changing depictions of female virgin martyr saints, but to show that there were considerable varieties in style and subject matter within the same religious tradition, at roughly the same time period. Simply stated, the continuing desire by patrons for alternative saintly images such as Zurbaran's *Saint Agatha* underscores the fact that while violence

⁶³ Figure 8

may have been an increasingly popular mode, it was by no means necessary.

Piombo, Zurburan, Vaccaro, and Stanzione likely fully intended for their works to be nothing more than devotional and storytelling aids, as well as advertisement of the artist's skill. However, as discussed previously and detailed in Megan Holmes' 1997 article *Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art*, works can in fact have many layered interpretations, some contradictory, and all outside of the artist's control.

While Holmes' article details another subject matter and a slightly earlier time period, the concepts she discussed can easily be applied to the Saint Agatha works discussed here. Like Madonna Lactans images (images of the Virgin nursing the infant Jesus) images of Saint Agatha with her breasts exposed blur the line between the virgin and whore archetypes, even while extoling virginity. The very clarity, often achieved through naturalism, that the Council of Trent demanded threatened to remove the sanctity of these images, by associating the saint with other representations of bare breasts.⁶⁴ For viewers already familiar with other depictions of bare breasts, such as Eve, Venus, or wet-nurses, the nudity of the saint created an association with these images, whether consciously or subconsciously.⁶⁵ If the sanctity of the image is threatened, then it is possible for lust to arise within the viewer for the beautiful image. While the idea of lusting over any painting, let alone a religious one, may seem foreign to many modern viewers, Holmes recounts

⁶⁴ Megan Holmes, "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art," in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178.

⁶⁵ Holmes, "Disrobing the Virgin," 181-182.

several instances in which patrons specifically asked artists to age the Virgin, in order to make her unappealing to the eye.⁶⁶ One man goes so far as to ask Da Vinci himself to remove sacred imagery from a painting so that the patron may be free to kiss the work without guilt.⁶⁷

This particular anecdote illustrates a more fundamental issue common to both Madonna Lactans and virgin saint imagery; the male desire to possess the female subject. The male desire for possession of the female subject is present regardless of subject matter, whether religious or secular. It is only the degree of permissiveness which changes. Holmes writes, "When viewing a picture of a beautiful woman, the male beholder's gaze was transformed into an act of impassioned desire to possess the female subject displaced to the order of representation and embodied by the painted image."⁶⁸ An increase in permissiveness for this possession and the erotic gaze can be found in the lessening of the religious symbolism present in these works.

As previously discussed, alternative images of saints, whether male or female, were highly symbolic, requiring the viewer to have an extensive knowledge of the stories of the saints and their attributes in order to properly identify the depicted saints. However, during the Counter-Reformation, saintly imagery in some areas became increasingly graphic and sensual. For the majority of saints, and practically universally for female virgin martyr saints, this is a scene of torture, or

⁶⁶ Holmes, "Disrobing the Virgin," 181.

⁶⁷ Holmes, 181.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 185.

the aftermath of torture. The removal of saintly attributes and symbolism may allow for the viewer to more easily assign an erotic interpretation to the image, regardless of the artist's intentions. The male desire for erotic possession of the female subject becomes far more permissible if he is viewing what is ostensibly a scene of sexual violence, in many ways removed from religious context.

This level of male gaze and possession may help to explain the popularity of this particular variety of Saint Agatha imagery. The fact that sexual violence runs throughout Agatha's story cannot be ignored in the context of the erotic gaze. Both in the Early Modern period and now, there exists a market for images of women suffering in a sexual manner, whether or not a sexual act is depicted.

The complexity of these images lies in the fact that each of these interpretations are simultaneously valid. A single image of Saint Agatha can be a tool of the faithful, a product of religious violence and evolving theology, as well as a potentially erotic image. Such layered meanings can be found in a wide range of other religious works that I do not have the space to detail in this work, including Old Testament stories such as Susanna and the Elders or Amnon and Tamar. However, such complex, layered interpretations of sexually violent works is not limited to religious works. The courts of Catholic Europe also used tales from mythology as tools to represent their own absolutist power, a theme which will be discussed in the following chapter.

RUBENS AND THE COURTS

As demonstrated by martyr imagery, depictions of violence against the female body became a common artistic motif in certain religious works in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. However, the Church was far from the only major patron interested in multivalent works depicting violence against the female body. Powerful monarchies such as France and Spain, as well as the numerous principalities that comprised modern-day Italy, were in need of large-scale artworks as well. Many of these courtly commissions also included elements or scenes of sexual violence, often in the context of a mythological or allegorical scene. The implicit merger of violence and sensuality present in martyr imagery was made overt in court commissions. These mythological scenes were used not only as decoration or a show of wealth and power, but as overt propaganda meant to instill in the viewer the near divine right of the sovereign to rule and the role of his subjects within the state.⁶⁹ However, not all scenes of violence against the nude were utilized in this manner; instead artists carefully chose narratives which would act as visual enforcement of the right to rule.

⁶⁹ Margaret Carroll, "The Erotics of Absolutism: Rubens and the Mystification of Sexual Violence," *Representations* 25 (1989): 5.

While many artists were involved in courtly commissions of this nature, Peter Paul Rubens stands out both in terms of volume of works produced and for his unique role as both an artist and diplomat. Through an examination of selected works of Rubens for the Spanish crown and other noble patrons, I will examine the use of artwork as propaganda in a time of expanding empires and religious warfare. In addition, I will examine the rise of both Absolutist and Neo-Stoic political theory and the role of artists, particularly Rubens, in supporting sovereigns who followed this philosophy. Ultimately, I plan to examine why exactly violence against the female body, specifically sexual violence, was used as a theme in representations of the state, and what advantages this representation may have had for both rulers and artists. While Rubens serves as a representative artist, it is worth noting that Rubens was by no means alone in producing works depicting violence upon female bodies for noble patrons. Rather, he is simply the most prominent among a long list of colleagues producing similar content.

