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Milking It: How Breasts Humanized the Divine and
Eroticized the Human in Renaissance Art

Senior Thesis in Art History
Claire Lipsman

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Introduction

While art depicting bare breasts was nothing new to audiences in the Middle Ages, emerging themes associated with them gained popularity and developed new meanings for them in the fourteenth century. Issues regarding fertility and breastfeeding became pertinent with the arrival of famine and the bubonic plague in Europe and allowed for scenes such as the *Maria lactans*, or nursing Madonna, to find their place in the canon of devotional themes. The paintings humanized the Virgin through her breasts and some versions of the composition depicted her as a contemporary woman. Once these images were commonly accepted, artists and patrons could begin depicting the breasts of women who were actually their contemporaries. They manipulated breasts to suit the spiritual, psychological, or erotic needs of the viewer so that the breast became a multivalent symbol whose meaning varied depending on the setting in which it was employed.

This paper will explore how *Maria lactans* imagery inspired this shift regarding breasts in art and how this in turn allowed the breasts of living, human women to be represented and coded to indicate status. The Madonna of Humility type, images in which the Virgin Mary is seated on the ground, gained popularity as travelling church officials, diplomats, and artists saw Simone Martini's original ca. 1335 fresco at the papal palace in Avignon. In some later iterations of the type, it adopted the *Maria lactans* composition. We can see this in the ca. 1440 *Salting Madonna*, as many fifteenth-century Flemish artists emphasized Mary and Christ's humanity through visual signals such as active breastfeeding. Artists like Jan van Eyck utilized this cue in paintings of the Madonna enthroned in an effort to portray the Virgin and Child's humanity alongside their divinity. The *Maria lactans* increased in popularity, appearing in works in which it created

paradoxes such as van Eyck's ca. 1436 *Lucca Madonna*. As a repeated image, it normalized breasts that appear human rather than the allegorical or mythological breasts of previous periods in Europe. Within this historical framework, it would not have seemed as inappropriate to portray mortal women and their breasts. As a result, Fontainebleau school of sixteenth-century France developed an image type specific to the portrayal of the mistresses who were known figures at court.¹ Often depicting the woman in some state of undress in her bath or at her toilette, the paintings emphasized her sexual availability and eroticized her exposed flesh.

This may seem like a leap to make, beginning with the Virgin Mary's breasts and arguing that they inspired the pornographic panels of Fontainebleau. The frequent employment of the humanizing *Maria lactans* opened the door for erotic breasts to appear in new, secular image types rather than limiting the breast to religious, allegorical, and mythological scenes. The lactating Virgin gained the popularity crucial to the birth of new image types from the influence of rampant death in Europe during this time. With recurrences of plague and famine, the nourishing mother and promise of salvation offered by *Maria lactans* imagery would have been comforting to contemporary viewers. Because women and clergy were expected to nurse the sick and dying, they often became ill and died themselves, leaving a void where religious and motherly figures previously provided care to those afflicted.² *Maria lactans* scenes symbolically filled this void, as they depicted a loving mother attentively tending her child, and thus promising salvation to the suffering

¹ Philip Conisbee, *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2009), 119.

² Margaret Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350-1750* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2008), 33-36.

audience. As artists adapted the scene throughout Europe, it came to influence established image types such as Madonnas of Humility and enthroned Virgins.

Many churches commissioned paintings of the breastfeeding Virgin in attempts to promote maternal breastfeeding as opposed to the practice of wet-nursing, common among those who could afford it. People in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance believed Aristotle's assertion that breast milk was fully processed menstrual blood and therefore believed that taking in milk—i.e., the blood—of another had an effect on the child. This also meant that women who were breastfeeding were not meant to engage in sexual intercourse, for fear of tainting their milk and harming the infant in their care.³ The use of wet nurses within wealthy families in Europe increased in the eleventh century and continued to do so through and after the Renaissance. Attempting to guarantee their husbands heirs despite high infant mortality rates, wealthy and aristocratic women did not breastfeed their own children so they could conceive again quickly and produce many heirs for their husbands. It is because of this that aristocratic families saw an increase in their birth rates.⁴ Lack of motherly care was the source of fertility for the upper class because of the contraceptive effects of lactating in addition to the belief that sexual intercourse contaminated the breast milk. This made non-lactating breasts a signal of sexual availability to husbands, allowing breasts to be eroticized and idealized in a way that was different than in prior centuries; virginal-appearing breasts became the ideal due to the understanding that breastfeeding, rather than pregnancy, altered a woman's breasts.⁵ Paintings by the Fontainebleau school show these new erotic breasts of the aristocratic

³ Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing* (Basil Blackwell, Inc: New York, 1988), 9, 16.

⁴ *Ibid*, 35-36.

⁵ Miles, *A Complex Delight*, 47.

woman. François Clouet's *Lady in Her Bath* (fig. 4) , discussed in detail below depicts both roles late Renaissance breasts could fulfill: the aristocratic woman's breast for pleasure and the wet nurse's breast for nourishment.

Because of the connection between blood and breast milk, there were conflicting opinions on what was best for any given family versus what was best for the child. Due to the widespread idea that a child takes on the traits of whoever is breastfeeding him or her, churches used images of Mary breastfeeding Christ to remind parents of the importance of nourishing their own children. Giving them to a wet nurse put children at risk of taking after a lowly woman, or worse yet, of being given animal milk instead a woman's breast milk. This introduces the issue of the Immaculate Conception, and whether or not Mary carried the Original Sin. If she were as pure as some believed necessary to carry the Child of God, she would not have menstruated and therefore, according to medieval medical thought, could not have breastfed. These paintings presented the Virgin as the ultimate mother, an example to be followed by mortal women with their own children.

