

Article

The Virgin Mary in the Early Modern Italian Writings of Vittoria Colonna, Lucrezia Marinella, and Eleonora Montalvo

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Abstract: The Marian writings of the Roman poet Vittoria Colonna (1490/92–1547), the Venetian polemicist Lucrezia Marinella (1579–1653)¹, and the Florentine educator Eleonora Montalvo (1602–1659) present an accessible model of the Virgin Mary in the early modern period that both lay and religious women could emulate in order to strengthen their individual spirituality. While the Catholic Church encouraged women to accept and imitate an ideal of the Virgin Mary’s character traits and behavior for the good of society, these three women writers constructed a more fruitful narrative of the Virgin’s life and experience that included elements and imagery that would empower women to enhance their personal practice of meditation.

Keywords: Italian women writers; Vittoria Colonna; Lucrezia Marinella; Eleonora Montalvo; Virgin Mary; Early Modern Italy; Counter-Reformation; conduct literature; Catholic Meditation; Ignatian Spirituality

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian Europe, ecclesiastical leaders disagreed on the power of the Virgin Mary to effectuate salvation: Catholics promoted Mary’s intercessory role, whereas Protestants considered it heresy to pray to the Virgin, choosing instead to focus on Mary’s position as a recipient of God’s grace, a mortal woman full of faith and worthy of emulation (Bruni and Wirz 2012; Gambero 2012). While Catholic clerics reinforced the medieval perception of Mary as the Virgin Mother and Queen of Heaven, they also encouraged women to adopt Mary’s virtuous attributes for the good of society. Culling their ideas from the scriptures and such apocryphal texts as the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, and the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacopus de Varagine, Catholic preachers and writers of numerous works on the life of the Virgin emphasized Mary’s obedience, modesty, and submissiveness as characteristics of good female behavior and decorum. Similarly, early modern women blurred the lines between piety and manners when writing about the Virgin Mary, but they also identified ways in which Mary and the saints were powerful examples, on a human level, of female spirituality.

In an advanced-level undergraduate senior seminar on Early Modern Italian Women Writers, my goal as a teacher is to outline the expectations that men placed on women while encouraging students to identify and appreciate the unique ways in which women writers—and not just nuns who wrote on spiritual matters, but laywomen as well—sought to create their own template of the ideal spiritual woman. Among the works studied in this seminar, we analyze three Marian compositions written by laywomen: *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la passione di Christo* by the Roman poet Vittoria Colonna (1490/92–1547), *La vita di Maria Vergine Imperatrice dell’Universo* by the Venetian polemicist Lucrezia Marinella (1579–1653), and *Vita della Santissima Vergine Maria* by the Florentine

¹ Virginia Cox 2011, (n. 5, p. 271) proposes amending Marinella’s birthdate from 1571 to 1579.

educator Eleonora Montalvo (1602–1659).² These compositions, written in three different genres (plaint,³ biography, and dramatic performance), attest to the ingenuity of lay writers. Notwithstanding the constraints placed on their gender, these women writers designed a more intricate and empowering representation of the Virgin Mary than the traditional model, which focused solely on Marian attributes that women could emulate in order to make themselves useful and pleasing to a male-dominated society. Colonna's, Marinella's, and Montalvo's writings on the Virgin Mary emphasize individual meditation, one of the few spheres in which early modern women were free to shape their own notion of what constitutes personal devotion.

I teach these Marian writings in a three-week segment of a fourteen-week senior seminar for majors and minors of Italian at Brigham Young University (BYU).⁴ I begin this part of the course by having my students read Susan Haskins's succinct history of the Virgin Mary in the "Volume Editor's Introduction" (Haskins 2008, pp. 4–41) of her translated edition of the works of Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, and Lucrezia Marinella, for the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, entitled *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*. Haskins's brief history provides an excellent overview of the theology and cultural interpretation of Mary in the scriptures, the Eastern Church, the Western Church, the Apocrypha, the Middle Ages, and the Counter Reformation. In order to structure our discussions on the interconnectedness of written and visual cultures and to help students understand the power of Mary's image in early modern visual culture, I require one student to give a 3–5 min presentation at the beginning of each class period of the three-week duration on an assigned section of Haskins's history of Mary as it relates to two or three images of the Virgin from the early modern period that they have "pinned" on our class's Pinterest board.⁵

For their presentations, I ask students to interpret the images they have selected as they correspond to the various phases of the history of Mary and to consider how art may have been implemented to reinforce dogma, particularly during the Counter Reformation when the Council of Trent urged artists to illustrate, and thereby advocate, the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception, the conception and birth of Christ, Mary's perpetual virginity, and the Assumption and Coronation of Mary. Some of the images I find particularly effective in demonstrating Mary's role through history are the late thirteenth-century mosaic in the conch of the central apse of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome representing Mary enthroned as the Queen of Heaven as she sits beside Christ (to reinforce the medieval conception of Mary as *Regina coeli*), Correggio's sixteenth-century fresco of the Assumption of the Virgin in the dome of the Cathedral of Parma (to illustrate the doctrines of the Assumption, Incarnation, Intercession, and Transubstantiation), and the sixteenth-century *Madonna del Popolo* by Federico Barocci, depicting the Virgin interceding with Christ in heaven for the common people on earth. Barocci's painting tellingly portrays proper female societal duties, as the mother in the lower lefthand corner attempts to inspire Marian devotion in her children. I consider these presentations

² I have my students read Vittoria Colonna's and Lucrezia Marinella's compositions in translation (Colonna 2008; Marinella 2008). For Eleonora Montalvo's dramatic verse hagiography we read my Italian transcription (I am preparing a critical edition and translation of Montalvo's unpublished works for the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*).

