

Penisgate:

Response to Matthew J. Milliner, "The Sexuality of Christ in Byzantine Art and in Hypermodern Oblivion"

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Everybody loves a scandal. Travelling to Istanbul in 1717 the Englishwoman Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was shocked to see images of the Virgin Mary executed with no effort at naturalism. "The Greeks," she wrote home, "have the most monstrous taste in their pictures, which for more finery are always drawn upon a gold ground. You may imagine what a good air this has, but they have no notion either of shade or proportion."¹ En route through the Holy Roman Empire, she had been equally shocked to see pictures of the Trinity. Writing from Regensburg, she told her friend Anne Thistlethwayte, "I was very much scandalized at a large silver image of the *Trinity* where the *Father* is represented under the figure of a decrepit old man with a beard down to his knees, and a triple crown on his head, holding in his arms the *Son* fixed on the Cross, and the *Holy Ghost* in the shape of a dove hovering over him."² One can only imagine her response if she had been shown Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Holy Trinity in a Glory of Angels* (c. 1515-1518) with the Son's provocatively raised loincloth (Milliner, fig. 6) or, indeed, any one of the images painted by Renaissance artists in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in which Christ was shown as a baby with his genitalia revealed. But by the early eighteenth century, many of these images had been painted over, the babies given tiny loincloths so as not to shock their more recent viewers' sensibilities and the Throne of Grace forgotten (at least, by

¹ Letter 36 [to the Abbé Conti], Constantinople, May 29, O.S. 1717, in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O'Quinn (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2013), p. 142.

² Letter 6 [to Mrs. Thistlethwayte], Ratisbon, Aug. 30, O.S. 1716, in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Heffernan and O'Quinn, p. 55.

Anglican English viewers) as one of the ways in which late medieval and Renaissance artists had attempted to depict the mystery of the godhead.

Two hundred and sixty some years later, art historians and feminists were equally scandalized by Leo Steinberg's observation that Renaissance painters showed Christ's genitals as male.

Steinberg's critics countered that Christ did not need to be represented as male because there were other ways of understanding his humanity. In his paper, Matthew Milliner is arguing for an extension of this scandal. According to Milliner, Steinberg is to be faulted not only for focusing on Christ's maleness, but also for ignoring ways in which Byzantine artists represented Christ in his humanity, above all for describing their iconography as "decarnifying" the Incarnation and, therefore, as in effect unorthodox.

Scandalous as it might be actually to agree with Steinberg, I have a rather different take on the matter. As I read it, it was never Steinberg's main point that *only* Renaissance artists ever attempted to show Christ in his humanity, only that when they did, given their commitment to a certain style of naturalism, they found themselves obliged to represent the full humanity of Christ as a man, including his genitalia--and for good theological reasons. It is certainly arguable that Steinberg went too far in his enthusiasm in denigrating previous representations as more Gnostic than Chalcedonian (it is doubly unfortunate that he labeled this reticence "puritanical"--Calvinists might have something to say here), but his frustration (as he insisted more than once in his "Retrospect") was primarily with the modern oblivion towards the Renaissance depictions.

Focusing on his misunderstanding of the earlier tradition is, as it were, to throw the baby out with the baptismal water.³ (As Steinberg noted in conclusion to his remarks "Ad Bynum," her reading

³ Moreover, what Steinberg actually says is often considerably more nuanced than Milliner's excerpting suggests. As Steinberg puts it with respect to the Orthodox images (*SC*, p. 70, my emphasis): "It is arguable from a stylistic viewpoint--*at least in retrospect and from a Renaissance vantage*--that the hieratic Christs of Byzantine art are better adapted to Gnostic heresies than to a theology of the Incarnation; for, to

of the images through the experiences of medieval women mystics derails his argument "into a quarrel I would not have chosen to enter" [SC, p. 389], although one could in the present case justly contend he invited it, if only by quoting Demus.)