Many believed God helped Anna and Joachim conceive Mary immaculately—that is, without Original Sin—thus creating a pure vessel to carry His son. This creates a hypothetical problem for Mary's ability to lactate. If she was born without Original Sin, she did not suffer the punishments for it, which, for women, revolve around childbirth.⁶

Although to the modern individual the lack of menstruation signals an inability to conceive or carry a child, in the medieval and Renaissance world, it signaled an inability to nourish a child; there was nothing to convert into breast milk. Representations of the Virgin

⁶ These punishments are menstruation and pain in childbirth. Williamson, *The Madonna of Humility: Development, Dissemination, and Reception c. 1340-1400* (Woolbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2009), 132.

enthroned, such as Jan van Eyck's *Lucca Madonna* embody these paradoxes by illustrating Mary in her contradicting roles as Queen of Heaven and earthly woman, virgin free of Original Sin, yet a breastfeeding mother.

The adaptability of the *Maria lactans* helped the breast take on particular meanings when applied to a specific woman. In this paper, I will examine how this led to the separation between the symbolic breast of the Virgin, the working breast of the wet nurse and the erotic breast of the aristocratic woman. Through the exploration of a number of paintings, commonalities between image types and representations of each breast will become clear.

The Sacred, Nourishing Breast

Fourteenth-century Siennese artist Simone Martini is credited with inventing the Madonna of Humility image type that would become incredibly popular in the following centuries.⁷ These paintings emphasize Mary's humanity and humility by showing her feeding the infant Christ at her own breast and sitting on or close to the ground. The word "humility" comes from the Latin words "humus" and "humilis," meaning "ground" and "low" as well as the Sanscrit word for "earth" and the Greek word for "soil." These etymological relationships mean that the Madonna of Humility type is depended upon Mary being seated on or near the ground, taking her out of the throne she traditionally been depicted in and showing her as a human mother rather than Queen of Heaven.⁸

⁷ Ilse Hecht, "Madonna of Humility," *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* 70, no. 6 (1976), 10.

⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

Not much survives of Simone Martini's original ca. 1335 *Madonna of Humility* but parts of the original scene can be seen through a damaged sinopia. In the arch below a tympanum depicting Christ the Redeemer holding the world, the Infant turns to stare at us from Mary's lap. The pair sits in the presence of Roman Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi.⁹ The painting includes several angels, one of which once held a now-lost crown over the Virgin's head, crowning her as the Queen of Heaven, despite her humble setting.¹⁰ While this image demonstrates a new focus on the humanity of Mary and the Christ Child, it still maintains many conventions of religious art. In this original *Madonna of Humility*, the patron is present and the divinity of Mary and Jesus is not understated as it is in later versions. This early image seeks to strike a balance between creating a relatable mother-son pair while still venerating them. Because not much of the original painting has survived over the centuries, it is beneficial to study a better-preserved almost contemporary image, such as Bartolomeo da Camogli's signed and dated 1347 *Madonna of Humility* (fig. 1), to fully understand this image type and what it would have meant to its intended audience.

Bartolomeo's *Madonna* presents us with the pair in an intermediate space, between heaven and earth, immediately signaling that they are of both realms. A dark blue background and halo of stars around Mary's head celebrate her as the Queen of Heaven. Two twisting columns and a trefoil archway frame the nursing mother and her Son as they sit on the ground. A motif that carries over into later renditions of the *Maria lactans*, the architectural setting here seems to serve as a portal between the viewer and the world in

⁹ Though the type is associated with Italy, its development in the papal palace in Avignon meant that it would have been seen by Church officials from all of Christendom when they came to visit the papal court.

¹⁰ This angel in particular is now missing, the evidence suggesting his existence and purpose in the image is passed on sinopie. Williamson, *The Madonna of Humility*, 29-31.

which the mother and Child reside, setting them in a sphere separate from us, though it is an opening through which they are reachable. Christ, with both hands on his mother's breast, looks out at us as he drinks her milk and Mary looks down at him. This interaction reminds us of Christ's humanity, as no child can live without his mother's milk.¹¹ Mary gave Jesus his life, and now sustains it just as Christ will help Christians find heaven. The intimate moment illustrates the humanity of the pair, however their separation from the viewer serves as a reminder that the two are not entirely human. The relationship and interaction between the characters, the architectural setting, and heavenly background create tension by portraying both humanity and divinity in the same figures.

Depictions of Mary nursing Christ in a rather humble setting are often interpreted as scenes from Virgin's life, whether they actually happened as they are shown or not. With the popularity of narratives from the lives of biblical figures, humanizing scenes of Mary such as these may have come from Nativity or Annunciation scenes depicting her sitting or kneeling in prayer.¹² Bartolomeo's *Madonna of Humility* even includes an Annunciation scene in the spandrels. On the left, Gabriel lands and kneels, reaching out to the Virgin on the right. She sits on a bench, leaning over a book with the same attentive concern she offers Christ in the larger painting below. Bartolomeo's spandrels depict a pivotal moment in Mary's life as a mother, while images of her breastfeeding didn't necessarily do so. Because these early *Madonna of Humility* images functioned as devotional works rather than narratives, they do not take place in any physical space or reflect any historic moment. This left them more open to adaptation and interpretation by artists and viewers.

¹¹ Marina Warner, *Alone in All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 194.

¹² Hecht, "Madonna of Humility", 12.

Bartolomeo takes breastfeeding, a very real act of motherhood, and applies it to Mary and Christ. This renders the believable moment a fantasy or vision rather than a historic image. At this point, breasts have yet to regularly appear in more human interpretations of the mother and child. Earthly mothers who viewed these images had had comparable moments in their own lives, making these paintings relatable. Mary's attentive care for the child was an example to all Christians; it encouraged them to tend to their own relationships with Christ through meditation.¹³

The Virgin's motherhood itself was an example of her extreme humility, piety, and chastity. Mary's mind was not on sex, nor was she concerned with producing an heir like most wealthy and aristocratic women. By breastfeeding Christ herself, Mary demonstrates her humility twofold: she is both a humble woman and of a low socio-economic class. Though she bears the child of God, she does not swell with vanity or selfishness. As demonstrated by a thirteenth-century manuscript, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, the level of Mary's humility and motherhood were unique to her. She and Joseph lived humbly and her breastfeeding Christ was no doubt the result of her dedication to the Child of God. The text describes them as "destitute," meaning Mary would not have been able to hire a wet nurse if she had wanted to.¹⁴ The text tells us of her reaction at the Annunciation: "the humble woman could not but be disturbed...Since humble persons are unable to hear praise of themselves without shame and agitation, she was perturbed with an honest and virtuous shame."¹⁵ The prospect of carrying God's child humbles her; she feels unworthy.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Isa Ragusa, trans., *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* edited by Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green. (Princeton, NJ): Princeton University Press, 1961), 56.