³ While Colonna's text was published with the title of "plaint" (a literary composition of complaint or lamentation), it was originally conceived as a letter to Bernardino Ochino and considered a meditation on Christ's Passion in the manuscript tradition (Haskins 2008, p. 49). Eleonora Carinci (2016, pp. 404–5) indicates that the title *Pianto* may have been added later to published editions of the text.

⁴ In this course on early modern Italian women writers, we study selected works of varying genres (letter, treatise, dialogue, biography, plaint, drama): Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi's *Lettere* (Macinghi Strozzi 1997, 2016); Arcangela Tarabotti's *Inferno monacale* (Tarabotti 1990) or her *Tirannia paterna* (Tarabotti 2004); Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* (Fonte 1997); Vittoria Colonna's *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la passione di Christo* (Colonna 2008); Lucrezia Marinella's *La vita di Maria Vergine Imperatrice dell'Universo* (Marinella 2008); Eleonora Montalvo's *Vita della Santissima Vergine Maria*, and Antonia Pulci's *La rappresentazione di Santa Domitilla* and *La rappresentazione di Santa Guglielma* (Pulci 2010). Throughout the semester I also have my students read selections from the sourcebook, *Women in Italy, 1350–1650: Ideals and Realities* (Rogers and Tinagliand 2005), regarding issues pertaining to women (i.e., life cycles, roles, discourse of beauty and love, etc.).

⁵ See <https://www.pinterest.com/jharaguchi7475/vergine-maria-ital-495r/>.

essential for setting the stage at the beginning of each class period for close readings of the texts and our discussions on (a) how the Catholic Church created and fostered a Marian ideal as a means to improve society and (b) how the visual arts may have influenced Colonna, Marinella, and Montalvo to write in ways that would help women strengthen their private meditative practices.

1. The Male Ideal: The Well-Behaved Mary

One of the first points I make with my students about the model of a “well-behaved Mary” is that art was a powerful force in shaping it. Following each student’s presentation, we review as a class some of the images on our Pinterest board and consider the Council of Trent’s charge to promote artistic depictions for pedagogical purposes:

... let the bishops diligently teach that by means of the stories of the mysteries of our redemption portrayed in paintings and other representations the people are instructed and confirmed in the articles of faith, which ought to be borne in mind and constantly reflected upon ... so that they ... fashion their own life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God and cultivate piety (Schroeder 1941, pp. 215–16).

By analyzing artistic depictions of Mary, my students come to see a development in the transition from the regal Mary of the Middle Ages to the more relatable image of Mary from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. As Annabel Thomas has posited in her study of the life of the Virgin in conventual art, artistic depictions of Mary comprise two categories: (1) the Virgin portrayed in all her majestic and celestial glory; and (2) the Virgin presented as obedient and humble through the inclusion of more personal, intimate details (Thomas 2003, p. 120). Through a brief analysis of the works of art that we have placed on Pinterest, my students see how early modern images of the Virgin focused less on the paradoxical and unattainable ideal of Mary as both virgin and mother and more on an accessible and familiar mother Mary whose obedience, modesty, and submissiveness could be imitated for the good of society.

I also point out to my students that public sermons played an important part in constructing the “well-behaved Mary” ideal. One of the most famous examples cited by historians considers San Bernardino’s preaching in fifteenth-century Siena when he comments specifically on Mary’s behavioral traits. He encourages women and girls to stay at home, as the Virgin did, and never at the window, but shut away in their rooms instead reading pious material:

O you girls, learn how you should stay at home, and beware of whoever enters the house, as you see that the Virgin Mary stayed shut away, and always wished to see who wanted to come in and why ... But we must say where the Angel found her. Where do you think she was? At the window, or involved in some other vanity? Oh no! She stayed shut away in her chamber, and was reading, to set an example to you, my girl, not to enjoy standing or leaning out of the window, but to stay at home, saying the Ave Maria or Paternoster or, if you can read, reading good, pious material (Rogers and Tinagliand 2005, p. 45).

San Bernardino also draws on the fourteenth-century artist Simone Martini’s depiction of the Annunciation in the cathedral (now in the Uffizi) to encourage his female congregants to keep Mary’s “fearful pose” (in front of the Angel Gabriel) in mind when speaking with men:

Have you seen that Annunciation scene in the cathedral, at the altar of St Sano, beside the Sacristy? That certainly seems to me to have the finest, the most reverent and modest pose I’ve ever seen in an Annunciation. Look: she’s not looking at the Angel, but is in an almost fearful pose. She knew quite well it was an angel, so why should she be alarmed? What would she have done if it had been a man? Follow this example, girls, of what you should do. Never speak to a man unless your father or mother is present (ibid.).