In order to demonstrate the role of art within the political system of the majority Catholic principalities of southern Europe, it is first helpful to establish the political and social environment of the day. Much of Europe at the time was ruled by various branches of a dynasty, the Habsburgs, with another powerful family, the House of Bourbon, reigning over France.⁷⁰ The House of Habsburg split into two main branches in the sixteenth century, ruling over Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, respectively. The family retained power through a series of advantageous

⁷⁰ A. W. Lovett, *Early Habsburg Spain, 1517-1598* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

and famously inbred marriages, as well as through military might, creating an intricate web of familial relations and political loyalties.

As always in Early Modern Europe, religion also played a large role in the political complexities of the day. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation were not merely theological debates, but worldview shattering events that led to a series of wars throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries known as the European Wars of Religion. Among this myriad of wars, the Thirty Years War is both the most well-known and the costliest in terms of loss of life. While modern-day estimates range, up to eight million people lost their lives, the majority not from violence, but from the secondary effects of war, such as disease and starvation.⁷¹

While these wars are known as the European Wars of Religion, it is too simplistic to simply assign terms of Catholic or Protestant to individual states and assume they were in constant conflict. Many states changed official religions often, dependent on the personal beliefs of the sovereign at any given time. In addition, states were not necessarily allied with one another simply because they shared a common religion. Instead, the religious conflict became a form of proxy war between the Catholic French House of Bourbon and the Spanish and Austrian branches of the House of Hapsburg. Other major contenders in this practically

⁷¹Peter Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 4.

continent-wide conflict included Sweden and the Dutch Republic, newly independent from Hapsburg Spain.⁷²

In addition to the violence of the near-constant warfare, the sixteenth century was also the dawn of European colonialism, in which the wealth and resources of the New World were exploited and funneled back to major European powers. The expansion of European imperial interests into previously unknown areas likely added to the princely sense of unquestioned dominion, even in the rapidly changing fortunes brought on by extended war. In this chaotic environment, rulers welcomed and actively sought out art which reinforced the hegemony of their own power. Rubens was one of the most prolific and desirable artists a sovereign could commission for the creation of such works.

First, a very brief overview of Rubens' unique career is helpful in understanding his unique position and favor among the courts of Europe. Born to Jan Rubens and Maria Pypelincks in 1577, Rubens was raised as a Catholic by his mother in Antwerp following his father's death in 1589.⁷³ After training as a painter, he traveled to Italy, remaining there for eight years.⁷⁴ This trip was formative for Rubens as an artist, as he had the opportunity to study the works of Greek and Roman masters, as well as Renaissance greats such as Michelangelo and Da Vinci, in

⁷² Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, 6-7.

Following an initial revolt in 1568, The Netherlands and Spain engaged in the Eighty Years War, another conflict part of the broader European Wars of Religion, ultimately resulting in the ousting of Hapsburg rule and the establishment of a Protestant Dutch Republic.

⁷³ Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Rubens: A Double Life*, 1st American ed (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1993) 8-9.

⁷⁴ Lescourret, *Rubens* 11,18.

addition to more contemporary artists such as Caravaggio.⁷⁵ In addition, Rubens first undertook diplomatic work in Italy for the Spanish crown under the direction of his patron, the Duke of Mantua.⁷⁶

Rubens returned to Antwerp in 1609, and shortly thereafter became the official court painter for the sovereigns of the low countries, Albert VII, Archduke of Austria, and the Infanta Isabella of Spain. Rubens never returned to Italy after this eight-year period, despite an apparent strong desire to do so and many attempts throughout the years.⁷⁷ During his time as official court painter for Albert and Isabella, Rubens remained a diplomat, primarily working for the Spanish crown.⁷⁸ His dual careers of artist and diplomat merged in his numerous works for the royal families of Spain and France, specifically the extravagant Medici Cycle. Rubens remained in the service of the Spanish nobility for the majority of his life, including his final decade in which he created a great many of these mythologically-inspired works depicting violence. In addition to his unusual dual careers, Rubens was unique in the sheer volume of works produced by both the artist and his extensive workshop. These factors make Rubens singularly qualified to serve as a case study of larger trends within court paintings.

The Multiple Functions of Sexually Violent Art

One popular subject depicted in court paintings is that of a mythological or semi-historical abduction scene. More specifically in these allegorical works,

⁷⁵ Lescourret, *Rubens*, 22, 30.

⁷⁶ Lescourret, 19, 35.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41, 48-49.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 56.

sovereigns were equated with heroic figures such as Jupiter, while the state was personified as abducted and ravished women such as Europa. These images of gods or historic figures abducting either goddesses or mortal women often fall into a category coined by art historian Diane Wolfthal as “heroic rape.” According to Wolfthal, works in this category share a number of features, including: an aestheticization of rape, sanitization of both violence and overt sexual imagery, a focus on the viewpoint of the rapist and of the male relatives of the victim(s), and the suggestion of a so-called “happy ending.”⁷⁹ The combination of these elements creates an image that, while depicting an act of violence, is often devoid of any overt sense of either resistance or force. Rather, the victims are depicted, while perhaps struggling, as soon to cease that struggle and acquiesce to the demands of their attacker. Acceptance is implied even during the abduction.⁸⁰

For the sake of brevity, I will use a select number of images by Rubens as indicative of the larger body of work. These works include *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, as well as commissions for the Torre de la Parada, a hunting lodge constructed for the Spanish King Philip IV. Rubens’ relevant commissions for this lodge include; *Rape of Proserpina*, *Rape of Hippodamia*, and *Rape of Ganymede*.

It is worth reinforcing that Rubens was in no way representing the reality of seventeenth-century culture with these images of violence against the female body. While there was certainly a great deal of gender inequality, it is ahistorical to view

⁷⁹ Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The “Heroic” Tradition and its Alternatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 9.