¹⁵ As quoted in *ibid*, 17.

Rather than accepting that she is virtuous enough to carry the child, she thanks God for his gift to her. She willingly accepts her role as mother, but struggles internally to accept the holiness that comes with it. This is where it becomes clear that Mary's loving care for the child is a sign of her humility. She cares for and loves God's gift to her and does not behave like the queen will ultimately become.

With its frequent use, some scholars question the gaze with which viewers would have approached *Maria lactans* paintings. The issue of how to view Mary's care for Christ can be addressed by looking at how artists chose to represent her in the act of breastfeeding. By depicting Mary with only one breast exposed, as audiences would have seen in practice as contemporary mothers breastfeed, Mary's breast is a nourishing one rather than an erotic one.¹⁶ The growing popularity of the *Maria lactans* clearly demonstrates that this was not a big enough issue to prevent the scene from continuing to be painted. If one believed in the Immaculate Conception, then Mary's life was entirely void of sex and sexuality; therefore it is very likely that audiences approached religious art with a different gaze than they would have viewed secular art. Unlike wives or mistresses, Mary was sexually unavailable. Artists purposefully depicted Mary's breasts as unnatural looking, with odd placement, shape, and size, simultaneously desexualizing them and highlighting the superhumaness of them.¹⁷ These breasts do not lactate for a normal child;

¹⁶ There was some concern over showing nudity in religious art, in the 14th century but the growing popularity of the *Maria lactans* clearly demonstrates that this was not a big enough issue to prevent the scene from continuing to be painted. Miles, *A Complex Delight*, 29.

¹⁷ With the realism of later paintings and the consistency with which her breasts are shown as strange and unnatural, it would be hard to believe artists lacked the skill to paint breasts.

they nourished Christ, as he will one day bring spiritual nourishment and salvation to Christians.¹⁸

Mary maintained the pair's sanctity through her willingness and ability to care for Christ herself, making the actual practices of motherhood relevant to the images. Both the Church and doctors recommended that mothers breastfed their own children, based on the belief that breast milk was fully cooked menstrual blood. This way, an infant would consume her blood rather than the blood of a wet nurse.¹⁹ If the biological mother nourished her own child, she could guarantee that her own bloodline continued through her infant. This is particularly significant when applied to Jesus's lineage; he is the child of God and Mary, the pure vessel. Had he been cared for by a wet nurse, her impure body would have polluted the incarnation of God. His blood, while the blood of God, is also the blood of Mary, the one pure woman.

Another point of meaning for the lactating breast of the Virgin is its affiliation with the bleeding side wound of Christ.²⁰ The belief that menstrual blood converts into breast milk and the comparable locations of the wound on Christ's body and Mary's breast create this relationship.²¹ With the widely held belief in Transubstantiation, those taking Communion would have truly believed they were imbibing the blood of Christ. From the link between breast milk and blood and the connection between the side wound and Mary's breast, the Eucharist could be interpreted as a form of nursing. The gift Christ gives to man

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹ Merrall Llewelyn Price, "Bitter Milk: The "Vasa Menstrualis" And the Cannibal(ized) Virgin," *College Literature* 28 no. 1 (Winter 2001), 146-147. Charles T. Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought," in *Speculum* 56 no. 4, (1981), 719.

²⁰ Warner, *Alone in All Her Sex*, 200.

²¹ Price, "Bitter Milk", 147.

in the Eucharist is from his own breast, but it is not physical nourishment: it is forgiveness and salvation, that is, spiritual nourishment. By emphasizing her motherhood, the *Maria lactans* illustrates Mary's role in human salvation. While these images focus on the humanness of Mary and the Christ child, they still maintain many conventions of religious art. In Simone Martini's original *Madonna of Humility*, the patron is present and the divinity of Mary and Jesus is not minimized as Simone portrays them with angels, Mary is crowned as Queen of Heaven, and they reside in the presence of a praying patron. Though later versions of this type put less and less emphasis on their divinity, Mary remains the human connection with God. She literally nourished Christ as he symbolically nourishes his flock.

Transitioning Breasts: from Holy to Human

Because the Madonna of Humility type highlighted the Virgin's human motherhood, it invited viewers to consider her earthly counterparts. The emphasis on Mary's humility tended to increase as the type's popularity grew into the fifteenth century. As Craig Harbison explains, fifteenth-century Flemish painters and patrons began to pay special attention to the realism of paintings, leading artists to use architecture and domestic interiors to clearly set their paintings in contemporary Flanders.²² When it comes to devotional images, this careful effort in creating familiar and recognizable spaces helped create an immediate connection with the Virgin and Child in the image.²³ Much of this is lost on the modern audience because many present-day viewers do not hold a worldview focused on religion and the afterlife and are blind to the complications that accompany the *Maria lactans*. In this section, I will explore how fifteenth-century images of the Virgin breastfeeding Christ construct direct, intimate relationships with contemporary viewers that are complicated by their understanding of the relationship between lactating and menstruating.

The *Salting Madonna*, also known as *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen* (fig. 2), exemplifies the heightened emphasis on realism in religious Flemish art, helping humanize the divine.²⁴ Often attributed to Robert Campin or one of his followers, the painting shows the Virgin, once dressed in purple that has since faded to white, sitting on the floor before a

²² Craig Harbison, "Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting," *Art Bulletin* 117 no. 4 (1984), 588.

