

Article

The Nursing Madonna in the Middle Ages: An Interdisciplinary Study

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Abstract: Because of the transgression of the first woman Eve, all medieval women bore the punishment, including the biological consequences related to pregnancy and birth. This affected the entire female gender, according to Judeo-Christian tradition. Although Mary was able to avoid some biological consequences, this was not the case with breastfeeding. This work aims to study sacred images—and especially those of the Nursing Mary—from an interdisciplinary point of view, by delving into rather unconventional sources such as medical treatises, whose perception of the female body may have influenced the creation and reception of certain iconographic types of the Virgin.

Keywords: Nursing Madonna; Madonna of Humility; Eve; Mary; breastfeeding; virginity; redemption

1. Introduction

In antiquity and early Judaism, women were considered inferior to men: a woman was an imperfect man. Indeed, according to Galen (130–210) her organs were inside-out (Noga 2007, p. 18). These ideas were transferred with nuances to the Christian world, which borrowed the negative burden associated with the figure of Eve from Jewish tradition and placed Eve's guilt on the entire female gender. As the instigator, the first woman was held completely responsible for the Fall (Gn 3), despite Adam's necessary participation. As a result, humanity was marked by the original sin, which only baptism could erase. Women were especially stigmatized, with one exception: Mary, the future Mother of God.

Despite the Church's secular vacillations, which did not proclaim Mary to be free of the original sin until 1854, the Virgin's Immaculate Conception was resolutely defended by numerous ecclesiastical authorities, since it was unthinkable that the womb that received the Savior might not have been clean. They based their thinking on the text from the Old Testament narrating the Fall: "So the Lord God said to the snake: '[. . .] You and this woman will hate each other; your descendants and hers will always be enemies. One of hers will strike you on the head, and you will strike him on the heel'"¹ (Gn 3:14–15). Biblical exegesis saw the mother of Christ in the woman who was to crush the serpent's head, by which it was inferred that Mary was in God's plans and had been conceived in his mind from the beginning of time (Doménech García 2014, p. 70), so that she was exempt from the original sin and its consequences, as we shall see. In the opinion of the Church Fathers, the Virgin's humble acceptance of being the mother of the Son of God (Lk 1:26–38) marks the beginning of the history of redemption (Melero Moneo 2002–2003, p. 125; Doménech García 2014, p. 70).

However, during the early years of the Church, testimonies again emerged against women due to Eve, who was not only considered to be a sinner, but also guilty of all the afflictions that struck humankind. Furthermore, in the seventh century, Saint Isidore of Seville emphasized the malign nature of the female body:

These are also called "womanish things" (*muliebria*), for the woman is the only menstruating animal. If touched by the blood of the menses, crops cease to sprout, unfermented wine turns sour, plants wither, trees lose their fruit, iron is corrupted by rust, bronze turns black. If dogs eat any of it, they are made wild with rabies.



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The glue of pitch, which is dissolved neither by iron not water, when polluted with this blood spontaneously disperses². (Isid. orig. XI, 140–41; Barney et al. 2006, p. 240)

Isidore's ideas pervaded thought for centuries, so that in the thirteenth century, Albertus Magnus (*De secretis mulierum*, chap. I, comm. B) affirmed that during menstruation women were an instrument of the devil that corrupted all within their reach. As a result, women themselves were considered diabolical (Melero Moneo 2002–2003, p. 113). Occasionally, the serpent from Paradise was represented with female breasts, which hints at the evil character of femininity (Figure 1a).

In this article, I will examine sacred images of the Virgin lactating to investigate to what extent the extra religious knowledge and beliefs associated with breastfeeding may have influenced the public's view of these works. For this, we cannot ignore the fact that painful childbirth, and everything associated with motherhood, were seen by Christian society as a punishment for original sin; therefore, the sections below are dedicated to the dichotomy between Eve and Mary. In the case of Mary, however, her particular circumstance as the virgin mother of the Son of God, which is unattainable for other women, implies that the interpretation of those images in the light of the aforementioned sources reinforce aspects of Mary, such as her virginity—which contradicts her motherhood—or her redeeming condition.