As a class we evaluate this painting, discussing how San Bernardino’s comment echoes the advice of contemporary conduct manuals instructing women to be timid and humble in the presence of men.

The connection I endeavor to make between art, sermons, and conduct literature leads to another essential class discussion on the power of the printed word in shaping societal expectations of the “well-behaved Mary.” The recent study, *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy*, indicates that 31.3% of the 208 titles of tracts on various arguments published by Giolito’s press between 1536 and 1606 were conduct manuals (Sanson and Lucioli 2016, p. 16). One of the core elements of the early modern period was education, and clerics and writers took advantage of the printing press to diffuse educational principles that would reform the church and the world. Evoking the civilizing precepts of the humanist educational treatises of the previous century (i.e., Francesco Barbaro’s *De re uxoria* [1416], Matteo Palmieri’s *Della vita civile* [1431–1438], and Leon Battista Alberti’s *I libri della famiglia* [1433–1434]), Counter-Reformation writers reinforced the behavioral traits and educational principles found in these secular texts for a religious purpose, conflating manners and piety in their own writings.⁶ As I lead my students in our discussion of conduct literature, providing excerpts from some of the manuals, I also make them aware of the proliferation of Marian texts in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many on the life of the Virgin Mary, written by priests of various religious orders, which reinforce moral and didactic principles found in conduct manuals (Carinci 2013, p. 362). The authors of these spiritual texts make it clear that proper female devotion depends on proper behavior: they advise mothers, wives, and nuns to emulate Mary’s humility, meekness, silence, passivity, obedience, timidity, and modest and prudent speech. The authors also persuade women to read the psalms and do needlework, practices that, according to the apocryphal texts, helped Mary avoid idleness.

By considering the underlying cultural forces at work in the making of the “well-behaved Mary,” my students are in a better position to analyze how and why Marinella chose to reinforce this ideal in *La vita di Maria Vergine Imperatrice dell’Universo*, published in Venice in 1602 (with a subsequent edition in 1604, a reprint of this edition in 1610, and another edition in 1617).⁷ Marinella would have been familiar with conduct literature and sermons that urged a woman to keep her honor and virtue safe by not going out alone in public, and I tell my students that it is highly probable that Marinella would have also seen artistic depictions, such as the Giotto frescoes in the Cappella degli Scrovegni in Padova,⁸ which portray Mary and her cousin Elizabeth in the company of others. In *La vita di Maria Vergine*, Marinella follows this directive, borrowing directly from Pietro Aretino’s *Vita di Maria Vergine* (1539),⁹ by having Anna, the mother of Mary, go with companions when she travels to meet her husband; Mary, too, makes the journey to visit Elizabeth in the company of other women.¹⁰ Similarly, Marinella reiterates the prescriptive advice given to women in conduct literature on the importance of prayer and self-mortification when she states that “despite her youth, [Mary] fasted often, and was always praying” (Marinella 2008, p. 146) and “[s]he ate sparingly, and only as much food as was humanly necessary” (p. 149).¹¹ Marinella also reinforces the male ideal by accentuating the negative aspects of undesirable character traits in women: “Swollen pride, punishable talkativeness, impetuous rage, and tenacity of greed were all far removed from [Mary]” (ibid.). In addition, Mary’s dress, as indicated by male instruction, was modest, simple, and pure: “She shone, not among the purples and golds

⁶ Ottavia Niccoli (1994) argues that Counter-Reformation treatises, such as Silvio Antoniano’s *Tre libri dell’educazione cristiana* (1584), made unique efforts to link rules of comportment and piety with the aim of reforming the Church and society.

⁷ (Haskins 2008, p. 120). The first edition includes an epic poem in *ottava rima* that Marinella wrote on the same subject. In this course we read only the prose version.

⁸ See (Jacobus 1998) for a convincing discussion on the relationship between devotional texts, conduct literature, and art in this chapel.

⁹ See (Carinci 2013) for further evidence of Marinella’s emulation of Aretino’s text. See also (Aretino 2011).

¹⁰ Susan Haskins (2008, p. 125) states that “Anna goes to meet Joachim ‘together with some respected women,’ as no ‘respectable’ woman would be allowed out without a female companion (p. 140);” and “similarly, Mary, going to visit Elizabeth, takes ‘two elderly women,’ Anna’s old servants, with her, presumably inherited on her mother’s death, and possibly a mark of family continuity (p. 168).”

¹¹ At this point we have a brief discussion on the importance of self-mortification in the early modern period. For further information see (Bell 1985; Bynum 1987).

beneath which the swollen vanities of women are concealed, but among the whiteness and simplicity of a pure, plain single robe . . . in the purity of such a garment, she appeared almost an angel, shining in the whiteness of his heavenly tunic” (p. 152). Finally, Marinella depicts an industrious Mary who not only shuns idleness while residing in Egypt but who is as committed as Joseph to provide for their refugee family:

With the integrity of his craft, Joseph obtained a little of the food our nature needs for its preservation. As he was a foreigner he earned little. However, in great poverty they survived. The Virgin, too, whom Heaven elected as its queen, was in the straits of necessity, but by practicing the virtues of embroidery and lace-making, which she knew how to do very well, she made their great poverty a little less burdensome (p. 194).