²³ Carol J. Purtle, *The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 98-99.

²⁴ Though this painting's attribution is under debate, there are many who would give it to Robert Campin, ca. 1440. The oil on panel work can be seen in the London National Gallery. Lorne Campbell, *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Paintings*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 92-99.

bench. Her mantle with jeweled hemlines opens to reveal her breast, which she offers to the infant. A firescreen and her cascading, wavy hair frame the Virgin's oval face. The firescreen serves as a halo in the otherwise earthly scene while locks of hair cascading over Mary's shoulders signal her virginity. Considering that her dress was once purple, the color of Mary and Christ's bodies is the lightest of the whole painting, drawing the viewer's attention to their exposed flesh. Drops of milk fall from Mary's nipple, but the Christ child ignores her offer and turns to look at the viewer. In under drawings, the cloth he sits on covers his genitals but the artist changed this composition and exposes Christ's human vulnerability.²⁵ Both of these elements display the ordinary humanness of the mother's and Child's bodies, making them relatable figures. The objects in the room emphasize this; the room belongs in a typical bourgeois home. The book and the golden cup on top of the carved, wooden cabinet with lions in it would have been expensive items that the biblical Mary would not have been able to afford.²⁶ Lorne Campbell interprets this interior as depicting Mary as the Queen of Heaven rather than viewing the painting as a Madonna of Humility due to similarities between this space and those depicted in French miniatures, however her position close to the ground follows the latter's tradition: this domestic setting is intended to remind viewers of their own homes.²⁷ The scene appears entirely of the earthly realm; the only thing clearly hinting at their divinity is the firescreen "halo" behind Mary.

²⁵ Ibid, 94.

²⁶ The right hand panel, 9 centimeters wide, was added in the nineteenth century and the chalice depicted here is of a style that came about after the painting was originally done. The restorer may have been aware of what the original panel depicted, meaning the cabinet, chalice, Mary's left elbow, and the left edge of the fireplace may have been based on the original. Ibid, 94.

²⁷ Campbell, *The Fifteenth Century*, 96. Harbison, "Realism & Symbolism", 588.

Such humanizing depictions of the Madonna and Child continued to see a growth in popularity in the mid-1400's, despite contemporary debate regarding whether or not Mary could lactate. This was such a concern at the time that the Council of Basel, begun in 1431, sought to find an explanation. Inferred from the fact that women do not menstruate while pregnant or breastfeeding, medical knowledge of the day stated that breast milk was fully cooked and purified menstrual blood.²⁸ People believed the blood had to go somewhere, and thus they came to the conclusion that it nourished the baby, first in the womb during pregnancy and then after birth, through the breast. Despite the scientifically inaccurate thoughts surrounding menses at the time, medieval doctors knew they were necessary for reproduction.²⁹ Church doctrine stated that women menstruated as a punishment for Original Sin, but because Mary was better than all other humans, theologians did not want to believe she had the whole female experience. If she menstruated, its connections with original sin could have meant she did not have the purity some thought necessary to bring the Child of God into the world.³⁰ Many simply avoided addressing the topic directly, and instead exalted the care she gave Christ without discussing the issues it brought up.³¹ The as yet unresolved issue with this idea was whether Mary was born free of original sin, that is, immaculately conceived. For some theologians, Mary's was the Immaculate Conception. Ultimately, the Church wanted to answer the question: If Mary really was pure enough to

²⁸ Merrall Llewelyn Price, "Bitter Milk: The "Vasa Menstrualis" And the Cannibal(ized) Virgin," *College Literature* 28 no. 1 (Winter 2001): 146, 147. Charles T. Wood, "The Doctor's Dilemma: Sin, Salvation, and the Menstrual Cycle in Medieval Thought," in *Speculum* 56 no. 4, (1981), 719.

²⁹ Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) explained that because women had no control over menstruation, it could not be used against them as it was simply a fact of life. *Ibid*, 713-714.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 719.

³¹ It is very likely that they considered the topic of menstruation an inappropriate one to talk about and this is why there was not much open discussion. *Ibid*, 720

carry Jesus, would she have menstruated? And if she didn't menstruate, would she have been able to nurse Christ?

Paintings of the Virgin breastfeeding Christ may have served as propaganda for one side or another of this debate. They were clearly done for patrons who believed she could nourish the Child, whether or not she was immaculately conceived. The Council of Basel never resulted in a decision regarding Mary's conception, menstruation, or ability to lactate. Religious texts from before it met in the fifteenth century would have fueled arguments about the matter at the Council and help us understand how contemporary audiences may have viewed the paintings in question. As Charles Wood notes, the *Protoevangelium of James*, written in the third century, tells of how Mary was raised in a temple, but at the age of twelve, the priests began to worry that her impending womanhood would pollute the temple, prompting her marriage to Joseph. This suggests that she did experience life as a complete woman.

Mary's hypothetical menstruation threatens her position as the new Eve. If she were the new Eve then she would have been created without Original Sin and lived free of its punishment. Mary was sent to bring Christ to Earth and with him, redeem Christians from their sins. However the Curse of Eve was believed to cleanse women's bodies of poisons, so on some level it was purifying in nature.³² The thirteenth-century text *Meditations on the Life of Christ* makes comments such as "O Lord, with how much concern and diligence she nursed Him" and "How readily she nursed Him, feeling a great and unknown sweetness in nursing this Child, such as could never be felt by other women!" In a fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript of the *Meditations*, an illustration of Mary breastfeeding Jesus

³² Ibid, 721-726.

accompanies this quote.³³ While setting forth the assumption of Mary as capable of breastfeeding, this portion of text also sets Mary up as a supreme mother. Her bond with her child is as supernatural as the child himself. The Virgin offers average women a role model of motherhood to follow.³⁴ This text carries a contradiction: it does not mention whether or not Mary carried the sin, except to say that she was “the purest in purity.”³⁵ If she is as clean as the text claims, she may not have menstruated and therefore she may not have been able to breastfeed. The text ignores this issue as it makes a point of illustrating Mary’s humility through her engagement in the act of breastfeeding. This could be explained away by stating it was all simply a miracle from God, but this was not a valid explanation for contemporary viewers. What the illustrated version of *Meditations* tells us is that like her supernatural bond with her child, Mary’s purity came in a form more extreme than it could have in any other woman. This makes her deserving of the honor of carrying God’s child and bringing humanity’s salvation into the world.

