# Saint to Slut:
# The Representation of Sex Workers in Art

*A'yla James | aylaj41@gmail.com*
*B.A. Global Liberal Studies, 2023 | New York University, New York*
*https://doi.org/10.33682/8qgf-jjgh*

**Abstract**

Sex work is one of the oldest professions that remains in society today. With its long history, sex workers have repeatedly found themselves in the limelight, society contemplating and prescribing meanings to their bodies. As a result, sex workers have become a popular subject of art throughout the years. This article specifically looks at their depiction in the Renaissance/Late-Renaissance and the present platform of OnlyFans to understand the evolution of the representation of sex workers. An analysis of their portrayal is done through a comparison of artworks in an effort to look at society's varying perceptions of sex workers and, more importantly, the role of agency within these works. While the discussion of agency in sex work is an ongoing and delicately complex one, this article aims to explore the possibility of reclamation and empowerment within the profession by asking the question: When depicting a sex worker who is owning her body? The sex worker, artist, or viewer?

**Keywords**

Sex Work; Feminism; Art History; Renaissance; OnlyFans; Mary Magdalene; Titian Vecellio; Giampietrino; Artemisia Gentileschi

## Introduction

Prostitution remains one of the oldest professions practiced today. Despite society's many attempts to suppress and regulate, prostitution has remained as part of society from biblical to Renaissance to modern times. In its early years, prostitution was heavily associated with religion. Although the origins of religious/sacred prostitution are still speculated and debated, in his work *The Histories*, ancient Greek scholar Herodotus recorded the act was practiced in Babylon, Corinth, Rome, and many parts of Asia and Africa.[1] The role of the sacred prostitute was taken up by women who "sacrificed their virginity and their right to marriage, [and] were looked upon much in the way that we today are accustomed to look upon nuns and priests who, in the service of God, eschew all rights to the sexual pleasures and amenities of normal life" in order to invoke fertility in land and animals.[2]

However, despite its sacred beginnings, prostitution came to be seen as an immoral act that not only was harmful to the women themselves but also to the men they seduced. Condemned in the Bible as women with lips that "drip honey" and "speech smoother than oil," and women who lie "in wait like a robber and [increase] the number of the faithless," prostitutes soon were disdained by society, looked down upon for their lust and greed.[3] It is this aspect of immorality that has stuck with society's view of prostitutes; minister and writer, Ralph Wardlaw, described

[1]George Ryley Scott, *A History of Prostitution: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Routledge, 2013), 55-56.

[2]Scott, *A History*, 54-55. However, Scott does argue that even this definition is too narrow to explain the origin of religious prostitution as it disregards male prostitution. Instead, Scott believes religious prostitution came from the belief that sex with a god, or those connected to a god, benefited the human participant. For example, men feared marrying a virgin because they would be harmed for deflowering her before a god could. There was also a belief that the blood from a virgin during the act of sex was poisonous to the ordinary man and only those deemed holy could deflower a virgin without punishment. Scott argues it is this belief that led to *jus primae noctis*.

[3]Proverbs 5:3 (New Revised Standard Version); Prov 23:28 (NRSV)

the service as "illicit intercourse of the sexes," popularly seen by society as a woman selling her body simply for money.[4]

However, much like its change from a sacred act to an immoral one, prostitution, its definition, and how society views it, has continued to evolve through the ages. We can see this especially today with the discussion that surrounds prostitution, now more frequently referred to as 'sex work.' This term was coined by Carol Leigh in the 1980s as a "contribution to the language" of the feminist movement, to include prostitutes in feminism without stigma or judgment. The term replaces slurs like whore or slut while also not being "yet another euphemism, like lady of the night, hooker, *filles de joie*, etc." To use the terms sex work and sex worker "marks the beginning of a movement. It acknowledges the work we [sex workers] do rather than defines us by our status."[5] For this reason, prostitution and prostitutes will be referred to as sex work and sex workers in this article.

Despite the taboo label forced upon it, there have been eras when sex work and sex workers have found themselves in the spotlight. Typically, these eras were marked by society realizing that sex work could not be suppressed but regulated and contained, whether in certain parts of cities or in brothels. With an embracement, albeit limited, of sex work, sex workers found themselves a popular subject for artists. These women found themselves asked to model for painters where their sexuality was captured in oil and acrylic, then put on display in exhibitions to be seen and discussed by many. However, even with this popularity and embracement, where did the sex worker truly

[4]Scott, *A History*, 3.

[5]Carol Leigh, "Inventing Sex Work," in *Whores and Other Feminists*, by Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 229-230. It should also be noted that "prostitute" itself is a euphemism, meaning "to offer publicly."

stand? Instead of being wholly accepted, their place in society was left ambiguous, their status uncertain.

As Carol Leigh herself points out, much of the perspective of depicted sex workers comes from the, typically, male artists who captured them. This perspective calls into question the role of agency within these artworks. When put in a gilded frame and displayed for, typically, male viewers, is the depicted sex worker in control of her body? Or, is she simply a tool of eroticism used to fulfill the sexual desires of others, whether the artist or viewer?

## Mary Magdalene—The Saintly Sex Worker

In fifteenth-century Italy, Florence's Platonic Academy sat in Villa Medici at Careggi translating and commenting on works from Plato and Neoplatonists. The leader of this group of intellectual men was Marsilio Ficino, a famous humanist philosopher who had a passion for merging the pagan philosophies of ancient Greece and Rome with the Christianity that ruled over Italy. An important component of the philosophy Ficino developed was love, which he believed to be born from beauty. Not only did Ficino see this love as "the love of the soul for God [but also as] the basis of morality. Love, he wrote, was the link between the divine and the terrestrial, in a continuous chain reaction, the *circuitous spiritualis*, or spiritual circuit, which led from and back to God."[6]

During the Renaissance, born from Ficino's philosophy, came the belief that feminine beauty caused "rapture in the lover, which in turn fostered in him the desire for God."[7] One

[6]Susan Haskins, "The Weeper," in *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 232. It was also Ficino that coined the term "Platonic love."
[7]Haskins, "The Weeper," 233.

example is seen in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* which states, "women alone take from our hearts all vile and base thoughts, woes, miseries and those troubled humors that so often attend such things…women do not distract but rather awaken our minds."[8] No longer were women and their beauty seen as a product of temptation and sin, but instead a divine tool that inspired spiritual love, faith, and desire. This rising to a saintly status can be seen even further with the invoking of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, within a Christian context.