Here, Marinella presents Mary as she is often depicted in early modern paintings, engaging in sophisticated needlework that was typical of the upper classes, in contrast to the fourteenth-century pseudo-Bonaventuran representation of the Virgin Mary who performs basic and essential sewing and spinning to help provide for her family’s needs in Egypt (Ragusa and Green 1961, pp. 69, 75).

As we read these excerpts from Marinella’s *La vita di Maria Vergine*, my students and I consider the following questions: Why does Marinella’s text reinforce and promote examples of the male ideal regarding female behavior? Does Marinella endorse this ideal and create a similar prescriptive text of her own for women? Or does Marinella propose anything distinctive outside of the male-designed blueprint for women? My students often respond that Marinella probably felt constrained to craft an ideal of the Virgin that was consonant with societal expectations and acceptable to her male peers. I agree that Marinella may have fashioned her particular version of the Virgin according to the “well-behaved” Marian ideal espoused by men in order to gain approval from a male audience. However, it is important that we establish that Marinella also transforms Mary into an active spiritual role model for women—one who, for example, was always “discussing holy matters” at a young age (Marinella 2008, p. 146), which was not an obvious female trait. Marinella, like Colonna and Montalvo, profiles Mary’s knowledge, understanding, and skillful practice of female spirituality and indicates that Mary constitutes an attainable exemplar for women as one who demonstrates how and on what to meditate in order to get closer to God.

2. The Female Ideal: The Meditative Mary

As we begin to analyze the unique aspects of Marinella’s, Colonna’s, and Montalvo’s Marian writings that emphasize and promote meditation through an example of a pensive and didactic Mary, I find it necessary to help students understand that certain ideas, favorable to women, circulated during the sixteenth century, notwithstanding a seemingly all-encompassing oppressive climate.¹² The following example illustrates how women benefited from a modification to religious thought. Influenced by evangelical ideas, Catholic clergy advised devotees to veer away from the medieval *imitatio Christi*, which they realized was an impossible pattern to follow, and towards the imitation of Mary, a mortal being, and her approachable faith and meditation practices, a more accessible paradigm on the pathway to Christ (Brundin 2008, p. 142). Women (both lay and religious) embraced this type of religiosity since it involved a more realistic, relatable role model for them to emulate. In a sermon delivered in Venice in 1539, the Capuchin preacher Bernardino Ochino encouraged congregants to imitate Mary’s example of faith and contemplation:

¹² Contemporary scholarship, following in the footsteps of Virginia Cox’s groundbreaking studies on women’s writing in Counter-Reformation Italy, which cite over sixty published works by women between 1580 and 1630, is more inclined to examine cultural elements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that fostered, rather than suppressed, female creativity (Cox 2008, 2011).

The Virgin Mary, the holy virgin, was the one who most perfectly and better than any other creature contemplated Christ hung upon the cross with a living faith in the manner in which we too should contemplate him (Ochino 1541, fol. 27v.).¹³

Ochino's sermons and emphasis on the imitation of Mary—as opposed to *imitatio Christi*—appealed to Colonna and other women who were seeking a role model who was more definitive and pertinent to them as women. Ochino's statement focuses on the importance of emulating Mary, especially in the way she contemplated Christ. Similarly, the Marian writings of Colonna, Marinella, and Montalvo underscore how well Mary performs meditation and contemplation and propose these practices as specific ways in which women may imitate Mary. Drawing inspiration from the visual arts and contemporary texts on meditation, these three writers illustrate how Mary provides a powerful role model for women who seek to improve their individual and personal devotion to God.

In order to be able to identify and analyze textual elements that foster meditation in the writings of these three laywomen, students should understand the importance of meditation and how it was practiced in the early modern tradition of affective piety.¹⁴ I explain that this tradition was widely available through three primary avenues: meditative literature (specifically, the influential fourteenth-century pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, usually attributed to the Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus, and the popular genre of Rosary meditations, which included images to facilitate meditation); the *devotio moderna* movement that originated in the Netherlands in the late fourteenth century, which encouraged followers to participate in the Passion of Christ through vicarious experience; and the Jesuit teaching of Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercitia Spiritualia*, published in 1548, a four-week program of meditations on the sinful life of man and the life of Christ. I share passages from the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes*, a guidebook on meditation and contemplation (the terms are used interchangeably in this text) when explaining that the power of mental images leads one to a higher level of devotion (Ragusa and Green 1961). I also present excerpts of Ignatius's *Exercitia Spiritualia* to illustrate the steps the faithful must take in the meditative process that will lead them to spiritual self-reformation: the first phase consists of "seeing in imagination the physical place where that which [they] want to contemplate is taking place"; next, they should activate their senses in bridging the gap between Christ's era and their own, considering and analyzing what they "see" and "hear," as if they were actually present; finally, they should simulate a "colloquy" with Christ on the cross or with Mary or the saints in order to seek counsel and favors from them (Ganss 1991). Once my students gain a better understanding of the early modern concept of meditation, they recognize more easily the meditative aspects of the writings of Marinella, Colonna, and Montalvo.