⁸⁰ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 8.

these images as representative of lived experiences, and assume sexual violence was valorized. Rather, Rubens created allegorical representations of both the manner in which his wealthy patrons viewed themselves and their role in the world, and the world as they wished it to be; that is, one they ruled absolutely, with divine right, akin to Jupiter. These works are not indicative of reality; they are heterosexual male power fantasies writ large. This is not to say that sexual violence was not present, but that this particular romanticized, heroic version is a myth intentionally created by Rubens and his patrons. Metaphorically, these images equate subjugation of women by heroic figures and the domination of the prince over his subjects. These works are not merely erotic reproductions of mythological stories, but rather a product and construction of patriarchal culture at a particular point in European history.⁸¹

According to Wolfthal, these images of heroic rape serve three functions; to instruct viewers in marital doctrine, to serve as erotic stimulation, and to assert the political authority of aristocratic patrons.⁸² I will primarily focus on the final function within the European aristocracy, in which erotic domination became an allegorical representation for political domination, however all three are interrelated.⁸³ While I intend to focus on the political implications of these works, the simple fact remains that these are erotic images and this eroticism merits discussion. For all that these images exist as allegorical representations of ruler and

⁸¹ Carroll, *Erotics of Absolutism*, 5.

⁸² Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 10.

⁸³ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 22, 24.
Carroll, *Erotics of Absolutism*, 9.

state, they are still images of a sexual narrative. Additionally, many works depicting sexual violence did not have a strict interpretation, but rather complex, layered levels of meaning and function.

The act of forceful possession has long been both romanticized and glamourized, both in art and literature. While many images of heroic rape reconstruct the encounter as a sensuous meeting of two willing lovers, there simultaneously existed a desire for images in which the (usually) mortal woman is clearly struggling and attempting to escape. This is also true for the only major example of assault on a man, that of Ganymede and Jupiter. In some representations, the two are shown absconding together, while in others Jupiter is depicted abducting the youth.

The act of fleeing from pursuit or struggling against abduction makes it evident to the viewer that the woman is chaste and virtuous, desirable traits among both Greco-Roman and Early Modern viewers.⁸⁴ In addition, any fear and distress felt by the women is seen in and of itself as an attractive element. Discussing Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which had a strong impact in Italian humanistic circles, Leo Curran writes, "Sexual desirability is enhanced by disarray of clothing or hair, by discomfort or embarrassment, or by fear. For the rapist these are all aphrodisiacs."⁸⁵ Rather than a sign of distress to invoke pity in the viewer, fear becomes erotic.⁸⁶ For some aristocratic patrons, this eroticization of fear was preferable to images of willing and

⁸⁴ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 20.

⁸⁵ L. Curran, "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*," in *Women in the Ancient World, the Arethusa Papers*, ed by J. Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan, Albany 1984, 275.

⁸⁶ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 21.

mutual desire.⁸⁷ The struggle of the women also serves as a form of justification for the viewer, in that the struggle demonstrates that they are not viewing something improper, but rather a struggle against an assailant. Wolfthal describes this dissonance as, "In this way, the viewer may enjoy her nudity, much like the medieval viewers of sensuous female martyrs whose bodies are exposed as they are sexually tormented for their faith."⁸⁸ A clear preference existed in certain circles for images of clearly unwilling women.

Despite this apparent preference for images and tales in which there is a struggle, it is evident in the typical ending to these stories that the aforementioned struggle is in vain, or unnecessary. In many of these mythological tales, the abducted or raped woman is transformed by her experience, often becoming a wife and mother. This transformation is implied to be a good and joyous change. There is an apparent attitude of the ends justifying the means, implying that while women may struggle and resist, they in fact desire, if perhaps not the rape itself, the end results. Ovid in particular exposes the virtue of taking love by force, writing in the *Metamorphoses*, "...a woman who has departed untouched, when she could have been forced, though she stimulates gladness on her face, will be sad. Phoebe suffered violence, violence was used against her sister: each ravisher found favor

⁸⁷ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 22.

⁸⁸ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 20.

with the one he ravished.”⁸⁹ Rather than an act of violence, force is viewed as a commendable act of passion.

The transformation from maiden to mother and wife through abduction may have also been understood to be an instructional scene for newly married wives.⁹⁰ In Early Modern European society, women, especially upper-class women, were no longer considered part of their family of birth following marriage; rather, they were considered members of their husband’s family alone. This transition was obviously difficult for some, and images of heroic rape may have served as visual reminders of what was expected of the new brides.⁹¹ While the experience may be traumatic, the women would become mothers, and therefore enter into what was considered their proper role in society. The strict limitation of female roles to virtuous maiden and submissive wife and mother echoes the obsession with virginity and its defense present in previously discussed martyr imagery.

The eroticization of fear becomes particularly compelling when viewing these images of heroic rape through a political lens. The allegorical representation of ruler and state with scenes of sexual violence rose alongside Absolutist political theory in the sixteenth century.⁹² The force and domination believed to be necessary to successfully command a state is equated with the force necessary to dominate and possess a woman. In Absolutist political thought, force evolves from a tool of

⁸⁹A. Richlin, "Reading Ovid's Rapes," in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, (New York, Oxford: 1992) 168.

Carroll, *Erotics of Absolutism*, 3.

⁹⁰ Wolfthal, *Images of Rape*, 12.

⁹¹ Wolfthal, 11, 15.

⁹²Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism," 5-6.

last resort to the prince's primary tool, one that is celebrated and glamourized.⁹³

While notable exceptions such as Ganymede and Jupiter exist, the majority of these images follow a predictable pattern, in which typically mortal women are assaulted by divine or heroic men.

While many of these scenes of heroic rape were private palatial decorations, there were public examples of these images, which serve a slightly different purpose. These private palatial decorations were intended to be viewed by a select group of the aristocracy, while public works such as Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabine* instead were placed in public squares, intended to be seen by the city as a whole.⁹⁴ Despite being a scene of abduction and violence, the Rape of the Sabine Women was a foundational myth of Rome, serving as the catalyst for the creation of the Roman family, which was commonly emulated in the Early Modern period.⁹⁵ The inclusion of such a scene in a highly visible public place underscores the popularity of such tales in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. The specific location of *Rape of the Sabine* also implies a level of official approval; the sculpture is located in the Piazza della Signoria, a town square directly outside of the Palazzo Vecchio, or town hall of Florence.