Ficino's philosophy was not just limited to influencing the academic field, it also had an impact on the creative. His blending of pagan and Christian beliefs found itself being used in literature and poetry, specifically with the figure of Venus and her relation to the Virgin Mary. In a letter titled *Prospera in Fato Fortuna, Vera in Virtute Felicitas* [*Good Fortune is in Fate, True Happiness in Virtue*], Ficino wrote "all the heavens are within ourselves" with Venus, the planet, representing humanity. We see Ficino's impact within a poem from Lorenzo Buonincontri, a friend of Ficino, in that the poet "having entered the 'third orbit' of the heavens, not only [invoked] the ruler of this orbit, Venus, in the same breath with Virgin Mary but [greeted] the '*sancta Dei genitrix*' as a 'goddess of goddesses' (*diva dearum*) whom he, in his previous works, had 'often dared address under the fictitious name of Venus' herself."[9] Many Madonnas began to resemble Venus, "naked and draped, celestial and terrestrial..., depicted and described in conformity with the ideals of feminine beauty."[10] However, the invoking of Venus was not just related to the Virgin Mary, but also found itself being used in relation to Mary Magdalene.

[8]Haskins, "The Weeper," 233.
[9]Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1960), 186-187.
[10]Haskins, "The Weeper," 234.

Mary Magdalene is one of the few female figures featured in the Bible. She has come to be known as a saved sex worker, one who repented her life of lust and gave it up for a holy life as one of Jesus's apostles. Surprisingly, Magdalene's backstory as a sex worker is never explicitly stated in the Bible. Instead, her first appearance comes in the Gospel of Luke, where she is described as one of the women who accompanied Jesus alongside the apostles, "cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had been casted out."[11] It was not until the year 591 that Magdalene came to be seen as the penitent sex worker due to the sermon of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604). On September 14, 591, Gregory called a sermon on repentance in which he focused on the story of the woman in Luke 7:36-50:[12]

> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.[13]

Although this woman remains unnamed for the entirety of the story, Gregory declared her as Mary Magdalene to his listeners: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark."[14] Within his sermon, Gregory also deemed the seven devils/demons casted out of Magdalene the seven deadly sins and put much emphasis on the sin of lust:

---

[11]Luke 8:2 (NRSV). With the ongoing discussion of the chronological order of the Gospels, Magdalene's first appearance may instead come in the Gospel of Mark 16:9 (NRSV) "Now after he [Jesus] rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared to Mary Magdalene, from who he had cast out seven demons."

[12]Philip C. Almond, "Who Was Mary Magdalene?" in *Mary Magdalene: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 8.

[13]Luke 7:36-39 (NRSV).

[14]Almond, "Who Was Mary," 9-10. Here Gregory is also conflating Mary Magdalene, with Mary of Bethany who is featured in the Gospel of John 12: 1-8 (NRSV) who also anointed Jesus's feet with a perfume and wiped them with her hair at a dinner.

> It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears.[15]

With the use of phrases such as "perfume her flesh in forbidden acts," "displayed more scandalously," "coveted with earthly eyes," and the mention of her displayed hair, Gregory's listeners and readers understood that the Pope deemed lust Magdalene's greatest sin. Magdalene's profession as a sex worker comes in more subtle notes that can be examined further. For example, the overuse of perfume on the flesh was "often described in ancient literature as the hallmark of the prostitute." There is also Magdalene's free hair which goes against the Christian tradition that women's heads should be covered and their faces veiled. As the Latin theologian Tertullian (c. 155-240) put it, 'be you mother, or sister, or *virgin* daughter…veil your head.'"[16] Alongside the words Pope Gregory chose to describe Magdalene's penitence, there is also the act itself, "given the setting, the description of the woman, and her anointing of his feet, 'the erotic overtones of the story are obvious. Only slaves or prostitutes would perform such a function in the context of a meal.'"[17] With all of these factors, Pope Gregory the Great took and shaped Magdalene's narrative into one of a penitent sex worker. Magdalene demonstrated the possibility of rising to a saintly status through repentance of a wayward life. She not only became the middle ground between Eve of the Book of Genesis, the ultimate sinner, and the Virgin Mother Mary, the ultimate saint, but also between celestial and terrestrial beauty.

[15]Almond, "Who Was Mary," 11.
[16]Almond, "Who Was Mary," 11-12.
[17]Almond, "Who Was Mary," 9.

Like the Virgin Mary, Magdalene also began to resemble Venus in artwork. One example


is Fig. 1.1 on the left[18] where Magdalene is displayed on the title page of an Italian chapbook dedicated to the conversion of Magdalene from sex worker to saint. In the illustration, Magdalene is seen in her typical depiction, young and nude with long flowing hair that covers her private parts. However, this Magdalene also calls to mind images of Venus, as she is fashioned in the typical *Venus Pudica* pose, much like Botticelli's *Birth of Venus.* This pose also further highlights the mixing of pagan and Christian philosophies as it showed the "Platonic interpretation of the modest Venus, who was described as expressing the dual nature of love both sensuous and chaste."[19] With the tufts of grass seen at the bottom of the illustration, it is implied that Magdalene is in her typical hermetic setting, away from society, in order to achieve true penitence. However, Magdalene is also wedged between two columns, making it feel as if she is standing within a sculptural niche. This framing also seems similar to Botticelli's Venus who is framed between Zephyr and Aura on her left and the Hora of Spring, on her right.

Similar to the invocation of Venus with the Virgin Mary, Magdalene became interchangeable with the goddess and adopted her characteristics. She became the "personification of Celestial Love [representing] a desire for beauty that surpasses earthly reality and longs for the

[18] Figure 1.1. Anonymous, title page to Marco Rossiglio's La Conversione di Santa Maria Madalena, 1611, woodcut, Biblioteca Vaticano, Vatican City.

[19] Rachel Geschwind, "The Printed Penitent: Magdalene Imagery and Prostitution Reform in Early Modern Italian Chapbooks and Broadsheets," in *Mary Magdalene, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, by Michelle A. Erhardt and Amy M. Morris (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 117-120.

divine, as opposed to a terrestrial love that yearns for beauty found in the flesh and the material world."[20] However, it cannot be lost that Magdalene, a former sex worker, had become associated and intertwined with a goddess that had also been linked with the courtesan. Many courtesans were hired by artists to pose for portraits of goddesses. One example being artist Raphael painting Imperia, one of the most famous Renaissance Roman courtesans, as Venus on the façade of her home, allowing her to be defined as "the icon of love, capable of bestowing pleasure and splendor as a deity among mortals." The figure of Venus was also used within art to represent the city of Venice, known for its large population of sex workers, to show the city as "both a powerful divine deity and a licentious and profane being."[21]

However, what marks the difference between Magdalene and the Venus courtesans was Magdalene's story of penitence. As Pope Clement VII stated, she "was forgiven many sins because she loved much, and that she, perhaps, in no less grace than Saint Paul, was many times rapt to the third heaven of angelic love."[22] Although she invoked the goddess that ruled over sexual desire, it was her Christian origin that allowed her to resemble Mother Mary in conveying not just carnal desire, but also the divine. Like the saintly status of women, Magdalene found herself representing and inspiring love, faith, and spiritual desire. Magdalene, serving as a combination of Mary and Eve as virtue and sin, embodied redemption and, in turn, became a symbol of reformation for the many sex workers who populated the streets during the Italian Renaissance.