There were three acceptable states of being women could experience, and Mary miraculously lived in two of these simultaneously, thus setting an impossible standard for those who hoped to emulate her. The lowest acceptable status a woman could hold was that of a wife, the next was a widow, but the highest level was the virgin. Wives were accepted because although they were sexually active, it was with only one man; widows were higher up because they were no longer virgins but had only been with husbands and

³³ Isa Ragusa, trans., *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* edited by Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green. (Princeton, NJ): Princeton University Press, 1961), 54-55.

³⁴ Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), page 143.

³⁵ Ibid 13.

were no longer sexually active; virgins held the highest level because they had never had sex, and it was possible that they might never engage in such activity. Through these levels of hierarchy, motherhood was ranked below virginity because it required sex, making the mother closer to the prostitute, an unacceptable category, than to the virgin.³⁶ Because Mary was a virgin and therefore unpolluted by an interest in sex, she could be set as the example of purely maternal love and care.³⁷ Mothers who sought to move away from the prostitute and closer to the Virgin would be inclined to follow her example of motherhood. Because, for the average woman, sex was necessary to have a child, the only thing a mother could do to more like the Virgin was to breastfeed her own child.

We've already seen the inherent contradictions within *Maria lactans* imagery when applied to Madonnas of Humility, however this becomes more complicated when we see it used in paintings of the Virgin enthroned. While Madonna of Humility imagery continued to develop in Italy and travelled north, the traditional Virgin Enthroned image type endured and in some cases, adopted elements from Madonnas of Humility. These images of Mary breastfeeding on the Throne of Wisdom carried even more contradictions than images simply depicting her nursing as they raise issues of class as well as those relating to the Immaculate Conception. Jan van Eyck's 1436 *Lucca Madonna* (fig. 3), for example, shows Mary as not only Queen of Heaven, but also as the attentive mother audiences had become familiar with through the Madonna of Humility, but note that here she is enthroned rather than seated on the ground.³⁸ Van Eyck adds to her elevated status by depicting her with the ideal breast of an aristocratic woman: small and set high on the chest. It is not engorged or

³⁶ Cristina L. H. Traina, "Maternal Experience and the Boundaries of Christian Ethics," *Signs* 25 no. 2 (Winter 2000): 378

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ The oil on panel work can be found in Frankfurt at the Städelsches Kunstitut.

emphasized like the breasts of other lactating mothers studied in this paper. It is only visible to the viewer because of a small shadow cast in the middle of Mary's chest. Van Eyck utilized the beauty ideal as a part of portraying Mary as the Queen in Heaven. In this role, she hypothetically could have employed a wet nurse and this would have given her the option to attain the perfect breast. By depicting her with this breast, van Eyck reminds his contemporary audience of the status Mary attains through her motherhood and highlights her humility despite it. The painting not only contains not only the paradox of pure virgin versus breastfeeding mother, but of divine queen and humble human as well.

Van Eyck's image celebrates the majesty of Mary as Queen of Heaven and mother of Christ rather than emphasizing their earthliness as Campin does. Referring to the sculptural history of the Virgin Enthroned, van Eyck set the pair in a niche-type space; a tight fit, the space is reminiscent of chapels in large churches.³⁹ A geometric-patterned rug begins somewhere in the viewers' space, off of the foreground, and recedes back into the painting, disappearing under the Virgin's mantle and pulling the audience into the niche.⁴⁰ Behind the Virgin hangs a curtain which recalls the green, yellow, and orange of the rug, helping tie it to the decorous canopy above, thus unifying the top and bottom halves of the image. Mary's throne has lions carved into either armrest and the seatback, relating her rule to King Solomon's, and again reminding the viewer of sculptures in which Mary acts as Christ's own throne.⁴¹ Richly dressed in a bright red mantle with jewels along its border and a jeweled diadem that marks her as Queen of Heaven, Mary gazes attentively at the infant, nourishing him from her own breast. This breaks from the sculptural tradition in

³⁹ Purtle, *Marian Paintings of Yan van Eyck*, 102.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Described in Kings 10, 18. Carol J. Purtle, *The Marian Paintings of Yan van Eyck*, 103.

which the two figures hardly interact and instead, stare blankly ahead. Despite the naturalism in the depiction of mother and child and the intimate moment we bear witness to, the image maintains some of the rigidity seen in older sculptures of the Virgin Enthroned.

As Carol Purtle points out, the pair in the *Lucca Madonna* seem formally posed.⁴² Supported by his mother, the baby sits straight up. Rather than reclining and relaxing into the moment as she does in *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*, this Mary's position seems stiff and uncomfortable, as if she is aware of the viewer's gaze but won't acknowledge it. Harbison points out that van Eyck was a court painter to the Duke of Burgundy, meaning that he would have painted official portraits and given his subjects a quality of nobility.⁴³ This may explain why he often chose to depict the Virgin's majesty as opposed to the humility highlighted by Campin.

Although she is enthroned and crowned as Queen of Heaven, her humility is clearly demonstrated. She ignores the lavish decorations centered on her and her child. The audience, too, is hardly noted. Instead, she focuses on her role as mother and nourisher. Robert Koch uses the term "living icon" to describe the way Rogier van der Weyden paints similar scenes and I would apply this term to the *Lucca Madonna*.⁴⁴ The paradoxical combination of the setting, Mary's humility, and her divine motherhood set her up as both human and divine. More than an icon of a religious figure, the painting portrays Mary as a mother, allowing her to embody both roles audiences were used to seeing her fulfill.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Harbison, "Early Flemish Art," 589.