A common theme emerges for both private and public images of sexual violence, in which the female body is treated as a tool for bonding between groups of men. Just as ordinary men were expected to emulate the Roman family and

⁹³Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism," 5.

⁹⁴ Figure 9

⁹⁵ Carroll, 10.

dominate their wives, so too did the sovereign dominate the state, on a much larger scale. This shared gender role creates, as Margaret Carroll writes, “. . . create[s] an empathetic bond between ruler and ruled that spans divisions of class and wealth by affirming their commonly held values in the domain of gender.”⁹⁶ The relationship of importance is not between attacker and victim, but rather between differing groups of men. An example of this preference for relationships between powerful men can be found in Carroll’s analysis of Ruben’s 1618 *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*.⁹⁷

Absolutism and Neo-Stoicism in Representations of Violence

According to myth, the daughters of King Leucippus, Phoebe and Hilarea, are abducted by the twins Castor and Pollux to be the men’s wives. Rubens has illustrated this scene in a monumental painting. The two sisters, nude except for two pieces of non-functional drapery, twist away from Castor and Pollux, even as Pollux dismounts from his horse to scoop up the lower sister. The second sister arches away from Castor, her arm raised and eyes trained towards the heavens. A putto, or small cupid, peers from over the shoulder of Castor, while a second putto appears to rein in the steed of Pollux.

While this is a scene of rape and abduction, there is a notable lack of violence in both the seizing of the sisters and the expressions of the twin brothers. Neither man seems as if he intends on abducting the women through physical violence, and

⁹⁶ Carroll, “Erotics of Absolutism,” 10.

⁹⁷ Figure 9

neither brother is shown making a movement to strike one of the sisters. In turn, the sisters, while undeniably struggling, seem to lack passion in their resistance. The woman being held aloft in particular appears to have accepted her fate. While her sister recoils and holds her mouth open in apparent shock and distress, the figure in the center of the composition does not appear to attempt to shove the arm of her abductor away, instead resting her hand on his arm delicately. This apparent lack of animosity between the abductors and their victims again shows the transformative power of marriage in art to remove the malice from a scene of violence. While the sisters may be unhappy in the moment of the narrative, the implication is that they will be pleased by their new role as wives to the famous twins Castor and Pollux. While force is applied, it is not shown as a negative, and instead as a valid method to achieving the ultimate goal of marriage, and presumptively, children.

Carroll argues that Rubens, master of allegory, has transformed the mythological story of abduction into one representative of two contemporary royal marriages, that of Philip IV of Spain to Elizabeth of France, sister to Louis XIII, and of Louis to Anne of Austria, Philip's sister. The marriages of two of the most powerful kings in Europe at the time to each other's sisters was arranged by Philip III of Spain and Marie de Medici, Queen Regent of France and a notable patron of Rubens.⁹⁸ While the exact circumstances of this painting's commission are unknown, as is its original owner, it can be inferred through Rubens' position as court painter to the Spanish-ruled Netherlands that he was aware of the momentous marriage and may

⁹⁸ Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism," 13.

have painted this work as a reflection of this actual event. A French tradition of depicting rape scenes as demonstrations of princely authority was already well-established by the time Rubens painted *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*.⁹⁹ In addition, the identification of the princes of France with the twins Castor and Pollux was established tradition by the seventeenth-century, and this, combined with the relative rarity of the scene depicted, strengthen the case made by Carroll that Rubens intentionally created this work as a representation of the two royal marriages.¹⁰⁰

In casting the two kings and future brothers-in-law as the famous twins, Rubens may have been expressing his hope for the marriages to usher in peace and stability between the two previously warring nations. Through the acquisition of women, who were still very much considered property of men, both the mythical brothers and the actual future monarchs are encouraged to set aside strife and instead embrace the peace that was associated with women and marriage. This peace, however, would not be established by tenderness between either pair of husband and wife, however; rather, between the new bonds of brotherhood between the two kings and mutual domination of women.¹⁰¹ Through the sexual conquest of women, their aggression is mitigated and turned away from destructive war towards marriage and procreation. The fraternal bond between the two men is

⁹⁹ Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism," 12.

¹⁰⁰ Carroll, 11.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 14.

established and strengthened by their mutual redirection, rather than elimination, of aggression towards women.¹⁰²

The act of rape becomes a form of male bonding ritual in which one form of violence is exchanged for another. The no longer acceptable drive for war becomes instead the socially acceptable domination of the female body. Carroll describes the transformation in this way: “The dangers of combat are exchanged for the thrill of rape. Violence is absorbed into sexuality.”¹⁰³ Rather than being two individuals, the sisters’ exposed bodies become both desired prize and sacrifice. The distinct lack of overt struggle against their abduction created “victims without bile,” who while not necessarily willing, presents no hinderance to the greater goal of establishing peace and security through violence against them.¹⁰⁴ The potential of their marriages to establish peace is given more importance than the individual feelings of any of the participants. Rubens, as a diplomat and court painter, was fully aware of the realities of royal marriages; rather than focusing on the dislocation of the princesses and the separation from their families, he has chosen to instead illustrate the vital importance of such unions by comparing them to similar mythological tales.¹⁰⁵

Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus and its implied happy ending of marriage producing peace between nations is indicative Rubens’ association of peace itself with feminine influence, which is both threatened and defended by the war-like

¹⁰² Carroll, “Erotics of Absolutism,” 16.

¹⁰³ Carroll, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 18.

nature of men.¹⁰⁶ However, this work only represents Rubens' hope for the marriages and the official message from the monarchies, as in reality great stabilizing bonds of brotherhood never developed between the two kings.¹⁰⁷ Even when making direct comparisons to actual historical figures, these images of heroic rape do not represent the reality of historical events. Again, these images are far more reflective of contemporary male ideals of force, sovereignty, and gender dynamics than of historical reality. These images are made by men, for elite male viewing, and therefore reveal far more about aristocratic opinions of themselves than any reality of everyday gender roles.