As seen in Fig. 1.1, the illustration of Magdalene was used for Marco Rossiglio's chapbook dedicated to the Conversion of Magdalene. Chapbooks were small, cheap, and easily readable

[20]Geschwind, "The Printed," 121.
[21] Geschwind, "The Printed," 121-122. An example of this is Veronese's *Apotheosis of Venice* (1579).
[22]Geschwind, "The Printed," 121.

pamphlets popular during the Renaissance, published with the goal of "[converting] readers to 'new values."[23] Chapbooks dedicated specifically to Magdalene were meant to pose her as a role model for "wayward [women], which was echoed in popular Lenten sermons and mandatory conversion sermons for prostitutes."[24] Rossiglio's chapbook is no exception, most likely circulating in Venice and Rome where the campaign of converting sex workers was popular.

The reformation of sex workers went hand in hand with the rise in number of sex workers in Italy's major cities. This rise was not only a response to the increase of poverty in Renaissance Italy, but also the high ratio of men to women in these cities.[25] For example, once the papacy reestablished itself in Rome after the Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism, there was an increase in clergy and laymen settling in Rome looking for positions in the papal court. Not only did the papacy reestablishing itself in Rome increase the number of men in the city, but it also allowed sex work to thrive, specifically the role of the courtesan. Even before the Renaissance, the Church had viewed sex work, even while condemning it, as a necessary vice, believing it was too integrated into society to be eradicated while also preventing greater sins.[26] This acceptance of sex

[23]Geschwind, "The Printed," 114, 123. As Geschwind details, chapbooks originated in oral culture and were aimed to target more than the literate customer. The sellers of these chapbooks, ballad singers and traveling vendors, would perform songs and verses associated with the stories within the chapbooks to educate illiterate audience members on the moral stories they contained and help them memorize the message.

[24]Geschwind, "The Printed," 117.

[25]Geschwind, "The Printed," 109, 111. The poverty of women during the Italian Renaissance can be linked to the inflation of the dowry system with many women turning to sex work to acquire and secure their dowry funds. This poverty can also be linked to the economic decline in textiles which was the most successful career choice for lower class women.

[26]Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, "The Chapel of the Courtesan and the Quarrel of the Magdalens," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 275, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177269. Elaborated on in John K. Brackett's "The Florentine Onestà and the control of Prostitution, 1403-1680," these justifications stemmed from St. Augustine and St. Thomas during the Medieval Age. Augustine argued that sex work was a "legitimate outlet for the libidinous desires of men" and prevented it from infecting society. St. Thomas shared the same belief but he also thought that permitting sex work allowed the avoidance of "sodomitic sexual practices," which was a concern when men outnumbered the women, like in Rome. It should also be said that higher members of the papal court, including the pope, had their own courtesans which could account for the acceptance of sex work. Some of these members include Pope Alexander VI, Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, and Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, later named Pope Julius II.

work allowed courtesans to acquire prominent wealth and status through their wealthy and powerful clients.[27] It was their high status that allowed courtesans to have opportunities that sex workers of the lower class did not. For example, some of these women were given the chance to be socially independent and advance their education.[28] By gaining wealth and independence, these courtesans were able to pursue other interests, one example being the Magdalene Chapel in the church of SS. Trinità dei Monti in Rome.

The decoration of the Magdalene Chapel was passed down to Giulio Romano and Gianfrancesco Penni when they inherited the workshop of their mentor, Raphael, after his death in 1520. Within the chapel, Romano and Penni painted four scenes and an altarpiece centered on the story of Magdalene.[29] However, what makes this chapel particularly interesting is that the decoration of the chapel was possibly commissioned by a famous courtesan of Rome. According to Giorgio Vasari's writing, the paintings were done for a sex worker and the face of the dead woman carved on top of a sarcophagus within the chapel belonged to "a very famous courtesan of Rome."[30] With the tolerance of courtesans within Rome and the high status these women could hold, it is highly probable that a courtesan paid for the decoration of the chapel, especially since this would not be the first time one has done so. For example, the courtesan and mistress of

[27]Although I am using "courtesan" as a general term in this article, the sex workers of Renaissance Italy were divided into ranks (all renamed in the sixteenth century). There was *meretrice* (renamed *cortesana puttana*), a street walker of the lower class, then *cortigiana* (renamed *cortesana da lume/candela*), a high-priced and distinguished courtesan, and finally *cortesana onesta* (which appeared in the sixteenth century), an honest or respectable courtesan that acquired much wealth, admiration, and high status. It is the two latter ranks who mingled with nobility and were often the ones who found themselves the subject of literature and art.

[28]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 275.

[29]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 273. The four scenes are titled: *Mary Magdalen Borne Up by Angels*, *Mary Magdalen Anointing Christ's Feet in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, *Mary Magdalen in the Desert*, *Martha Leading Mary Magdalen to Christ* and the altarpiece being *Noli me tangere*.

[30]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 273.

Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, Vannozza dei Cattanei, also founded a chapel in S. Maria del Popolo where she was later buried in 1518.[31]

Although Vasari did not write who the courtesan of the Magdalene Chapel was, Pio Pecchiai's writing suggests the woman was Lucrezia Scanatoria, as it is her name that appears on records from the church of SS. Trinità. Scanatoria's death also occurred before February 14, 1522 which is the date when the money she left for the church was used by the executors of her will to purchase a home in Rome known as La Maddalena. Pecchiai suggests the naming of the house "was because of its association through its patron with the frescoes in the Magdalene chapel."[32] Christopher Witcombe suggests that this house may have been connected to the Convertite della Maddalena, a convent for converted sex workers founded by Pope Leo X in 1520. If this is true then Scanatoria "had also left money to SS. Trinità dei Monti to be used for the purchase of a house, either for use by the newly founded convent or perhaps to serve as a refuge for converted prostitutes."[33] Before her death, it is likely Scanatoria would have repented her sinful life as it is unlikely the Church would have allowed her to decorate a chapel otherwise. Her assumed repentance is only underscored by the use of Magdalene in the chapel, the painted scenes deriving from biblical accounts but also legendary ones.

The scene painted inside the arched entrance to the chapel is *Martha Leading Mary Magdalen to Christ* (Fig. 1.2 below), stemming from the *Golden Legend*, a fifteenth-century story centered on Magdalene's conversion. In the story, Magdalene is once again conflated with Mary of Bethany and is made to be the sister of Lazarus and Martha mentioned in the Gospel of John.

[31]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 279. Similarly to Scanatoria, Fiammetta, courtesan of Cesare Borgia, owned a chapel dedicated to Mary Magdalene within the church of S. Agostino and was buried there.
[32]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 278.
[33]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 279.