⁴⁴ Robert A. Koch, "Copies of Roger van der Weyden's "Madonna in Red," *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 26, no. 2 (1967): 48.

While this analysis appears to have strayed from the examination of breasts in Renaissance art, it is in fact the breasts themselves that lead to the identification of the Virgin as mother and it is this identification that brought about the controversy regarding Mary's purity and creates the paradox discussed above. As discussed, the association between breast milk and blood led many to believe that mothers should breast feed their own children rather than use a wet nurse, as a wealthy or aristocratic woman typically would have. By humanizing the virgin, the paintings set Mary up as a role model to any women who might have seen her and encourage them to follow her example of humility and keep their children entirely of her family's blood, rather than polluting them with a wet nurse's milk. In these paintings, the breast serves as a religious symbol through its significance to motherhood; Mary used her breast to nourish Christ and thereby demonstrates her humility and readiness to please God. Without the practices regarding breastfeeding and the religious and medical ideas surrounding breast milk and menstruation that were still major concerns during Campin's and van Eyck's lifetimes, modern viewers miss the symbolism entrenched in the Virgin's exposed breast.

The Erotic Breasts of Sixteenth-Century French Court Paintings

As we have already discussed, the *Maria lactans* normalized the sight of breasts in domestic settings. Though with these images the semi-undressed woman is the Virgin Mary, and therefore typically observed reverently instead of with lust or desire, the images sought to place her in a private, contemporary setting. Patrons and artists prioritized her earthly motherhood over her heavenly queenship by placing Mary in contemporary bourgeois homes. Though her breast symbolizes the mother and child's humanity in addition to her humility, they remain religious figures. By the sixteenth century, the Virgin's bare, human breast became normalized and was such a popular device that it was no longer shocking. I believe that widespread *Maria lactans* imagery paved the way for fully human breasts to appear in the infamously sensual art of the Fontainebleau school.

In this section, I will explain how *Maria lactans* paintings influenced François Clouet's ca. 1550 or 1571 *Lady in her Bath* and how the breasts in this painting imply the class of the women they belong to.⁴⁵ Clouet presents us with three exposed breasts: two belonging to a lady who proudly displays them from her bath and behind her, the third belongs to a wet nurse in her employ, the breast of whom is partially hidden by the child she cares for. Between them, a boy reaches for fruit. The space recedes into another room where a servant is visible heating more water for the bath. The many figures of the image are connected by their gaze and movement: the servant looks at the wet nurse, the wet nurse looks at the little boy, his extended arm draws our eye to the fruit bowl and the lady's hand in front of it. All of the activity and movement in the background brings us to the woman's

⁴⁵ oil on panel, 92.3 x 81.2 cm, The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Etienne Jollet, *Jean & François Clouet*, Translated by Deke Dusenberre (Lagune: Paris, 1997).

stillness. With her gleaming white skin in comparison to the dark background and ruddy cheeks of the wet nurse, she appears like a sculpture from antiquity.

Because of this seemingly strange composition, scholars have debated what kind of painting *Lady in her Bath* is. Many believe that it may be an allegorical scene or mythological scene, however the presence of the wet nurse and servant lead me to believe that this may be a portrait. The infant being breastfed was the product of carnal activity, but someone is providing for the child. If meant to be didactic, the scene would have shown negative consequences for giving in to vanity or lust. The older child reaches for the fruit in front of the woman in the bath, perhaps to draw attention to the full, fertile symbols or a reminder of the forbidden fruit. If the woman were intended to be an allegorical figure one of the sins mentioned above, we would see her depicted looking in a mirror or in an extremely erotic fashion, but instead she sits up straight and looks somewhere off-panel, her idealized, oval face undisturbed. Despite her exposed torso, she is posed like any other sitter for a portrait suggesting to me that this painting depicts a real woman rather than an allegorical or mythological figure.⁴⁶

In the sixteenth century, portraits were often half-length and featured curtains, two elements employed in this painting. We can compare this image to another panel by François Clouet, his 1562 portrait of his neighbor and friend, titled *Pierre Quthe, an Apothecary* (Figure 5). In this painting we see Clouet's incredibly highlighted and shadowed curtains along with similar positioning between the figures in the two paintings.⁴⁷ Pierre Quthe rests his left hand on a table where the lady rests hers on the edge of the bath, both let their fingers relax and fall naturally. The apothecary's right hand sits on his leg, his

⁴⁶ Ibid, 265.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 152.

fingers and thumb set apart as if he might have just dropped something. Her legs not visible to the viewer, the bather sets her corresponding hand on the table across the bath. In this hand, she holds a carnation or pink, symbolizing engagement and fidelity.⁴⁸ An embroidered unicorn hangs beside the servant in the background, signaling chastity and purity. Between the careful inclusion of conventions of portraiture and symbols of an exclusive relationship, I think it is likely that this is a portrait commissioned by someone in a romantic and sexual relationship with the bather.

Signed, but undated, the painting presents problems in specifically identifying the woman in the bath. Without a written record providing a date or a patron, it is impossible to determine who she may have been. Clouet served as court painter to four French kings, François I (r. 1515-1547), Henri II (r. 1547-1559), François II (r. 1559-1560), and Charles IX (r. 1560-1574).⁴⁹ The earliest dates scholars believe the painting could have been done place it in the 1550's, during Henri II's reign; this would identify the woman in the painting as his official mistress, Diane de Poitiers. In this case, the presence of the children in the painting would allude to her second official position at court as the royal governess, however many of the portraits done of her were mythological or allegorical, using Diane as a model for Diana the goddess and do not look like the woman in *Lady in her Bath*. However, because there is a long history of depicting bathing Dianas, some would say this is evidence to support the identification of Diane de Poitiers.