Although it makes sense from a chronological perspective to have my students study Colonna's text first, I prefer to continue our analysis of Marinella's work (as outlined in the first section of this essay) by transitioning from our discussion of Marinella's dedication to the male-inspired model of female comportment to consider the writer's promotion of canonical meditation practices that encompass a more independent expression of female spirituality. Reading Marinella's *La vita di Maria Vergine*, my students are surprised by the "extra" episodes and details of Mary's life that do not appear in the New Testament accounts, and this opens up a conversation about Marinella's apocryphal sources and the meditative and devotional texts that she may have drawn from in order to enhance particular aspects of Mary's biography. As Eleonora Carinci (2013, 2016) has demonstrated, however, the most direct source for Marinella's *La vita di Maria Vergine* is Pietro Aretino's *Vita di Maria Vergine* and his *I quattro libri de la humanità di Christo* (1535), and I propose that Marinella reiterated explicit and elaborate passages from Aretino's texts in order to reinforce the directives of Ignatius's *Exercitia Spiritualia* and the

¹³ For more information on Bernardino Ochino, see (Bainton 1941).

¹⁴ For the information I share with my students, I have consulted (Egger 1974–2003; Gründler 1987; McNamer 2010; Freedberg 1989; Smith 2002).

pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes*.¹⁵ Furthermore, her training in the Baroque literary tradition of lofty rhetoric, influenced by Aretino's texts, replete with examples of hyperbole and repetition, produced an imaginative narrative that may have served as an aid to meditation.¹⁶ According to Ignatius, Christ's Nativity and Passion are the most important devotional subjects on which to meditate and Marinella renders these scenes in an exceptionally visual way to support Ignatius's recommendation to imagine details that make the journey to Bethlehem and the scene of the Nativity vivid in their minds (Ganss 1991, pp. 149–50). Marinella's description of the "poor hovel, or little hut, the shelter for animals belonging to some shepherds" (Marinella 2008, p. 173), borrowed from Pietro Aretino's *I quattro libri de la humanità di Christo* (pp. 11 r-v), employs the evocative detail of an early modern painting:

It was the place, as it is written, beneath the lowliness of which they retired, the ruin of a building, the ancientness of which had been thrown to the ground by Joseph's weak arm, as some pieces of broken columns and some walls bore witness. Ivy and thorns, in their arrogance, had taken over others' rights. Part of the building was still upright, thanks to the shepherds' care, and was covered by reeds set up rustically with leaves and roots. These were held up above some beams, weakened through rain and age. The door, which had fallen by the entrance, was of entwined willow-tree twigs (ibid.).

In depicting Christ's Passion, Marinella reinforces Ignatius's charge to activate the senses during meditation when she presents a graphic description of Christ's crucifixion that may produce feelings of sorrow and compassion in readers as they imagine what Mary visualizes:

Thus the disconsolate Mother, who with John, the Magdalen, Martha, and the other Marys, was bathed in the blood that dripped from her beloved Son's body, looked one by one at the blows, wounds, and stabs that cruelty's hands had made in the head, hands, and feet of her dead hope, and felt every injury, every wound, and every stab wound pierce her breast with the bitterness of sorrow, as if she had been wounded by the piercing and cruelty of a hundred swords (p. 218)

In addition to portraying the scenes of Christ's life, Marinella expands the repertoire of images to include Mary's vision of the martyrdom of the saints, which conforms with Ignatius's suggestion to meditate on any subject that brings one closer to Christ (Ganss 1991, p. 121). Marinella renders these scenes in an expressive way, again by accentuating the Baroque aesthetic, and this time by describing explicit torments as if unfolding on an elaborate stage:

It seemed to the glorious Virgin, I think, that she saw (still bound in a light sleep), among many other things, a spacious place, like a great theater, in which there were figures in various shapes all cut by swords, with what appeared to her to be the cruelty of tyrants venting their bestial natures on the flesh and bones of those who followed in Christ's divine footsteps. It seemed to her that these filled the fearful theater . . . [and] she saw countless virgins who, at the most beautiful and lovely age and in their beauty, offered their chaste limbs and delicate but strong breasts to swords, arrows, razors, flames, scourges, and poisonous serpents, to the savage talons of wild lions, to the darkness of

¹⁵ According to Paolo Marini (Marini and Aretino 2011, p. 65), the tendency of Pietro Aretino (1540, 2011) to vivid description in his religious works is heavily influenced by the tradition of *Meditationes vitae Christi*. It would be an interesting research project for one of my students to analyze specific instances in which Marinella uses and modifies Aretino's works to inspire meditation.

¹⁶ In the introduction to *La vita di Maria Vergine Imperatrice dell'Universo*, Marinella provides an explanation of her poetic methodology, stating that she follows the Greek epic tradition in employing a grand and eloquent style of writing to match the magnificence of the subject. The introduction is not included in Susan Haskins's edition, but Haskins provides a summary of it for her readers (Marinella 2008, pp. 122–23). Here, as Eleonora Carinci asserts, Marinella imitates Pietro Aretino's declaration that he wrote his *Vita di Maria Vergine* in an elaborate manner in order to reflect the nobility of the subject. Carinci argues that Marinella's biography of the Virgin draws decisively on Aretino's *Vita di Maria Vergine*, which was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1557 (Carinci 2013).

prisons, to hooks and cords, to the tenacity of hard chains, and who had such open faces in the presence of torments that it appeared to her that they desired more than feared such martyrdoms (Marinella 2008, pp. 228–29).