Figure 1.2. Marcantonio Raimondi and Giulio Romano, *Martha Leading Mary Magdalen to Christ*, 1520-1525, engraving on laid paper, Davison Art Center, Middletown.

Within a more modern version of the story, Magdalene is described as a woman who "gave herself totally to the pleasures of the flesh" and was "renowned ... for her beauty and her riches, she was no less known for the way she gave her body to pleasure—so much so that her proper name was forgotten and she was commonly called 'the sinner.'"[34] In this version, Magdalene, "guided by divine will," visited the house of Simon the Pharisee to see Jesus, leading to the events described in the Gospel of Luke.[35] However, in a fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Golden Legend*, it is said that Martha persuaded Magdalene to go and listen to Jesus's preaching, seen in the chapel painting, and by hearing his words she was converted.[36]

With the description of Magdalene in the story, it could be argued that courtesans were able to identify with Magdalene not only because of Pope Gregory's highly influential interpretation of her, but because she mimicked their life. She was a wealthy woman, known for her beauty and weakness to bodily pleasure, much like the courtesans who "moved in the highest levels of society as the intimate guests and fashionable companions of wealthy clients."[37] Even if these courtesans were illiterate, they were still able to hear romantic tales of Magdalene's

[34]Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 375.
[35]De Voragine, *The Golden*, 375.
[36]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 280.
[37]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 276-277.

conversion through sermons from preachers like Josse Clichtove, who described Magdalene as a woman who was "extremely vain in every way" and only went to visit Christ because Martha told her he was a handsome man. As Clichtove puts it, "She [Magdalene] was eager to see, not to hear. And as soon as she saw the Lord, she fell in love with him. But the Lord by his words began to soften her heart and bend it to the desire for repentance."[38] These women could have potentially witnessed the scene in plays like *Le mystère de la Passion*, a fifteenth-century play where Magdalene is portrayed as a "wordly courtesan who hears about Christ and how handsome he is and decides to seduce him. She is instead won over by him and undergoes a conversion."[39]

With these examples, we see the reinforcement of Magdalene as a woman who is driven by lust. She is a woman eager to satisfy her desire through the acquisition of a handsome man until she hears the word of the Lord. Magdalene reflects the reformation of sex workers in Renaissance Italy; while the virginity of these women could not be saved, their souls could. She is a woman who becomes a role model for all wayward women, serving as a reminder that one can be saved as long as one listens to God.

Interestingly, this reinforcement came when Magdalene's story, and therefore the Church, was being questioned. This debate, dubbed the Quarrel of the Magdalenes, began in 1518 when the French humanist, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, published his book *De Maria Magdalena* which argued that the Magdalene the Church spoke of was a combination of three different biblical women.[40] By questioning the portrayal of Magdalene, d'Étaples was not only undermining her existence but also the word of the Church. This caused an immediate rebuttal against d'Étaples

[38]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 281.
[39]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 280.
[40]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 280.

over several years until the quarrel died down in 1520.[41] For example, in 1518 Augustinian canon, Marc de Grandval, argued there was only one Magdalene in his published *apologia* and John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, wrote three tracts against d'Étaples arguments, four months after Grandval's *apologia*.[42] It is during these years that the decoration of the Magdalene Chapel occurred and, with *Martha Leading Mary Magdalen to Christ*, firmly reinforced the Church's portrayal of Magdalene and its own power.

Mary Magdalene, as Renaissance Italy knew her, was an amalgamation of stories and people. She was an unnamed sinner; she was Venus. She was a worldly courtesan; she was Mary of Bethany. She was a second Eve; she was a reborn Virgin Mary. She was a patron saint for converted female sex workers; she was a tool of reinforcement for the Church. Magdalene lived in ambiguity, being everything and nothing all at once. However, when you leave the sphere of the Church, how does the openness of her interpretation affect her representation?

Like Rome, Venice also regarded Mary Magdalene as an important figure. The city shared the Neoplatonic ideology that Magdalene was a Catholic counterpart of Venus, their patron goddess, and also viewed her as a reformer of sex workers. However, Venice additionally saw Magdalene as a protector of their large population of street walkers and courtesans. While Magdalene was used by Venetian leaders of Church reform in the 1530s to emphasize "the necessity of inner personal conversion," Venice mirrored Rome in its acceptance of sex work, even taking it a step further and legalizing the act.[43]

---

[41]However, in 1522 pupil of Savonarola, Giovanni Maria Tholosani delle Colle wrote two tracts against d'Étaples' argument.

[42]Witcombe, "The Chapel," 280. In response to Fisher, d'Étaples published another book, *De tribus et unica Magdalena disceptatio secunda*, focused on separating Magdalene from Mary of Bethany which caused Fisher to respond once more with his own treatise *Confutatio secundae disceptationis* in 1519.

[43]Sheila Hale, *Titian: His Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 364.

Like other European cities and towns during the Middle Ages, when it came to sex work Venice followed the typical pattern of first repressing, then containing, and finally legalizing it. Venice's legalization of sex work came in 1358 along with a "single official brothel area regulated and supervised by public officials."[44] Sex workers were forced to live in this brothel district which Paula Clarke believes was in the western section of the Rialto area. In 1360, legislation was drawn up which ordered the city's sex workers "to remain in their *callicelli* (side streets or alleyways), and prohibited them from soliciting in one of the major streets…It also forbade them to wander about the city except on Saturday…"[45] However, such containment was nearly impossible, even with the use of a single main gate to allow people in and out of the brothel area. With such a hard time enforcing this regulation, in 1416 the Capisestieri, who were in charge of maintaining order in the districts of the city, allowed sex workers to live and roam anywhere in the city as long as they wore a yellow scarf in public as a symbol of their profession.[46] Legislation surrounding Venice's sex workers remained complicated over the years, regulations being introduced and revoked, marking just how complex the situation of sex work was in the city. Like Rome, Venice viewed sex work as a necessary evil because, while the act was seen with contempt, it generated much money for the city as it was a prominent attraction for tourists.

With its immense number of sex workers, Venice gained a reputation as a "haven of loose morals and beautiful women."[47] With such an image, seeing the courtesans of Venice became an

[44]Paula C. Clarke, "The Business of Prostitution in Early Renaissance Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015): 422, https://doi.org/10.1086/682434. There are many reasonings that could explain the shift in policy in Europe regarding sex work. However, Clarke hypothesizes that the legalization of sex work within Venice was part of a "program to revitalize the city after a decade of plague, war, heavy taxation, and disruptions in the city's vital international trade."

[45]Clarke, "The Business," 426.

[46]Clarke, "The Business," 428.

[47]Margaret F. Rosenthal, "Satirizing the Courtesan: Franco's Enemies," in *Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 11.

obligatory tourist activity featured in travelers' diaries, letters, and travel accounts. The beauty of Venice's sex workers was so widely discussed that it, allegedly, caused male tourists to travel "great distances just to verify for themselves whether the courtesans' reputed beauty was fiction or fact."[48] It is to this grand haven of beauty and women that renowned artist, Titian Vecellio, arrived as a young boy to study painting.