Not all images of sexual violence were an attractive subject for the courts, however. Certain subjects, rather than reinforcing the position of the sovereign, could easily be interpreted as a critique of tyranny present in monarchy. The interpretation and function of the work was dependent upon the subject depicted, even within images depicting sexual violence. While mythological images in which the ruler could compare himself with Jupiter, the early Romans, or another heroic figure were clearly interpreted as a positive event, other stories, such as the semi mythical tale of Tarquin and Lucretia, were cast in a negative light. There is a great deal of similarity in the narratives of Tarquin and Lucretia and heroic rape imagery, however the two narratives received a remarkably different reaction.

¹⁰⁶ Lisa Rosenthal, "Manhood and Statehood: Ruben's Construction of Heroic Virtue," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1993): 104-105.

¹⁰⁷ Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism", 8.

As described by both Ovid and Livy, Lucretia is a Roman matron living in the pre-republic monarchical era. While away at war, her husband and his companions begin to boast about the chastity and character of their wives. Lucretia's husband Collantius argues that not only is she the most chaste, he can prove her character; the men ride to Rome and discover Lucretia up late weaving, in contrast with the other wives, who are found feasting. Tarquin, one of the men present for the earlier conversation and son of the king of Rome, returns to Lucretia's home with the intent to rape her.¹⁰⁸ After threatening to kill her, he is only successful in forcing her after threatening to kill both her and a male slave, claiming that he will pose the pair to look like an adulterous couple. After her assault, Lucretia summons both her father and husband and informs the pair of Tarquin's assault. While both men agree that Lucretia is not at fault, she refuses their reassurances and stabs herself in the heart. Lucretia's rape and subsequent death serve as the catalyst for the overthrow of the last king of Rome and the establishment of the Roman republic.¹⁰⁹

Initially, the similarities between the story of Tarquin and Lucretia and the various heroic rape scenes appear obvious. Both show a male figure of great historical or mythological importance dominating a woman. However, while the images of heroic rape were utilized as positive images of propaganda, images Tarquin and Lucretia were instead understood to depict an act of unacceptable violence. Rather than a legitimate display of authority, Tarquin's assault is a display

¹⁰⁸ Liv. 1.57-58

¹⁰⁹ Ov. *Fast.* 2.685-855

of tyrannical force. This difference in interpretation is evident in a 1609 work by Rubens, *Tarquin and Lucretia*.¹¹⁰

Rubens has depicted the moment Tarquin begins his threatening and assault of Lucretia. The two are shown in a lavishly decorated indoor scene, presumably Lucretia's bedroom. Lucretia, who is nude save for her jewelry and some conveniently placed red drapery, recoils from Tarquin. One hand is raised to fend off his assault, while her other grasps onto the red fabric, perhaps in an attempt to cover herself. Tarquin, a burly man draped in brocade, leans over the fleeing Lucretia. One hand is behind his back, drawing his sword. The other is pressed against Lucretia's pubic area, leaving no doubt as to what is about to transpire. An older gorgon woman recoils from the scene in the far left corner, while a single putto seems to lean down conspiratorially to Tarquin.

The atmosphere of this work is remarkably darker than *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*. Where Rubens was careful to not show Castor and Pollux as violent, even in the midst of committing an abduction, Tarquin is clearly willing to harm Lucretia. In addition to his groping hand, his expression shows nothing of the relative calm Rubens chose to portray on Castor and Pollux. Instead, we see only lust and determination. Lucretia's expression is similarly clear. While she is not crying out or weeping, her body language and furrowed brow indicate that she is actively resisting Tarquin, in contrast to the half-hearted struggle of Phoebe and Hilaeira.

¹¹⁰ Figure 10

The eroticism of the image remains unchanged, regardless of the differing response of the subjects depicted.

A few key societal differences also illustrate the circumstances leading to the different interpretations between the two narratives. Firstly, the assault on Lucretia represented an inverse of accepted power structures, in which a respected matron is attacked by a tyrannical prince. In images where sexual violence is used as an expression of legitimate monarchical authority, it is a valorized tool. Conversely, sexual violence was seen as indicative of an excess of power when paired with a tyrannical force. While other foundational Roman myths, such as the rape of the Sabine women, reinforced the parallel hierarchy of dominance between men and women and rulers and subjects, the story of Tarquin and Lucretia instead showed negative consequences of rape.

Additionally, Lucretia was known as a matron of unimpeachable reputation and character. The assault of a married woman was a very different circumstance to the assault of an unwed maiden.¹¹¹ In addition, the assault of a married woman, especially one of Lucretia's station, does not reinforce the social hierarchy. In more acceptable depictions of sexual violence, a more powerful figure assaults a less powerful figure. The "heroes" of heroic rape images are gods, demigods, or semi-mythical historical figures; in contrast, the majority of women in these images are mortals, nymphs, or very rarely, goddesses. The power imbalance between these

¹¹¹ Georges Vigarello, *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the 16th to the 20th Century*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc, 1998) 18.

two groups is depicted as an insurmountable gulf, in the same manner as the difference between a sovereign and his subjects. Images which reinforced this power structure were acceptable, and even celebrated, while in contrast scenes which involved an inversion of this structure were understood to depict abhorrent events. The differing responses to heroic rape images and scenes such as Tarquin and Lucretia illustrates the fact that artists were not simply creating images which eroticized violence for violence's sake; rather, the decision to select certain scenes of sexual violence over others indicates a high level of intentionality on the part of both artist and patron. The use of depictions of violence against women is not haphazard, nor limited to erotic functions. Rather, it is a strategic tool for the sovereign.

Images of heroic rape offer a window into seventeenth-century male concepts of gender association and roles. In addition to the force valorized by Absolutist political theory, Neo-Stoic thought prescribed both the proper attitude for a prince and his (male) subjects. Rubens' work again plays into this philosophy. Both philosophies, while perhaps exhibiting different focuses, ultimately link the role of prince on a large scale with that of man and father on a familial scale.¹¹² With Neo-Stoicism, however, the masculine virtues of control and self-discipline are central to effective control of the unruly masses.¹¹³ The danger of a loss of self-control is illustrated by the depictions of Tarquin. Force however, is in no way eliminated from the equation. While the prince's virtue and discipline may ensure

¹¹² Rosenthal, "Manhood and Statehood," 99, 102.