Another possible woman who may be portrayed in *Lady in her Bath* is the mistress of Charles IX, Marie Touchet (1549-1638).⁵⁰ This would fit in with the later date often given

⁴⁸ Ibid, 261. Conisbee, *French Paintings*, 117.

⁴⁹ Conisbee, *French Paintings*, 113.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 117.

to the painting, 1571. There are no documented images of her, however there is a drawing of a woman from 1574 that may depict her. The woman in the drawing does resemble the woman in the bath. The latter's face was distorted by idealization, making it difficult to compare her to other images. The style of the painting, the rich textures and deep colors seem to situate the painting later in Clouet's career rather than earlier, making the later date fit a bit more securely.⁵¹

Whoever she is, the artist put incredible effort into visually representing her elevated status. The shiny, red curtain that frames the scene, the fruit bowl, the decor behind her, her servants, and her breasts all testify to this. Inspired by classical sculpture, ideal breasts in the Renaissance were small, round, firm, far apart, and very white.⁵² The woman's exposed bosom fits this beauty standard, one that does not describe the breasts of a nursing mother or a wet nurse. It was believed that it was breastfeeding rather than pregnancy that changed a woman's breasts, so women employed wet nurses as a way to retain their shape and become sexually available to their husbands again. Cosmetics and do-it-yourself beauty techniques began to play a role in this endeavor, as well, giving rise to boudoir culture and leading to the popularity of bathtub and toilette images.⁵³ The importance of using a wet nurse becomes multifaceted: not only do they help keep aristocratic breasts beautiful, but they also help wealthy women avoid the contraceptive effects of nursing and the possible danger of polluting breast milk through sex. Clouet's *Lady in her Bath* illustrates the role ideal breasts played in portrayals of women and whether or not they chose to raise their own children.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1997), 53.

⁵³ Ibid, 69.

With so much concern surrounding the issue breastfeeding, we see three types of breasts emerge in art: the symbolic breasts of the Virgin, the working breast of the wet nurse, and the erotic breast of the aristocratic woman. The interest in breasts was initially due to what they represented to men because of their evolutionary function. Breasts that fulfilled their purpose showed that a man had done his duty by creating an heir.⁵⁴ Because of high infant mortality rates, wealthy, aristocratic, and royal men had to continue fulfilling their own duties to their estates; they needed to be able to continue producing legitimate heirs with their wives. This matter complicates the idea of three distinct breasts: all three types belong to mothers and had the potential to nourish their children, regardless of how each woman uses them.

While we do not know the identity of the woman in *Lady in her Bath*, it is likely that she was the mistress of a king, or at least a woman of noble birth who engaged in a sexual relationship with a man of great standing. This places the panel in a long tradition of mistresses portrayed nude or partially undressed, begun with Agnes Sorel in the guise of the Virgin Mary in Jean Fouquet's *Melun Diptych* from 1452 (fig. 6).⁵⁵ Mistress to King Charles VII (1403-1461), Agnes Sorel was known for her breasts and sexual relationship with the king. By using her in the image, Fouquet injected the image with an inherently sexual tone. Though in the painting the breasts are strangely spherical and placed unnaturally on the body, appearing to come from the sides of her chest, they present an erotic potential because they are really the breasts of a mistress. Classically marble-white and wide-set, they followed some of the conventions of beautiful breasts. The Virgin's

⁵⁴ Ibid, 49-52, 62.

⁵⁵ Albert B. Friedman identifies the woman as Agnes Sorel in "Grounding a Superstition: Lactation as Contraceptive," *The Journal of American Folklore* 95 no. 376 (1982) 206.

downcast gaze and Christ ignoring the nude breast right in front of him both leave her bosom fully available for our visual consumption. Neither of them confronts our gaze, further freeing the viewer to look at the breast with any intent. This challenges the idea set forth by Margaret Miles in her discussion of the *Maria lactans* that by showing one breast and a child, contemporary viewers would have only associated the image with breastfeeding.⁵⁶

This tradition of depicting the king's mistress nude or partially nude continued for centuries, including images like *Lady in her Bath* and demonstrates how the exposed breast in portraiture helped in identifying these women's status.⁵⁷ Mistresses had an official position at court and their relationships with the king were by no means a secret. In many cases, the king's mistress had power through her relationship with the king and was awarded titles and properties. Portraits such as these legitimized these gains by depicting them in an erotic and expensive setting. Not only do the portraits allude to the nature of the woman's relationship with the king, they also show some of the benefits such as her living situation and gifts she may have received. Images like *Lady in her Bath*, that included what may be the king's children, would have shown her as a mother to them, but also as still engaging in sexual activity with the father. This tells the viewer that the woman in question is an important figure to those of royal blood. Because these portraits became a type, we can conclude that the woman in *Lady in her Bath* was a woman of status whose sexuality was important to the painting's patron.

⁵⁶ Miles, *A Complex Delight*, 29.

⁵⁷ At this time, it was generally accepted that this was Agnes Sorel. Zerner, *Renaissance Art in France*, 212. Friedman, "Grounding a Superstition," 206.

François Clouet's image of the unidentified woman in *Lady in her Bath* (fig. 4) illustrates how an artist could communicate things such as a woman's class through her breast.⁵⁸ As Marilyn Yalom and Valerie Fildes explain, breastfeeding was not common among higher-class women and their practice of employing wet nurses meant that their breasts were very different from those of nursing mothers, as illustrated by Clouet's painting.⁵⁹ The lady's breasts are small, smooth, and set high on her chest; they do not nurse her child. Instead, the wet nurse behind her holds the woman's child at her own large, bulbous, and engorged breast. The nurse's engorged breasts and comfortable position reflect images like Campin's *Virgin and Child before a Fire Screen*, showing an influence of the *Maria lactans* on secular art. The observable difference between the breasts of the lady in her bath and the wet nurse shows the bather's status because her breasts have not nursed a child, though by the presence of two children she likely had multiple pregnancies. The bather and the father of her children could afford to keep a wet nurse to care for their children and keep the lady in the bath sexually available to the father.⁶⁰ The class distinctions between the lady and her wet nurse are not limited to their breasts: their facial features and skin follow pictorial conventions of class, helping identify them as aristocrat and servant. The wet nurse's complexion is redder and her skin rougher than the bather, further marking her as one of the lower class.⁶¹ Her hooked nose and

⁵⁸ Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, 49-51.