Sometime between 1488 and 1490, Titian was born to the Vecellio family, one of the largest and most distinguished families in his hometown, Pieve di Cadore. The Vecellios were a notable family with a long history of public service, most members being "reasonably well connected and educated men" who held important positions in the local government. Titian reaped the benefits of belonging to such a prominent family, being educated as a young boy at a "local school for well-born boys."[49]

One may wonder why Titian, born into a family with no artistic inclination, was sent to Venice to study painting. The answer comes in a story from Titian's childhood, recorded 50 years after his death by an anonymous biographer who had heard the tale when he visited Cadore. As a young boy, Titian, apparently, painted an image of the Madonna on a wall by squeezing the color out of flowers. While the "tale of the untutored child artist who demonstrates God-given skill has roots that go back at least as far as classical antiquity," the story was taken seriously enough that many believed Titian's Madonna, painted on a villa wall behind his family's home, was his first painting.[50] This story of Titian being blessed by God with the skill of painting is not the only one, with Sheila Hale even describing him as "regarded almost as a demi-god, an Atlantis or a recreation

[48]Rosenthal, "Satirizing the Courtesan," 12.
[49] Hale, *Titian: His Life*, 27-30.
[50] Hale, *Titian: His Life*, 32-33.

of Apelles, painter to Alexander the Great." Titian was seen as one of the world's greatest painters with a great clientele, painting for most of the most important people in Europe during his time. Among these people was the Marchioness of Pescara and famed poet, Vittoria Colonna.

On March 5, 1531, Titian received a letter from Federico Gonzaga requesting a painting on behalf of Vittoria Colonna.[51] The result of this commission was Titian's famous *The Penitent Magdalene* (Fig. 1.3 on the right) which Gonzaga requested to be "as tearful as you can make her' and as beautiful, 'which will not be difficult for you."[52] In the painting we see Titian succeed in this request with Magdalene's teary eyes turned heavenward and her "long, lustrous tresses…draped around her shoulders like a cape of gold."[53] Magdalene's skin glows against the dark background of the painting, her skin almost like moonlight with no evident source of light. Possibly, this glow is a heavenly one, marking her repentance as her faith allows her to glow from within.[54]

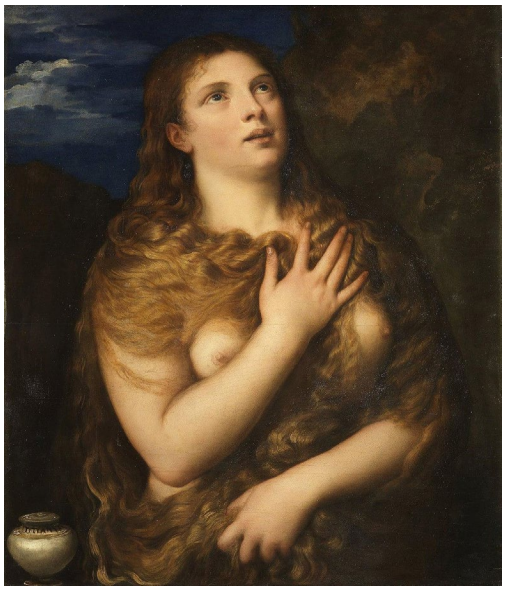

Figure 1.3. Titian Vecellio, *The Penitent Magdalene*, 1531-1535, oil on canvas, Pitti Palace, Florence, Italy.

While her face conveys spirituality, her nude body displays sensuality. Like the Magdalene of Rossiglio's title page, Titian's Magdalene stands in *Venus Pudica*. However, instead of indicating modesty, the pose further emphasizes her nudity. Her right arm, which in the typical

[51]Nirit Ben-aryeh Debby, "Vittoria Colonna and Titian's Pitti 'Magdalen,'" *Woman's Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2003): 29, https://doi.org/10.2307/1358804.
[52]Hale, *Titian: His Life*, 364.
[53]Debby, "Vittoria Colonna," 29.
[54]Debby, "Vittoria Colonna," 29.

pose would cover her bare breasts, instead draws the viewer's gaze to them. Unlike her genitalia, her breasts are not covered by her long hair but instead glow against the dark background and Magdalene's hair, creating further contrast to draw the audience's eye. This contrast is paralleled by her left arm glowing against and grasping her long hair, an "old symbol of sexual licentiousness," only drawing more attention to the genitalia she hides.[55]

The eroticism of the piece is an obvious one, overwhelming the religious aspect as there is little reference to Magdalene's penitence. While she has her ointment jar and tears, which "wash sin away" and are an external sign of contrition, the ascetic aspect of her story has been stripped away.[56] Specifically, Titian's *Penitent Magdalene* is not set in the Cave of Sainte-Baume where she is believed to have given herself up to the life of prayer. By denying herself the pleasures of the flesh and society as a whole, Magdalene's time in the cave is a key symbol of repentance. This erasure of the cave is especially interesting if Titian did, in fact, base his composition on Giampietrino's Magdalene (Fig. 1.4 and 1.5 below). While both feature a nude Magdalene, the tones of these pieces are widely different. Giampetrino's Magdalene is almost like a wax figure with her "very delicate, almost transparent skin and pale pink nipples."[57] With the setting of the Sainte-Baume cave and her pose in prayer, the spirituality of the piece is immediately evident to the viewer. With this Giampietrino creates a distance between his Magdalene and her audience, leaving her just out of reach. However, by Titian omitting this setting, he allows nothing to separate "the beholder from the monumental female figure whose vitality is overwhelmingly manifest."[58]

[55]Bernard Aikema, "Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An Ambiguous Painting and Its Critics," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57 (1994): 49, https://doi.org/10.2307/751463.
[56]Aikema, "Titian's Mary," 50.
[57]Aikema, "Titian's Mary," 48.
[58]Aikema, "Titian's Mary," 48.

There is no distance between the viewer and Magdalene, allowing her to be seen as easily obtainable.

Figure 1.4. Attributed to Giampietrino, *St Mary Magdalen*, Private collection, Florence, Italy.