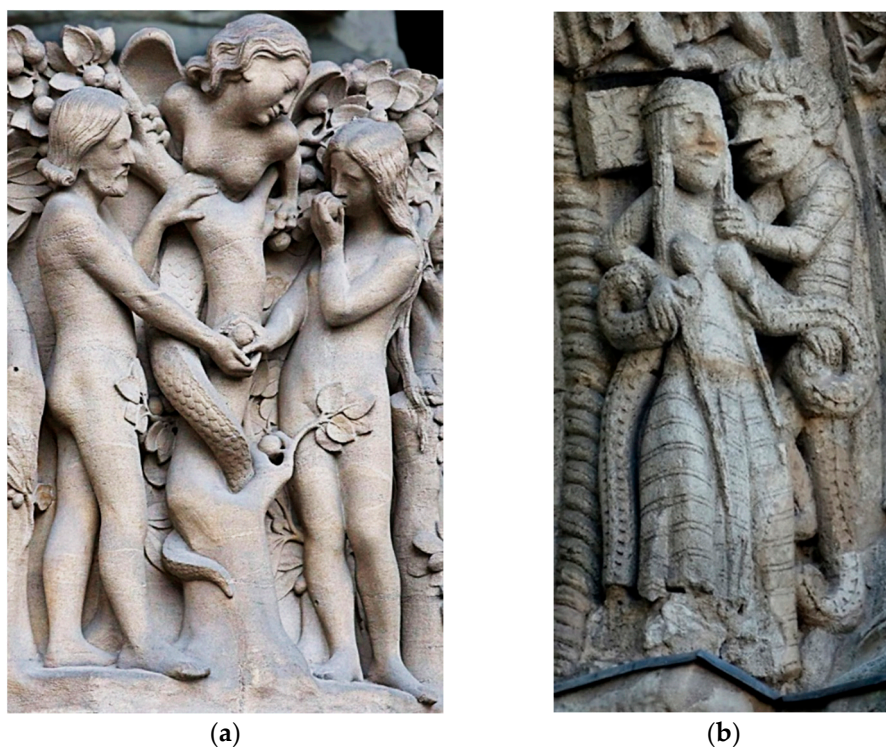


Figure 1. (a) Adam and Eve, Portal of the Virgin, 1210–1220, Paris, Notre Dame Cathedral; (b) Punishment for Lust, late 11th cent.-early 12th cent., Bordeaux, Church of the Holy Cross.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This study takes an interdisciplinary approach. After establishing a visual context for the argument, that is, the consideration of women and female visibility in Judeo-Christian culture, the main aim is to provide a new vision of late medieval Marian imagery, especially that of the Virgin breastfeeding Christ. To do this, I will draw on sources of a medical or social nature, not exclusively those that are religious or theological. As we shall see, the images of the Lactating Madonna—and especially the Virgin of Humility—could paradoxically point to Mary's virginity, rather than to her divine maternity. On the

other hand, Mary's motherhood, according to what doctors believed about the anatomy of pregnant women, could have given her a Eucharistic nature. As we will see later, the medieval belief that the body of a child was formed from the blood of the mother, implied that the blood of Christ was the same as that of his mother and, therefore, Mary's blood could also be considered Eucharistic.

Thanks to those two prerogatives of being a mother while remaining a virgin and being the Mother of God, together with the as yet undeclared dogma of her immaculate conception, some images show Mary as redeemer of Eve and all women: the redemption of Eve thanks to Mary had already become manifest in the early Middle Ages—for example, in the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* (8:9–9:3) from the 6th century, as we shall see later. However, its visual representations are more recent. Some of them date back to the 11th and 12th centuries in, respectively, Germany (Figure 2) and France (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the Trecento and Quattrocento Italian images are especially explicit, including Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Maestà*, made ca. 1336, in Montesiepi Chapel (San Galgano); Paolo di Giovanni Fei's *Nursing Madonna* of ca. 1385–1390 (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art); Paolo di Giovanni's *Nursing Madonna*, made after 1370 (San Marino, private, collection); and Carlo da Camerino's *Madonna of Humility*, made ca. 1400 (Cleveland Museum of Art, Figure 4a).

Ultimately, this study considers these images in a new light, by applying the conclusions of studies on breastfeeding and the use of nurses at the end of the Middle Ages, as well as the advice of medical or moral treatises to the interpretation of the images of the *Virgo Lactans*.



Figure 2. *Maria Regina*, *Gospels of Bernward*, 11th cent., Hildesheim, cathedral treasury, Ms. 18, fo. 17.



Figure 3. (a) *Original Sin* and (b) *Annunciation*, the Miègeville doorway, early 12th cent., Toulouse, Basilica of Saint-Sernin.

1.2. Brief State of Research

Medical and moral treatises, sociological studies on motherhood and the use of wet nurses, and some recent articles on the *Virgo Lactans* and the Virgin of Humility inform the current study. These set the stage for the contraposition of Eve-Mary and, above all, the study of sacred images from the perspective set out above, which will lead to new conclusions about, curiously, Mary's virginity and her role in the redemption of humanity. This is where the reader will find the greatest contribution of this work.

In terms of the influence of medical "knowledge" on iconic representations, the publications by [Giménez Tejero \(2016\)](#), [González Hernando \(2010\)](#) and [Moral de Calatrava \(2008\)](#) stand out, while [Phillips \(2018\)](#), [Alfonso Cabrera \(2013\)](#) and [Holmes \(1997\)](#) have carried out specific studies on the imagery of breasts or breastfeeding. These authors work in different parts of Europe, and therefore draw on different regional and national collections. This has allowed me to make generalizations across Western European images.