¹¹³ Rosenthal, 102.

the continued existence of the state, it is his sole control over military forces which enforces his commands.¹¹⁴

Rubens' ties to Neo-Stoic philosophy through his brother, Philips Rubens, and this philosophy's effect on his art is thoroughly examined by Lisa Rosenthal in her article, "Manhood and Statehood: Rubens's Construction of Heroic Virtue." While Rosenthal uses Rubens' images of Hercules as her examples for heroic virtue, I argue that her conclusions are also applicable to "heroic rape" imagery. Rosenthal argues that Rubens' works cannot be interpreted simply with an iconographic or allegorical approach. Instead, the paintings communicate layers of complex meaning constructed through the interaction of the figures. In addition, a binary construction of gender-specific traits is established, which places men and women in an adversarial relationship. Women are associated with luxury, vice, unbridled sensuality, and a loss of control; simultaneously however, civilization and peace are associated with femininity. Masculinity, in contrast, is associated with virtue, valor, and self-discipline, and yet also unchecked aggression.

Rosenthal further argues that heroic masculinity is in fact a fragile construction, one that is easily lost if control and self-mastery are not maintained.¹¹⁵ This fragility creates a paradox in which the female body becomes both an object of desire and a threat, as sensuality is considered a corrupting and feminizing force.¹¹⁶ Feminine seduction, while appealing, can spell disaster if the hero becomes so

¹¹⁴ Rosenthal, "Manhood and Statehood," 102.

¹¹⁵ Rosenthal, 107.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 99.

enamored with sensuality and luxury that he loses his control and associated masculinity. Masculine-coded aggression serves to distance the hero from feminine allegorical figures, and yet is simultaneously directed against them. Aggression, a trait solely associated with masculinity in this binary concept, acts as a shield against the influences of feminine forces. The hero, in Rosenthal's examples Hercules, is left with two responses to feminine sensuality; either erotic possession or virtuous rejection.¹¹⁷ Forceful possession and subjugation becomes one method of neutralizing the anxiety caused by feminine sexuality.

While within this framework imagery of sexual violence could be seen as a loss of control and a surrender to lust, I argue that images of "heroic rape" instead act as a neutralizing force on female sexuality. Rather than giving into the charms of a lover, the hero is taking forcible control of potentially renegade feminine sexuality, rendering the threat she presents to his masculinity null and void. He is no longer in danger of being tempted to lessen his aggression; rather, his aggression is sharply directed at her. Among their functions as erotic tools, marital instructions, and political statements, heroic rape images serve to mitigate male fears over feminine sensuality by removing agency from the female subjects represented, emphasizing their place as male possessions.

An overt example of the dangers of giving into feminine sexuality can be found in another Rubens work, the 1610 *Samson and Delilah*.¹¹⁸ The two lovers are

¹¹⁷ Rosenthal, "Manhood and Statehood," 99-100.

¹¹⁸ Figure 11

shown in a candlelit room, with a statue of Venus and Cupid located in a niche behind the figures. The biblical hero, completely taken in by Delilah, sleeps peacefully with his head resting in her lap. Delilah is seated, fully dressed in a red gown, but with her breasts exposed. Another man carefully trims Samson's hair, robbing him of his superhuman strength as an older woman looks on. Philistine soldiers are visible in the open doorway to the right of the image, eagerly awaiting their opportunity to capture Samson. The finale of the story would be familiar to viewers; after being captured, the newly weakened Samson is blinded and humiliated by his captors, until God miraculously restores his strength for one final act, collapsing a temple on both himself and his Philistine captors.

Samson's destruction at the hands of Delilah clearly illustrates the danger present to masculine identity by feminine sexuality. Strength, perhaps one of the most basic traits of stereotypical masculinity, is taken from Samson, along with his sight, liberty, and dignity. He is only able to escape his torment through an act of simultaneous revenge and suicide. Samson's surrender to lust is the key to his destruction, just as sensuality is the key to Delilah's triumph. In contrast to imagery of sexual violence and dominance, the roles are reversed for Samson; he is outsmarted and duped by a woman, placing her into the position of dominance over him. This role reversal serves as another cautionary element for male viewers to both restrain themselves and protect their masculinity.

Rubens and the Torre de la Parada

These multiple functions of representations of sexual violence in a predominately male space are illustrated in Rubens' work for Philip IV of Spain in the Torre de la Parada, a private hunting lodge. Rubens began work on the massive project in 1636, just four years before his death. Within the span of eighteen months, Rubens and his workshop completed approximately sixty paintings, of which approximately forty survive, either as fully realized works or as sketches.¹¹⁹ Of these, fourteen can reliably be identified as being painted by Rubens himself. The king was remarkably involved in the process, personally initiating the commission and utilizing his brother, Ferdinand, as a liaison between himself and the artist.¹²⁰ The Torre de la Parada's function as a location of leisure and recreation among Philips inner circle informs the choice of subject matter in the building's decoration.

Rubens' work for the Torre de la Parada consisted of a series of mythologically-inspired works, including many scenes of sexual violence, such as *Rape of Proserpina*, *Rape of Hippodamia*, and *Rape of Ganymede*.¹²¹ When considering the purpose of including these works depicting sexual violence in the king's private lodge, it is worth considering the audience. Primarily, these works would be viewed by the king's inner circle, as well as by esteemed visitors such as the Duke of Modena, all high-ranking aristocrats.¹²² While a seventeenth century king could not

¹¹⁹ Alexander Vergara, *Rubens and His Spanish Patrons*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 125-126.

¹²⁰ Vergara, *Rubens and His Spanish Patrons*, 126.

¹²¹ Figures 12-14

¹²² Vergara, 127.

necessarily be said to have peers, these men were likely the closest approximation. Philip IV wanted these men and himself to view mythological works which underscored the king's great humanistic learning and refinement, yet also reinforced his absolute power. Sexually violent images accomplished both goals.