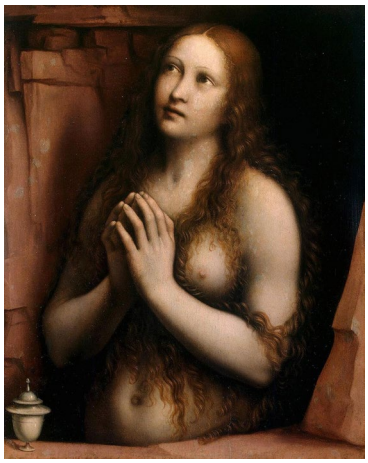

Figure 1.5. Giampietrino, *Repentant Mary Magdalene*, 1500-1550, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The eroticism of Magdalene and her story is one that cannot be erased as it is what allows her to be such a relatable and inspiring role model.[59] However, Magdalene is by no means limited to this eroticism, as at the heart of her story is her reformation. Titian discards this when he does not depict her as a saint, a woman of penitence, or even as a religious decoration, but as a mere object of eroticism. The sensuality of the piece is so overwhelming that Magdalene's power to inspire faith in the viewer is replaced by an incitement to lust. Titian's penitent Magdalene is not a woman devoted to the Lord, a woman reformed, but one who has had her sexuality placed at the forefront for the enjoyment of the viewer. He discards her as a woman who balances the grace of the Virgin Mary and the sin of Eve in favor of keeping her as the alluring woman who indulged in the pleasures of the flesh.

The balance of virtue and sin Magdalene embodies is what makes her so complex. It is her sensuality and the life of sin she lived that led her to repentance and achieving virtue. Without her sensuality she is not Magdalene and she is not Magdalene without sensuality. However, the same can be said with her repentance, as we see with Titian. By focusing on her sensuality and discarding her penitence, the heart of Magdalene's story is lost. Magdalene is a character of dichotomy whose

[59]It was not just sex workers who identified with Magdalene's sexuality, but also women like Vittoria Colonna, who Debby argues associated female sanctity with sensuality.

depiction requires a subtle balance of her penitence and sensuality, her virtue and sin, and it is Artemisia Gentileschi who captured that balance beautifully.

From the time she was born in 1593, Artemisia Gentileschi's life as a woman in the 1600s was heavily restricted. Despite her great talent, she was forced to live a secluded life and spend the majority of her time in the home.[60] The exception to this was her local church mass, an event which held a lot of weight during the Counter-Reformation era she was growing up in.[61] Jonathan Jones argues Gentileschi would have been a prime target for this movement due to her illiteracy growing up:

> An illiterate girl who looked at the pictures of churches and heard the holy stories told by priests was almost the ideal target for the emotive piety of the Counter-Reformation. This piety was personal. She would have been encouraged to identify with the female martyrs in paintings and sermons.[62]

This argument is further supported by the fact that Gentileschi's father wanted her to become a nun, even after teaching her how to paint in 1612.[63] While Gentileschi was able to escape this fate, we still see her identification with female biblical figures in the works she created.

A popular example of Gentileschi's identification with these figures is one of her earliest works, *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig. 1.6 below). Told in the Book of Daniel, Susanna, a virtuous woman and wife, is spied on frequently by two elder men. One day, Susanna decides to take a bath

---

[60]Jonathan Jones, *Artemisia Gentileschi* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2020), 18; Keith Christiansen and Judith Walker Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 286. Gentileschi's father "kept her almost secluded in their house. He never took her anyplace [sic] and hardly ever proposed that she go anywhere…Orazio [her father] often took care that visitors [of his workshop] did not meet Artemisia, or if they met her, that they did not speak to her."

[61]Jones, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 17.

[62]Jones, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 17.

[63]Jones, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 17-18. During this time, nuns "engaged in business, agriculture, worked as apothecaries, and they could paint" which means it would have been the most conventional way for Gentileschi to become an artist.

in her garden and sends her servants off to fetch oil and ointments. Once she is alone, the two elder men who had, once again, been spying on Susanna, approach her. The two demand sexual favors from her, threatening her with the accusation of adultery if she refuses.[64] While this particular part of Susanna's story has been depicted many times before, Gentileschi adds a new perspective by simply being a woman; she emphasizes the pain of the story and extracts empathy from the viewer. Differing from many other painted versions of the story, Gentileschi arranges her piece vertically rather than horizontally, "allowing the elders graphically to press the heroine to comply with their demands."[65] Gentileschi depicts the suffocation of harassment by placing the men directly on top of Susanna, their unified and dark front smothering the pale, isolated Susanna. Gentileschi also enables "the viewer to empathize with the terrible plight of the defenseless woman" by rejecting the fountain and foliage that appear in many Susanna depictions.[66] Gentileschi opts for the absence of these elements, forcing focus on the sins of these pervasive men and Susanna's fight to preserve her virtuosity.

Figure 1.6. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1610, oil on canvas, Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden, Germany.

[64]Susanna 15-21 (NRSV). Although the story of Susanna is part of the Book of Daniel, due to the debate of where the story is located within the Book, the Bible cited for this article leaves the story in the apocrypha. The Septuagint, Greek translation of the Old Testament and the Vulgate, Latin translation of the Bible, place it after Daniel 13 while Theodotion, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that succeeded the Septuagint and the version followed by the Bible cited, places it at the beginning of the Book of Daniel.

[65]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 296.

[66]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 296.

Many argue that *Susanna and the Elders* has an autobiographical meaning for Gentileschi due to her own experience with assault. In 1611, Gentileschi was the victim of rape and attempted rape by Agostino Tassi and Cosimo Quorli respectively. By 1610, Gentileschi's father had fallen out with Caravaggio, a dear friend, and considered Cosimo Quorli to be his "one close companion."[67] It was through Quorli that Orazio met Agostino Tassi and the three became close friends. However, unknown to Orazio, "Quorli had been plotting his scheme against the Gentileschis as soon as Tassi arrived in Rome—that is, as far back as June 1610."[68] When Gentileschi was seventeen Tassi raped her in her own home and, now that the two had been together, the man expected her to "carry on sleeping with him in secret."[69] With Tassi's assault, Quorli also tried multiple times to rape Gentileschi however she was able to fight him off. It is these events that lead people to believe Gentileschi identified and sympathized with Susanna. Although the work was painted c. 1610, before her assault, it is possible that Gentileschi was already receiving sexual advances from Tassi and Quorli at the time. This argument has been supported by the fact that, although the men in the biblical story are both elders, Gentileschi's work replaces one with a younger man, leading many to believe she was depicting Tassi and Quorli.[70]

As a woman of the 1600s and a victim of harassment and assault, it is not unlikely that Gentileschi felt a deep connection with the women she depicted. Gentileschi was able to sympathize with these women rather than finding pleasure in them, an element that sets her Magdalene (Fig. 1.7 below) in opposition to Titian's. The most noticeable difference between

[67]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 285.
[68]Jones, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 25. For more details on Quorli's involvement see Jones' "Judith" chapter.
[69]Jones, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 28.
[70]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 297-298.

Figure 1.7. Artemisia Gentileschi, *St. Mary Magdalene*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, Pitti Palace, Florence, Italy.