There are two problems here: one, whether we must accept Steinberg's vision of a "hyper-masculine" (his critics' word, not his) Jesus; two, whether Steinberg is correct that earlier iconographers did not depict Christ in his full humanity. Milliner argues that Byzantine iconographers depicted the humanity of Christ through showing his feet and legs. Here, Milliner is undoubtedly correct, and I can only celebrate the attention that he brings to this widespread, indeed global, tradition. Nevertheless, granting that, as Robert Nelson points out in his response, "it is not necessary for an image of Christ to bear his penis to demonstrate his humanity," does this necessarily mean that earlier images whether in Byzantium (as Milliner would seem to want to argue) or in the West (as Caroline Bynum suggested) did not mean to depict Christ as *male* in his humanity?

Steinberg points to the images of the baptism as well as of the crucifixion of Christ which depict him naked but sexless--or, more precisely, without genitalia. Milliner would argue that, in Byzantium at least, this mode of representation was intended to desexualize Christ or, at the very least, de-essentialize his masculinity because Byzantine theologians did not essentialize gender in the way that Latin theologians did. Steinberg notes that the figures are shown bearded (as, indeed, in the mosaics from Daphni shown in Milliner's figs. 10 and 15) and insists that they are still male. In Steinberg's words: "[The] same medieval artists who imaged the Crucified as unsexed (*asexué* [in Jean Wirth's word]) refused to deny him his beard, rejecting the type of the smooth-cheeked Savior common until the 10th century. Their image of Christ does not seem to

quote [the Byzantine art historian] Otto Demus again, 'The Byzantine image...always remained a Holy Icon, without any admixture of earthly realism'."

posit a shift of gender so much as an 'asexuation,' an ideal of manhood without blight of sex.

Though the shaming part is omitted, no late medieval artist insinuates that the Incarnate was other than male.... [In] Renaissance art...the salvific blood proceeds from a Man of Sorrows still maled by his sable beard, and no frank-eyed viewer mistakes such effigies for an androgyne."⁴

Such arguments may be impossible to resolve given modern viewers' inevitable differences in taste and scholarly allegiance, but an analogy may help clarify the argument at stake. As everyone who has ever taken a child to the movies knows, animators for the Walt Disney film studios regularly depict unambiguously male characters naked (or nude) but without showing their genitalia. To be sure, these characters are typically animals (or other non-human creatures), but they are clearly (often heroically) gendered in their roles, including as fathers or sons. And yet, no Disney animator would dream⁵ of showing Aslan or the Lion King in his full genital regalia, anymore than he or she would give one of the many Disney princesses visible nipples.

Steinberg argues that visual images make arguments that texts leave unexpressed. Of course, we depend on texts--or words--to make arguments about Christ's Incarnation, but this does not mean that everything that people think about the Incarnation is necessarily articulated through texts. Movie-goers in the 21st century know that male lions have testicles and penises (some may even know that feline penises have spines), but they do not expect to see Mufasa's or Simba's or Aslan's testicles and penis displayed visually in proof of his full lionhood. Imagine the scandal if an animator, bound by the stylistic conventions of CGI, thought it necessary for the characters to be fully endowed (see below)--and the scrambling, once the earlier Disney aesthetic returned, to insist that the formerly *asexué* but nevertheless resplendently-maned Mufasa or Aslan was in fact intended to represent not a lion, but a lion(ess).

⁴ *SC*, pp. 247, 366.

⁵ Well, perhaps they might dream, but it would never show up on a Disney-certified screen. Fan-fiction, on the other hand, is considerably less restrained, at least to judge from a quick internet search.



Image source: http://makloox.zoohaven.com/other/images/lion_rear_pink.jpg

Similar arguments might be made with respect to the representation of Mary (with or without nipples), and I fear that here, too, I am more on Steinberg's side than not. The mystery of the Incarnation was a mystery of God taking flesh in the body of a woman: both sexes participated in the mystery, and both sexes are represented in images of the Virgin (female) and Child (male). (As it says in Genesis 1:27, even in the Greek: "αρσεν και θηλυ εποιησεν αυτους.") It is interesting to me that many modern scholars are often as resistant to the idea of a Savior incarnate in the body of a human male as they are to the idea that it was a human female in whom God took his rest (Ecclesiasticus 24:12). This seems to me the real scandal--that is, stumbling block (1 Corinthians 8:9)--not to mention the best evidence of our hypermodern oblivion.