In another instance, Marinella employs the expression “blood-filled theater” (p. 230), which gives startling distinction to Saint Francis’s place of martyrdom and complements the phrases “great theater” and “fearful theater” in the citation above; these expressions, which evoke scenes of sensational representations, serve to further designate and classify places of extreme persecution and torture. Concluding our discussion of Marinella’s biography of Mary, I aim to convey to my students that Marinella’s religious text appropriates the highly dramatic and extravagant style of the secular writers of her day in order to depict memorable scenes that produce emotional responses for the reader and remain in the mind long after the reading is over.¹⁷

As we move backwards in time from Marinella’s biography to Colonna’s *Pianto della Marchesa di Pescara sopra la passione di Cristo*, first published in Venice in 1556,¹⁸ I point out that both authors represent the practice of meditation in different ways, perhaps reflecting their contrasting eras. Where Marinella’s Counter-Reformation text is almost entirely descriptive, underscoring *what* one should meditate on, Colonna’s is a more intellectual narrative, produced in an evangelical era, revealing Mary’s actual thoughts and feelings and demonstrating *how* Mary meditates as she gazes at the dead Christ lying in her lap. I give my students an example to illustrate this divergence. Turning back to Marinella’s text, as narrator, Marinella merely wonders what Mary is feeling as she contemplates her son on the cross:

What torment was yours, O Queen of the most beautiful souls that are worthy of God’s presence? While you were by the lofty wood of the tragic Cross, perhaps you were thinking that the birds took sweet rest in their nests, the wolves and the bears in their caves and dens, and that your blessed Jesus had nowhere to rest His wounded and drooping body . . . (Marinella 2008, p. 218)

Marinella offers a rhetorical question and speculates that Mary simply repeats in her mind the words Jesus spoke during his ministry (as recorded in Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58) to illustrate the cost of discipleship. Colonna, on the other hand, in her *Pianto* depicts Mary’s individual consideration of psychological and emotional issues in a way that may have inspired readers to express themselves freely in their own meditative practices. Colonna writes that Mary was “thinking over what [Christ] had felt in that hour” (Colonna 2008, p. 56), and that “in her mind she enclosed herself within the sacred side, whence she knew that the sacraments of our so many graces had flowed” and “wanted everyone in the entire world to be able to see what she saw, so that they might enjoy such immense grace” (p. 57); Colonna attests to the appropriateness of gratitude in meditation as Mary “thanked the heavenly Father . . . she thanked the Holy Spirit . . . she thanked the angels . . . she thanked the sun” (p. 63).¹⁹ Colonna is more insistent than Marinella on revealing the inner thoughts and feelings of Mary as she practices meditation.

¹⁷ While Marinella faithfully reproduces an established model of meditation, acceptable to her Counter-Reformation audience, Eleonora Carinci demonstrates Marinella’s deviation from the traditional perspective of women by identifying details that depict an active and didactic Mary, which perhaps would have empowered women in their personal study and devotion. According to Carinci, Marinella’s Mary mimics Aretino’s Mary who displays excellence in meditation and who also studies, speaks wisely, and even travels, teaches, and preaches after Christ’s Resurrection (Carinci 2013, pp. 373, 378).

¹⁸ This edition was the first of five sixteenth-century editions; it was published together with the *Orazione sopra l’Ave Maria*, another prose meditation written by Colonna, as well as an anonymous oration made on Good Friday, on the Passion of Christ (Haskins 2008, p. 49). Carinci (2016, pp. 400–1) argues that Colonna wrote the *Pianto* in 1540–1541. The manuscript held in the Vatican Secret Archives the *Pianto* is entitled *Meditazione del Venerdì Santo* and has an alternate title—*Sermone sopra la Vergine addolorata*—in the index of these archives.

¹⁹ Some astute students have pointed to the “Lament of Christ’s Mother” (Marinella 2008, p. 216) in Marinella’s *La vita di Maria Vergine*, as an example of Marinella’s presentation of a more introspective Mary. However, in discussing the medieval tradition of the *planctus Mariae*, we come to the conclusion that this “lament” merely follows the tradition and does not offer the unique meditative stance that Colonna adopts throughout her *Pianto*.