The inclusion of sexually violent imagery in Philip IV's private hunting lodge, by its very nature a private and secluded space, illustrates the popularity and multiple functions of such images. Without a doubt, these images served as visual erotic stimulation for the king and his guests, yet they also serve as propaganda that emphasized the authority of the king. Images such as *Rape of Proserpina* served to reinforce Philip IV's dominion over both himself and his people. Just as Pluto dominates Proserpina, or the Romans abduct the Sabines, or Jupiter rapes Europa, so too does Philip IV exert his will over Spain. Sexually violent images serve as visual indication of his dominion over, rather than vulnerability to, feminine sensuality. The images surrounding him serve to reinforce his own position as absolute authority in a rapidly changing, chaotic world. Male authority and virtue is defined and reinforced by violence done against the feminine body.

Philip IV was by no means an outlier in his use of sexually violent imagery in monarchical spaces. Rather, he was one in a long line of sovereigns dating back to the sixteenth century who utilized this visual language as a demonstration of their own power.¹²³ Other notable artists such as Titian and Correggio created similar series to Rubens work for Philip IV for rulers such as Philip II and the Duke of Mantua. The

¹²³ Carroll, "Erotics of Absolutism," 6.

prevalence of these images in courtly settings shows that by the seventeenth century, images depicting violence against the female body were not only common, but a standard part of the visual vocabulary of monarchical power.

CONCLUSION

Imagery of violence against the female body served a variety of functions in Catholic Early Modern Europe. Images reflected changes in religious practices, articulated gender ideals, and reinforced political authority. The two major authorities of the time, the Catholic Church and the aristocracy, both utilized layered, multivalent images which defied simple iconographic interpretation to convey complex concepts. These images are not arbitrary, but rather both a source and product of their social, political, and religious context. While a result of their contexts, these images also serve as visual language reinforcing the patriarchal systems from which they were created.

The chaotic reality of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation as well as the subsequent wars which followed, created an environment within which martyrdom was no longer a thing of the past, but a real possibility. In addition, theological changes such as the popularization of Jesuit teachings led to a need to represent the death of martyrs in violent, gory fashion in order to elicit an emotional response from viewers. Viewers were to see these images of suffering and internalize them, imagining themselves in the position of the saint. Through this focus on the trials of the saints, viewers were to increase their own devotion. In

addition, the suffering underwent by the saints provided a role model for viewers facing religious violence.

While violence had been present in depictions of martyrs for centuries, the Early Modern period saw the inclusion of sensuality into some depictions of martyrs. In Italy in particular, depictions of female virgin martyr saints began to have sensual undertones which were not required by the narrative. The focus on female virginal saints reflects the societal importance of, and near obsession with, virginity. While these women died for their faith, in a sense they also died for their chastity, as none are accused of refusal to participate in the state cult until they reject a pagan man. For the sixteenth and seventeenth century female viewers, virginity became one of the only methods for achieving the level of piety embodied by the saints and held up as an ideal.

As displayed by Spanish artists in particular, alternate modes of representing female virgin martyrs were valid. Simply put, the eroticism found in some works was not required, and therefore reflects some degree of choice by artist and patron. With the focus on exposed flesh and the vulnerability of the saints before their tormentors, the male gaze allows the viewer a degree of possession of the saint. Images intended for devotion become simultaneously latently erotic.

In the context of the courts, this latent sensuality and violence becomes blatant. Scenes of mythological abductions and rapes may appear initially to merely be erotically stimulating imagery; however these images serve as a method of reinforcing the authority of the rulers commissioning the works. In addition, these

works serve as a form of visual language, representing in certain cases the philosophies of Absolutism and Neo-Stoicism as they relate to individual monarchies. Again, there is a nuance and intention to the selection of myth; sovereigns wanted scenes of “heroic rape” in which they could identify as the aggressor, and personify their state with the dominated woman.

This association could not be applied broadly, however. Tales in which a powerful man, such as a god, demigod, or heroic figure assaults a woman with less power than he are the only way to establish this connection. Scenes which showed an inversion of this power structure were a threat, not a reinforcement, to the hegemony of the sovereign’s authority. These images serve as a form of propaganda, celebrating acceptable uses of authority while simultaneously condemning tyranny.

Representations of violence against the female body in Early Modern Catholic art defy simple explanation or interpretation. These images are complex and multivalent, with layered meanings that at times appear contradictory. They are simultaneously the product of their context and a visual vocabulary which serves to reinforce the systems from which they were created. While these are depictions of women, they are seen through a decidedly male lens, representing idealized gender roles which are themselves a reflection of male fears and values. In the context of these images, the female body becomes a politicized tool for elite patrons, a sort of blank canvas upon which the fears, desires, and beliefs of the society at large can be projected and strengthened.

FIGURES



Figure 1 Niccolò Circignani, *Saint Margaret*, Late 16th cen, fresco, Santo Stefano Rotondo



Figure 2 Niccolò Circignani, *Saint Cecilia*, late 16th cen, fresco, Santo Stefano Rotondo



Figure 3 Francisco Zurbarán, *Saint Agatha*, 1633, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre



Figure 4 Sebastiano del Piombo, *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*, 1520, oil on canvas, 132 x 178 cm, Palazzo Putti