Titian's and Gentileschi's Magdalene is the lack of overt eroticism. Gentileschi dresses Magdalene in a beautiful golden dress and pearl earrings, a testament to the characterization of Magdalene in the *Golden Legend*. With Magdalene's lavish wardrobe, along with the "richly upholstered" chair, the viewer is informed that this Magdalene is one that pursues earthly pleasures.[71] The eroticism comes in the form of the slipped neckline of the dress that exposes Magdalene's shoulders and the top of her breasts. However, unlike Titian's, Gentileschi's Magdalene is not one of sensuality but action. In the sixteenth century, a sermon from Francesco Panigarola, a Venetian preacher, described Magdalene's conversion to cause her to "[cast] down her necklaces and jewels, [and shake] out her tresses."[72] This dramatic physical description of conversion appears in Gentileschi's work, as argued by Judith W. Mann, in Magdalene's "disheveled locks, the dress that has slipped from her shoulder, and her bare feet, which belie her otherwise elegant attire."[73] Magdalene's eroticism therefore does not distract from the spiritual aspect of Gentileschi's work but instead adds to it as a result of her newfound penitence.

[71]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 325.
[72]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 326.
[73]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 326.

However, it is not just within her appearance that Magdalene's penitence can be found, but in her actions as well. If one is to look hard enough, in the background of Gentileschi's work a mirror and skull can be found. Magdalene pushes the mirror, which shows a reflection of her pearl earring, away, turning her head and casting her eyes heavenward with a face of contemplation. While the skull serves as a reminder of death, calling Magdalene to reflect on the sinful life she has lived and what awaits her after death, the pushing away of the mirror signifies Magdalene pushing her earthly desires and vanity away, in favor of a God-fearing life. This idea is further supported by the engraving on the mirror which reads *OPTIMAM PARTEM ELEGIT*, "She chooses the better part," sourced from the Gospel of Luke.[74] With this inscription, Gentileschi only further highlights Magdalene's agency in following the Lord, something Titian strips her of.

As discussed, the excessive eroticism of Titian's Magdalene overshadows her spirituality. Although she is meant to be a figure of penitence, with such sensuality she becomes a mere means of pleasure and lust for the viewer. Some have argued the sensuality of Titian's work is essential to its spirituality. One example being Bernard Aikema who writes:

> ...we should understand Titian's *Mary Magdalen*, as a moralising work for male viewers who could gain merit by overcoming the temptation of the sensuous depiction…an extremely suggestive, provocatively sensuous women [Magdalene] is presented to the…spectator as a warning against seduction — 'the person who is tempted, and by resisting overcovers the temptation, is more praiseworthy than he who has not been tempted.[75]

[74]Luke 10:42 (NRSV). While walking through a village Jesus is welcomed into the home of a woman named Martha. Martha had a sister named Mary who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to the wise words he spoke while Martha hastened throughout the home, distracted by many tasks. When Martha complains of Mary's idleness, asking the Lord to tell Mary to help her. He replies, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."
[75]Aikema, "Titian's Mary," 54-55.

Others have suggested Magdalene's physical beauty can be interpreted as "a sign of spiritual strength and purity."[76] In the art journal article, "Vittoria Colonna and Titian's Pitti Magdalen," Nirit Ben-Areyeh Debby argues this interpretation stems from Vittoria Colonna's poems featuring Magdalene who heavily resembles Titian's *Penitent Magdalene*. Like Titian's, Colonna's Magdalene is one that "emerges from the dark…signifying holiness coming forth from sin."[77] Colonna's emphasis on Magdalene's beauty likely stems from the conception that physical beauty reflects the soul, held by her mentor Cardinal Pietro Bembo.[78]

Nonetheless, these arguments still strip Magdalene of any agency in regard to her sexuality, leaving her as a mere tool to inspire lust in the male viewer. This goes directly against her accumulated character as her story allows her to own her sensuality, even if it is cast away for the Lord. It is not through the work of Christ that Magdalene becomes the penitent sex worker; she is not a receiver of one of his many miracles. Instead, it is she who decides to love Christ and give herself over to the life of prayer. If the spirituality of the piece is to be conveyed by Magdalene's sensuality, this leaves her objectified for the male viewer, stripping her of her sainthood and leaving her as the woman weak to the pleasures of the flesh.

On the other hand, Gentileschi imbues Magdalene with agency through her careful handling of the balance that is essential to Magdalene's character. She does not allow sensuality to overcome virtue nor contemplation to overcome action. Instead, she balances the eroticism that is essential to Magdalene's story by incorporating it into her penitence. The sensuality of Magdalene is not one for the viewer to take pleasure in but a symbol of Magdalene making the

[76]Debby, "Vittoria Colonna," 32.
[77]Debby, "Vittoria Colonna," 31. These poems can be read in Debby's article.
[78]Debby, "Vittoria Colonna," 30-31.

active decision to follow the Lord.[79] While Gentileschi conveys Magdalene's contemplation similarly to Titian, through heavenward eyes and the expression of "penitential focus," it is not a vague contemplation.[80] The viewer does not see Magdalene solely looking to the heavens without a clue as to what she is looking for. Instead, with the skull in the background of the piece, Gentileschi informs the viewer that Magdalene contemplates what kind of afterlife her wayward life will lead her to. This contemplation is further informed by the action of Gentileschi's Magdalene. By displaying Magdalene discarding her earthly pleasures and vanity, Gentileschi shows Magdalene choosing the Lord. She lets Magdalene own her contemplation and sensuality, her action and newfound virtue, instead of forcing her to be a mere tool of lust for the viewer. With this balance Gentileschi allows Magdalene to keep her agency instead of stripping it from her like Titian. By conveying the spirituality of the piece through action instead of sensuality, Gentileschi de-objectives the saint and places the ownership of her sexuality and eroticism back in Magdalene's hands.

## OnlyFans

As the years go by, some have raised an eyebrow at the third-wave of feminism's sex positivity and questioned whether the methods used are truly empowering. In her 1972 article, "Casualties of the Sex War: A Women's Lib Dropout," Karen Durbin raises a similar concern. In the article, Durbin addresses the sex war that occurred during the second wave of feminism, where feminists began viewing men as the enemy. Ironically, in their imitation and objectification of

[79]It should also be noted that like Giampietrino, Gentileschi establishes distance between Magdalene and her viewer, leaving her as unobtainable.
[80]Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 325.

men, these feminists were perpetuating the objectification of women they were fighting. This is due to the fact that this mindset allowed nothing to be expected of the men they engaged with. Instead of changing the culture and perception of the men they were engaging "by insisting on their full humanity, by refusing to permit men to treat them as objects, [which would] force the discovery of new, humane sexual relationships," it had been expected of the women to change their mindset and actions rather than the men.[81] This period of second-wave feminism had strived to imitate men in hopes of the empowerment and liberation of women; however, it instead catered to male desire.