To illustrate further the differences between Marinella and Colonna in their depictions of the meditative Mary, I point my students to passages where Marinella makes only fleeting references to Mary's meditations and contemplations,²⁰ whereas Colonna narrates more explicitly how Mary gazed on the physical form of Christ's "divine face" after his death in order to contemplate the virtues she saw "depicted" in his facial features and speech:

Then she meditated upon, even saw depicted in the divine face, the vestiges of charity, obedience, humility, patience, and peace in the divine face, saw first charity in its true seat, when He said: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do"; patience in saying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (pp. 55-56)

Mary's meditation in Colonna's *Pianto* derives its metaphysical aspects from Christ's physical features and from what she remembers he has said. Furthermore, Colonna's *Pianto* links Mary's empathy with her excellence in meditation: "All this shone forth in Christ's face more to the Madonna than to others, as she suffered more passionately" (p. 56). According to Colonna, Mary "saw" more than the others, in a metaphysical sense, because she was concentrating in a very pointed way in her meditation in order to participate vicariously in Christ's suffering. I suggest that Colonna's Mary may have inspired her female audience to innovate in a personalized way because she exemplifies what David Freedberg defines as not "some generalized channeling of the mind to the image, but rather an attentiveness particularized in terms of the intimate experience of the beholder" (Freedberg 1989, pp. 166-67). At this point I project an image on the screen of Michelangelo's drawing for Colonna—*Pietà for Vittoria Colonna* at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston—and we consider how Colonna's *Pianto* may be a more complex psychological representation of meditation than Marinella's *La Vita di Maria Vergine* because Colonna may have been looking at Michelangelo's drawing while composing it (Nagel 1997; Forcellino 2016, p. 302). We then discuss the notion in early modern culture of the power of images to facilitate meditation (in this case, Colonna's meditation on Mary's meditation as imagined from Michelangelo's drawing). As the Jesuit preacher Francis Borgia (1510-1572), a close friend of Ignatius, wrote in the introduction to his planned book of *meditations on the Life of Christ*, images play an important role in enabling a deeper and more concentrated meditation:

In order to achieve greater facility in meditation, one places before oneself an image showing the gospel story ["the evangelical mystery"]; and thus, before commencing the meditation, one will gaze upon the image and take especial care in observing that which it has to show, in order the better to contemplate it as one meditates, and to derive greater benefit from it; because the function of the image is, as it were, to give taste and flavour to the food one has to eat, in such a way that one is not satisfied until one has eaten it; and also in such a way that understanding will reflect upon and work on that which it has to meditate, at considerable cost and effort to itself. And this takes place with greater certainty, since the image conforms closely to the gospel, and because meditating can easily deceive one, as one takes one thing for another and leaves out the traces of the Holy Gospel, which one should respect both in small and large details, and so should not incline either to left or right (Nicolau 1949, p. 169).

While Borgia's text was never brought to fruition, his friend and fellow collaborator with Ignatius, Jerome Nadal (1507–1580), published a text on meditation, featuring illustrations to direct the focus of the person meditating and to limit any distractions, which served as the standard for many devotional works from the seventeenth-century on (Freedberg 1989, pp. 181–82).²¹ While Colonna's text does not

²⁰ "with meditations and contemplation, she fed her soul with heavenly food" (Marinella 2008, p. 204); "she gazed with a sharp mental eye, and contemplated on the spilt blood, the bitter wounds, and His painful death" (p. 227); "She remained night and day in continuous prayer, meditation, and fasting" (p. 234).

²¹ This may also have been Marinella's intent as the 1602 edition of her *La vita di Maria Vergine* contains engravings.

reproduce the image that Michelangelo drew for her, it is possible to surmise that Colonna's reflection on the depth of Mary's meditation is more focused and precise because she had an image in front of her to analyze and interpret.²²

The last author's work we study in this three-week segment of the course, Eleonora Montalvo's unpublished dramatic verse hagiography, *Vita della Santissima Vergine Maria*, which Montalvo wrote for and had performed by the women of the lay conservatories she founded in seventeenth-century Florence, draws on the power of theater to inspire and promote meditation.²³ Writing in the middle of the seventeenth century, Montalvo would have been influenced, as was Marinella, by Baroque literary conventions and the early modern theological debate on Marian devotion. Like Marinella's biography of Mary, Montalvo's poetic hagiography emphasizes the *what* of meditation (visually striking details of the Nativity and Passion) and, similar to Colonna's plaint, Montalvo's composition also establishes the *how* of meditation (through Mary's prayers and contemplation while Christ is on the cross and after his Ascension). But what sets Montalvo's work apart from the other two narratives is that Montalvo implements the medium of theater as a distinctive way to improve one's practice of meditation. In the introduction to the ninth section of the *Vita della Santissima Vergine Maria*, on the Passion of Christ, Montalvo's instructions state that the performer who represents Mary should change from her "Queen of the Angels dress" ("abito di Regina degli Angeli") to a "mourning dress and black veil" ("abito lugubre e nero velo") (Montalvo n.d., fol. 37)²⁴ and declare that the very purpose of the performance is, in fact, to help audience members improve their practice of meditation:

Son tornata di nuovo a raccontarvi
 Del Figliol mio l'asperissima passione
 Acciò che voi possiate prepararvi
 A meglio farne la meditazione (Montalvo n.d., fol. 38).
 [I have come back again to tell you
 About the most stinging Passion of my son
 So that you can prepare yourselves
 To improve your meditation of it.]

Appearing in her new costume, which reflects the transition in early modern visual culture from the regal Mary to a more imitable Mary who dresses in contemporary mourning dress, the performer prepares her audience for a powerful image of the Virgin Mary's outward expression of her deep inner sorrow. In this scene, the performer recites gruesome details and harsh rhymes in order to bring to mind graphic images of Christ's blood-stained and lacerated body hanging from the cross and through which her audience could experience sensory impressions when recalling these images during their meditation practice.