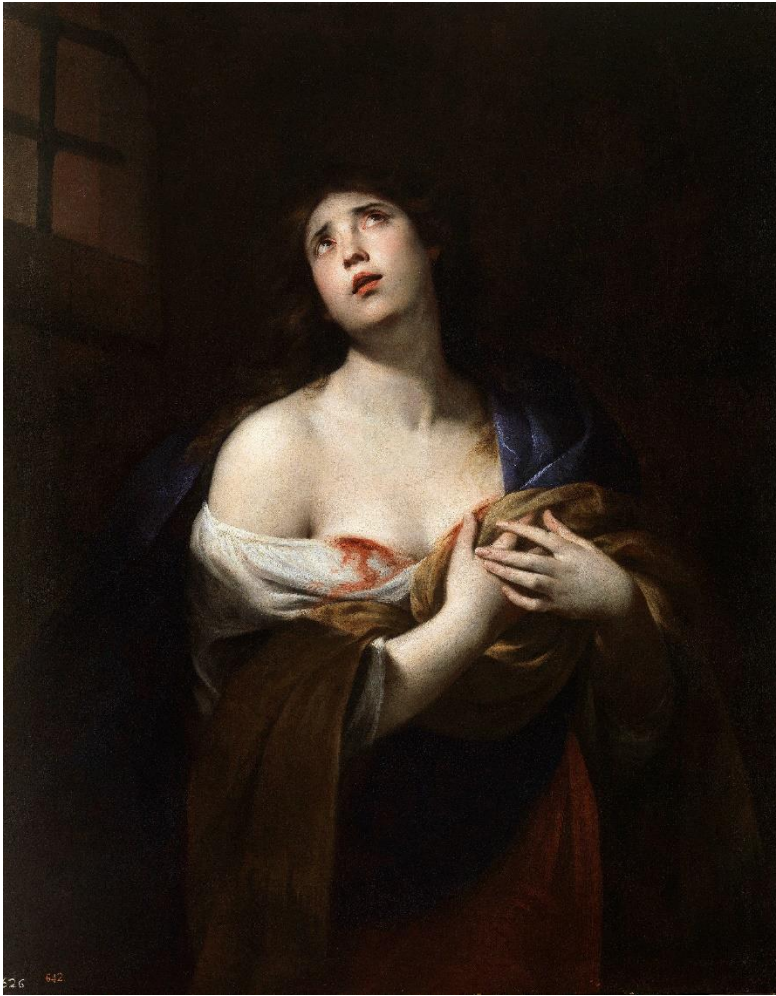


Figure 5 Andrea Vaccaro, *Saint Agatha*, 1635, oil on canvas, 128.5 x 101 cm, Museo del Prado



Figure 6 Andrea Vaccaro *Saint Agatha in Her Cell*, approx. 1630, oil on canvas, 104 x 127 cm, Museo del Prado



Figure 7 Andrea Vaccaro, *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*, 1635-40, oil on canvas, 122 x 159 cm, Musée Fabre



Figure 8 Massimo Stanzione, *Saint Agatha*, 17th cen, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 63.5 cm, Museu de Belles Arts de València



Figure 9 Giambologna, *Rape of a Sabine*, 1582, marble, Piazza della Signoria



Figure 10 Peter Paul Rubens, *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, 1619, oil on canvas, 224 x 209 cm



Figure 11 Peter Paul Rubens, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, 1609, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum



Figure 12 Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah*, 1609-10, oil on panel, 185 x 205 cm, National Gallery (London)



Figure 13 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of Proserpina*, 1636-37, originally at the Torre de la Parada, oil on canvas, 181 x 271.5 cm, Museo del Prado



Figure 14 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of Hippodamia*, 1636-37, originally in the Torre de la Parada, oil on canvas, 182.5 x 285.5 cm, Museo del Prado

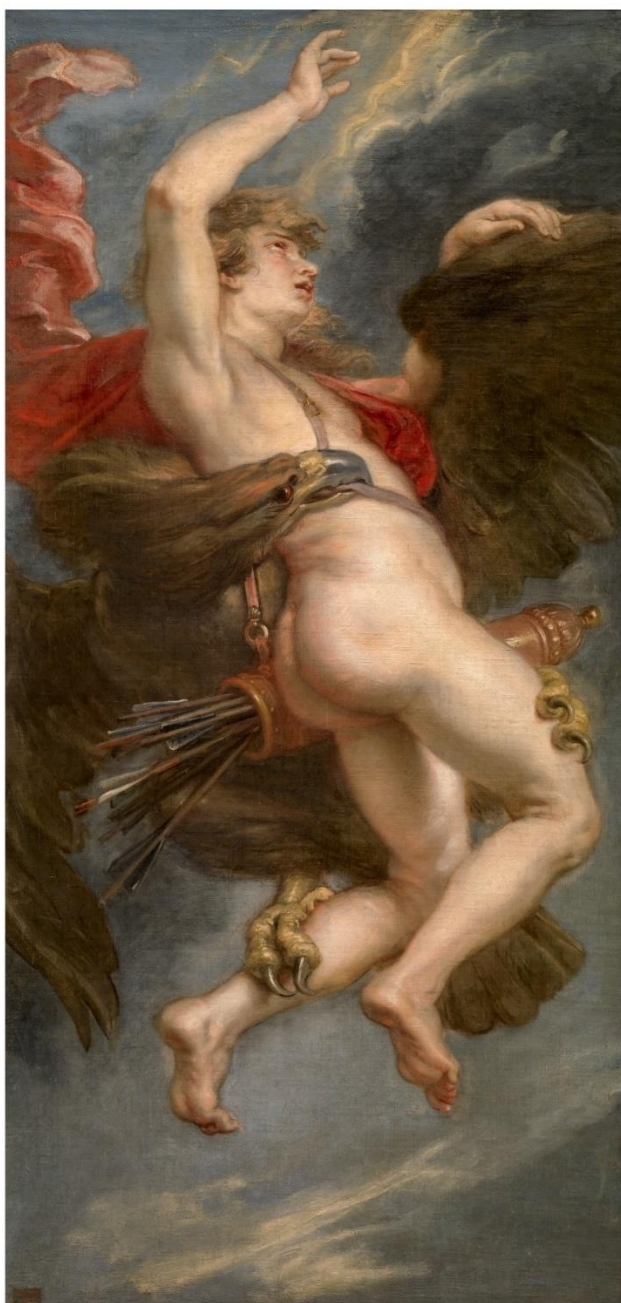


Figure 15 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of Ganymede*, 1636-38 originally in the Torre de la Parada, oil on canvas, 181 x 87.3 cm, Museo del Prado

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BIOGRAPHY

Ashley Lloyd received her Bachelor of Arts from Christopher Newport University in 2016, completing a double concentration in both Fine Art and Art History. Following a two-year break from academia, she relocated to the DC metro area to continue her education at George Mason. While enrolled at Mason, she has interned at the Exhibitions Department of the Workhouse Arts Center, presented at the inaugural Art History Graduate Association Symposium, and been an active member of the Art History Graduate Association.