⁵⁹ Also see Naomi Baumslag and Dia L. Michels ed. *Milk, Money, and Madness: The Culture and Politics of Breastfeeding*, (Bergin & Garvey: Westerport, CT, 1995), 39-40.

⁶⁰ Keep in mind the idea that sex while breastfeeding would pollute the milk and could harm the child. Because they are also small and set fairly high on the chest, one may think the breasts of the *Lucca Madonna* contrast this, however as explained above, they are likely intended to be a mark of class and beauty rather than a hint at sexual availability.

⁶¹ Conisbee, *French Paintings*, 117.

pointed chin give her an expressive face, creating a contrast with the statuesque stillness of the almost porcelain bather.

Although the image is not an overtly erotic one, the bather's nudity is made more striking by the fact that she is posed like a formal portrait. Positioned against a dark curtain partially hiding the room behind her, the woman in the bath is set apart from the rest of the image. According to court writer Pierre de Brantôme, a French prince of the sixteenth century used black satin sheets when sleeping with his mistresses so "the whiteness and delicacy of their skin might show the better."⁶² Clouet utilizes this tactic in his *Lady in her Bath* as the bather's gleaming, pale skin stands out in stark contrast to the shadows behind her. This creates a glowing effect and it appears almost as if she is a light source herself. With her face turned towards something out of the frame, behind the audience, the viewer is able to gaze at her nudity uninterrupted.⁶³ Further, the bath itself was an inherently sexual symbol. At this time baths were often thought of as sensual experiences, reminders of sex and eroticism.⁶⁴ Paintings of women in their baths recalled Greco-Roman sculptures of the bathing Venus and Diana, with their perfect, nude bodies on display for visual consumption.⁶⁵ Private baths were luxuries used only by nobility. François I's apartments at Fontainebleau included three bath rooms and attached rest rooms decorated with paintings in an effort to recreate the baths of antiquity. Men and women would have interacted with one another in the king's baths, despite the fact that they enjoyed the water nude. Having baths in one's home signaled status, and art associated with baths, both

⁶² Ibid, 269.

⁶³ Henri Zerner, *Renaissance Art in France: The Invention of Classicism*, trans. Deke Dusenberre, Scott Wilson, and Rachel Zerner (Flammarian: Paris, 2003), 204-205.

⁶⁴ Zerner, *Renaissance Art in France*, 221.

⁶⁵ Diane Wolfthal, *In and Out of the marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2010), 129.

paintings in bath rooms and depicting them, played to the sensuality of the baths⁶⁶ The woman in *Lady in her Bath*, and the room behind her, with the lower left corner of a painting visible above the fireplace, seem to fit the description of the royal baths.⁶⁷ Contemporary paintings show similar baths, also lined with a white cloth and often surrounded by massive draperies, indicating that like the Madonna of humility, this was an image type. Understanding this, it appears likely that the woman in the bath was attainable and therefore, real.

The woman and the wet nurse are opposites of each other. The bather represents the aristocratic ideal of beauty while the wet nurse appears as a lower-class woman. While many of their features suggest their respective classes, how they use their breasts, as illustrated in *Lady in her Bath*, is one of the strongest indicators. One of the wet nurse's breasts shows, while the other is hidden, like in images of the nursing Virgin – this breast does not serve to be enjoyed or viewed in a sexual manner. Both exposed, the lady's breasts however retain their beautiful, pre-pregnancy form, building off of the presence of the wet nurse to show the woman's status and availability.

⁶⁶ Wolfthal, *In and Out*, 130.

⁶⁷ Conisbee, *French Paintings*, 119.

Conclusion

Without first humanizing the breasts of the Virgin Mary, artists could not make the leap to depicting secular human breasts. This becomes clear through viewing contemporary issues. Religious discussions surrounding Mary's ability to breastfeed and whether or not she had the full female experience fueled imagery of her nursing Christ while class concerns dictated the significance of a nourishing breast versus an erotic one. Without contextualizing the works of art, we lose their real meanings and fail to see them the way their contemporary audiences would have. *Maria lactans* imagery took several decades to gain its position in the canon of religious themes, however once it did it changed the use of the breast in art. By humanizing the Virgin Mary, the breast was in a sense, given back to women. No longer reserved for goddesses or figures from literature, allegory, or Eve herself, the nude breast came to symbolize humility, motherhood, sexuality, wealth, and status. Many of these characteristics contradicted one another making the breast a complicated and multivalent symbol. The meaning of each breast depended on whose it was and the manner in which it was exposed, but it was the Virgin's nourishing breast that opened the door for these later and broader interpretations.



Figure 1: Bartolomeo da Camogli, *Madonna of Humility*, 1340/4, 164.5 x 165 cm, Galleria Nazionale della Sicilia



Figure 2: Robert Campin, *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*, ca. 1440, oil on panel, 63.5cm x 49.5cm, London National Gallery



Figure 3: Jan van Eyck, *Lucca Madonna*, 1436, oil on panel, 65.5cm x 59.5cm, Frankfurt Städelsches Kunstinstitut



Figure 4: François Clouet, *Lady in her Bath*, 1550's or 1571, oil on panel, 92.3 x 81.2 cm, The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 5: François Clouet, *Pierre Quthe, an Apothecary*, 1562, oil on panel, 91x70cm, Musée du Louvre



Figure 6: Jean Fouquet, right wing of the *Melun Diptych*, 1452, oil on panel, 94.5 x 85.5 cm, Koninklijk Museum Voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen

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