In creating poetic images to engage the physical senses and make the most impact on the meditation practices of the performer and the young women of the audience, Montalvo appears to implement for the stage the advice that Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597) gives in his *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* to post-Tridentine artists and writers, who should seek with similar intent to create material that shapes an audience's desire to obey God's will:

[I]f words that are heard or read are so effective at moving our senses, then pictures that radiate piety, modesty, holiness and devotion must pierce inside us with much more force

²² Studying Torquato Tasso's *Le lacrime della Beata Vergine* in conjunction with Colonna's plaint would provide an interesting parallel since it is believed that Tasso was also inspired by an image of the Virgin (now lost) to compose his 25-octave poem (Mazzotta 2012, pp. xiv–xv).

²³ Montalvo's dramatic hagiographies were performed at La Quiete and Il Conventino, two lay conservatories for women that Montalvo founded in seventeenth-century Florence. For more on Montalvo's lay conservatories and plays, see my article, "Teaching Ignatian Spirituality to Rich and Poor Girls through Dramatic Performance in Seventeenth-Century Florence" (Haraguchi 2016).

²⁴ Translations of Montalvo's *Vita della Santissima Vergine Maria* are mine.

... To hear the story of the martyrdom of a saint, the zeal and constancy of a virgin, or the Passion of Christ himself are things that really touch a chord; but for the martyred saint to be placed here in living color before our eyes, with the distressed virgin on one side, and Christ nailed to the cross on the other, it truly increases our devotion and, unless one is made of wood or marble, pierces our insides.²⁵

Paleotti's comment on the power of images to arouse emotions may help us understand why Montalvo chose theater with its multisensory persuasive potential. By implementing costumes, props, scenery, singing, and musical accompaniment, Montalvo may have considered her plays to be superior to the mere reading of devotional literature and the passive viewing of a work of art.

By facilitating the creation and activation of images in the minds of performers and audience members, Montalvo reinforces the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, quoted in the *Official Directory* to Ignatius's *Exercitia Spiritualia*:

If you wish to gather fruit from these matters, make yourself as present to what is recounted about the sayings and actions of the Lord Jesus Christ as if you were seeing them with your own eyes and hearing them with your own ears; do this with all the affection of your spirit, carefully, lovingly, and slowly, leaving aside all your other concerns and cares (Palmer 1996, p. 314).²⁶

As my students reenact scenes from Montalvo's *Vita della Santissima Vergine Maria*, we agree that both the performer and her female audience assume a virtual presence, but it is perhaps the performer who derives the most benefit from the experience. When the performer takes on the role of Mary, and in essence, "embodies" the Virgin, she might better imagine the nature of true meditation and contemplation. A young woman may learn best how to imitate Mary when she actually envisions herself as the Virgin making an appearance to her devotees. When a performer puts on Mary's clothing, carries props that identify her as Mary, and recites the opening lines of the performance, "I am the sacred and holy Virgin Mary" ("Io son Maria Vergine sacra e santa") (Montalvo n.d., fol. 43), she figuratively becomes the Virgin who appears to tell the story of her sufferings for Christ and to inspire others to become more like her.

3. Conclusions

In guiding my students through an analysis of depictions of the Virgin Mary in sermons, art, and the literary works of Colonna, Marinella, and Montalvo, I hope to help them better comprehend the social, cultural, and religious aspects of early modern society. To articulate this goal in more precise terms, my essay has outlined a twofold objective: (a) to help students see how conduct literature influenced male writers and clerics to construct an ideal of a "well-behaved Mary" that women were encouraged to emulate for the good of society; and (b) to show how Colonna, Marinella, and Montalvo drew on the precepts of texts on meditation and the visual arts in order to fashion a Marian ideal in a variety of literary genres that could serve as possible aids to meditation, inspiring women to assert their creativity within their own individualized and autonomous practice of female spirituality. Ultimately I aim to assist students in discovering how these three writers's depictions of the Virgin's meditations—composed of thoughts, images, ideas, personal observations and interpretations—reflect a freedom of inner expression and independent spiritual direction not otherwise readily apparent in the study of women in a society that sought to dictate their every move.

²⁵ My translation. See (Barocchi 1961, p. 228): "[S]e tanta efficacia hanno le parole, che si odono o leggono, di tramutare i sensi nostri, con molta maggiore violenza penetreranno dentro di noi quelle figure, dalle quali si vedrà spirare pietà, modestia, santità e divozione ... Il sentire narrare il martirio d'un santo, il zelo e costanza d'una vergine, la passione dello stesso Cristo, sono cose che toccano dentro di vero; ma l'esserci con vivi colori qua posto sotto gli occhi il santo martirizzato, colà la vergine combattuta e nell'altro lato Cristo inchiodato, egli è pur vero che tanto accresce la divozione e compunge le viscere, che chi non lo conosce è di legno o di marmo."

²⁶ Ignatius would have been familiar with this passage because it is cited in the prologue of Ludolf of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, a book that Ignatius read many times (see Smith 2002, p. 36).

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