Although Durbin's article had aimed at second-wave feminists, a similar critique has been leveled at the sex positivity of the third-wave in relation to sex work. In the 2016 article "The Divide Over Prostitution on the Feminist Left," Sarah Fletcher stated:

> In today's world, it's easy to be blasé and believe the selling of sex is no different than waitressing or serving coffee. I can see why so many millennials—including myself—have bought this narrative: pornography is widespread (the average viewer starting at the age of 12) and hookup culture is common on college campuses. Feminism fought hard to dispel the "he's a stud, she's a slut" double standard, and in doing so, has implicitly encouraged young women to view sex with the same broad brush of "no big deal," just like their male counterparts.[82]

Though the third wave has brought an embracement of femininity the second wave rejected, as Fletcher notes, its hookup culture resembles the second wave with its imitation of men. In their video essay "Are we turning away from Seggs Positive Feminism? [sic]," Khadija Mbowe connects this imitation of men in hookup culture to the girlboss movement during the 2010s, which

[81]Karen Durbin, "Casualties of the Sex War: A Women's Lib Dropout," *The Village Voice* (New York, NY), April 6, 1972, accessed March 31, 2023, https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/02/10/casualties-of-the-sex-war-a-womens-lib-dropout/.

[82]Chris Bodenner and Sarah Fletcher, "The Divide Over Prostitution on the Feminist Left," *The Atlantic*, last modified February 26, 2016, accessed April 4, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2016/02/the-divide-over-prostitution-on-the-feminist-left/624848/.

prompted women to lean into capitalism, work hard, build their own business empires and make their own money instead of relying on and letting men dominate the workforce. With this movement occurring during the same time as the #MeToo movement and SlutWalks, the girlboss mindset came into contact with the promotion of sex positivity and liberation.

We see this no better than with sex workers on OnlyFans, of being both merchant and commodity, as seen in all sex work, and being able to build an empire, or at least acquire a substantial amount of money, from it. At the root of this was the need for women to be empowered, whether in sex or in the workplace. As Mbowe states, with this movement occurring during the same time period as the #MeToo movement, there was not only a discussion of consent being important but also "women need[ing] to be in control of the sexual liberation movement…because [men] can't be trusted." This is also seen in OnlyFans and its appeal to sex workers because of the distance placed between themselves and their clients that allows an amount of security and control in their work and the content they post. However, like the sex war of second-wave feminism, the third-wave's sexual liberation movement excludes men from the conversation. While I do not condemn feminists for excluding men from the conversation, as it is hard to trust and rely on men when it is the patriarchy that oppresses women, this exclusion counteracts the change the movement strives for. By keeping men out of the conversation, the responsibility of changing the culture that allows the patriarchy to thrive is once again placed solely on women. We can see the effects of this exclusion through OnlyFans female sex workers and the enjoyment male clients receive from their content.

Due to the sex worker's unique position as both seller and service, objectification is inherent in her line of work. As the seller, the sex worker is engaged in the short-lived relationship of merchant and customer. However, as the service, the "goods" that she sells is her body,

prohibiting her from fully leaving this relationship. She, herself, is reduced to a commodity used by the male consumer. We see this objectification in the work of sex workers on OnlyFans through their involvement of the male viewer. Rebecca Jennings touches on this involvement in her article, "The sexfluencers," where she explores how sex workers on OnlyFans "often fill the role of e-girlfriends for their most devoted fans" and provide a sense of intimacy and affection.[83] Part of this facade of intimacy is due to the casual and amateur quality of the photos posted on the platform.

Within the article, Jennings writes about Chloe, an OnlyFans sex worker, whose photos are "super casual" and taken on the front-facing camera of her phone (selfie mode). However, instead of being turned away from the simplicity of her posts, Chloe states her subscribers love it: "I think subscribers really like that [her photos] because it's not polished. It's the fantasy of a girl who just took this picture for you really quick and sent it to you."[84] Additionally, the photos that OnlyFans sex workers post, typically, take place in their homes and project a sense of domesticity that allows the subscriber to create an illusion of intimacy because it feels personal. With the use of the front-facing camera of the phone and the simple but domestic bare-bones set up these sex workers use, there is a casualness in these photos that makes it hard to distinguish it from other photos a woman may send to her boyfriend. It is this blurring of lines and the casual aspects of the photos that invites the male viewer into the picture, similar to Titian's *Penitent Magdalene*. Like Titian's Magdalene, these photos put no distance between the male viewer and the sex worker. Instead,

[83]Rebecca Jennings, "The sexfluencers," *Vox*, last modified October 28, 2021, accessed April 6, 2023, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22749123/onlyfans-influencers-sex-work-instagram-pornography.
[84]Jennings, "The sexfluencers." Interestingly, this interest in the amateur has also been seen on other sex work platforms like Pornhub with "amateur" being the most-searched term on the site in 2019.

they make her easily obtainable, an object of eroticism to be dominated and used by the male viewer solely to satisfy his needs.

This does not mean the OnlyFans sex worker has no agency or ownership as she is the one in control of her OnlyFans page and what gets posted. However, the sense of empowerment one may derive from posting on OnlyFans seems to be lost within the photos posted. With Gentileschi's Magdalene, we see that the agency of the sex worker and her ownership of her sexuality can be preserved in her depiction. However, this preservation is done by Gentileschi distancing the male viewer, emotionally and physically. Gentileschi's Magdalene does not acknowledge the male viewer, forming no bond as she instead looks towards the heavens in private contemplation. Titian's Magdalene may also look skyward but there is a lack of physical distance within the work. While Titian's Magdalene is pressed flush against the proscenium that is the canvas's frame, Gentileschi's Magdalene is instead positioned further away. We see her foot, the hem of her dress, the floor, all elements contributing to the distance between her and the viewer.

Unlike Gentileschi's work, the photos posted by sex workers on OnlyFans directly involve the male viewer. They do not refute him but instead cater to his desire, allowing him to create a fantasy where he can have ownership over the woman he views. Those on OnlyFans may say these men are nothing but numbers and letters on a screen, serving no purpose but to cushion their wallets. Yet, while objectifying the men who subscribe to their pages, these sex workers are also objectifying themselves in their photos. While sex work can be empowering and women have the right to embrace and display their sexuality how they want, one cannot help but be reminded of Durbin's essay: if both parties are engaging in reification, a cycle of objectification in order to dominate the other, what change is that making? Although OnlyFans places the control in the sex worker's hands, allowing her to pick and choose what photos will represent her, indicating an

evolution in the depiction of sex workers, she is still objectified due to the involvement of the male viewer. However, maybe the change that needs to be made is not to the photos or the invitation of the male viewer, but to the culture that promotes stripping women of their agency. While objectification may be inherent in sex work through using the body as commodity, if the domination and oversexualization of women were not fundamental to our society due to the patriarchy, perhaps the sex worker would be able to be represented without fear of losing ownership of her sexuality and thus wholly empowered.

## Acknowledgments

I first thank the staff of *The Interdependent* for helping me publish this revised excerpt of my undergraduate senior thesis. I also thank my thesis advisor, Professor Lindsay Davies, for all her guidance and support in shaping my scrambled thoughts into a body of work I am proud of. Lastly, I thank my family and friends for their unwavering belief in me and my research.