However, [Williamson \(1996, 2009\)](#) remains the point of reference in studies on the iconographic types of the *Madonna Lactans* and the Virgin of Humility, as well as on the relationship between Eve and Mary ([Williamson 1998](#)). [Sperling \(2013, 2018a, 2018b, 2021\)](#), [Rivera \(2016\)](#), [Arroñada \(2008\)](#) and [Bergmann \(2002\)](#) have studied the use of wet nurses; however, scholars have not reached agreement on the consideration of breastfeeding and the hiring of wet nurses in the Middle Ages. Moreover, as we will see later, painted images have contributed to this confusion. Finally, [Castiñeyra Fernández \(2017\)](#) and [Martínez-Burgos García \(2002\)](#) have written about humanist sources, while [Ramón i Ferrer \(2021\)](#) and [Gregori Bou \(2016a, 2016b\)](#) have explored late medieval (Valencian) sources.

2. Motherhood as a Punishment for the Original Sin

Motherhood and all that it entails (sex, painful birth, breastfeeding) was presented as a consequence of the original sin. The medical treatises and social habits, which I will detail below and with which I intend to provide a new perspective of sacred images, were themselves entangled with Christian dogma as regards maternity and breastfeeding, especially regarding Mary.

The so-called curse of Eve, which affected all women, had other well-known, denigrating consequences: "Then the LORD said to the woman, 'You will suffer terribly when you give birth. But you will still desire your husband, and he will rule over you'"³ (Gn 3:16). Thus, the punishment for having let herself be deceived by the serpent while also tempting her husband is tripled.

Lastly, God mentions woman's submission to man, which as we have seen, is not exclusive to Christian societies. Backed by Genesis, Saint Paul (1 Co. 11:3) insisted on female inferiority and the need for women to have men as their guardians. Later, Tertullian (160–220)

spoke of the need for women to purify themselves through weeping, penitence and mourning because they were natural sinners (Martínez-Burgos García 2002, pp. 214–15):

If there dwelt upon earth a faith as great as is the reward of faith which is expected in the heavens, no one of you at all, best beloved sisters, from the time that she had first “known the Lord,” and learned (the truth) concerning her own (that is, woman’s) condition, would have desired too gladsome (not to say too ostentatious) a style of dress; so as not rather to go about in humble garb, and rather to affect meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve,—the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition⁴. (TERT. cult. fem. I, 1, l. 1; CPL, 11)

The second consequence (“you will still desire your husband”) is also striking, since it is considered a condemnation that a wife should feel attracted to her husband. Hence, all women have been considered temptresses by nature. In fact, the lust⁵ with which God punished Eve (Bergmann 2002, p. 93; Melero Moneo 2002–2003, p. 115) was one of the seven deadly sins and the visual representation of its corresponding punishment was usually a woman whose breasts and pudenda are being attacked by snakes and other reptiles (Figure 1b). So, it was not sexuality itself that the Church condemned, but the libido, or the fact that the act of sex had to be accompanied by pleasure (Giménez Tejero 2016, p. 56), which was a necessary evil to ensure the continuity of the species.

Eve was to take responsibility for this continuity with the first consequence of her sin (“You will suffer terribly when you give birth”), since she was condemned to give birth with pain and all that this entails, as we shall see below. On the other hand, the birth by the Mother of God was free from suffering, since she had also conceived without pleasure. Thus, proclaimed the saint deacon Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373): “Your womb escaped from the pangs of the curse./By the serpent the pains of the female entered./Let the defiled one be put to shame, seeing that his pangs were not in your womb” (*Hymns on Virginity*, 24, 11; McVey and Meyendorf 1989, p. 368). Saint Augustine (396–430) also affirmed this, as did Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274):

Augustine says (Serm. de Nativ.), addressing himself to the Virgin-Mother: “In conceiving thou wast all pure, in giving birth thou wast without pain.” (. . .) as Augustine says (Serm. de Assumpt. B. Virg.), from this sentence we must exclude the Virgin-Mother of God; who, “because she conceived Christ without the defilement of sin, and without the stain of sexual mingling, therefore did she bring Him forth without pain, without violation of her virginal integrity, without detriment to the purity of her maidenhood.”⁶. (*Summa Theologica*, Part III, Question 35, Article 6)

As for the consequences of the original sin, Mary had to be exempt from them since her conception had been ab initio as we have seen, and thus completely immaculate with no carnal lust involved (Boto Varela 2002–2003, p. 77). On the other hand, the births by the Virgin’s cousin, Elisabeth, and mother, Anne, would have been different. In some images, both women are holding their hand over their belly and/or leaning on midwives for support (*Nativity of the Virgin*, early 14th century, monastery of Studenica, Serbia) (González Hernando 2010, pp. 94–95). However, John Damascene believed Anne miraculously gave birth, because she did not suffer the pains of childbirth (Io. D. *Homilia in nativitatem B. V. Mariae*, 1–2; Salvador González 2009, p. 9).

There were consequences of Eve’s curse that the Virgin could not avoid, and which were intimately bound to maternity, such as pregnancy—and even menstruation? Another was breastfeeding, which by itself could have acquired negative connotations. Recent studies on breastfeeding and raising children have taken into consideration the custom of hiring wet nurses, as we shall see below. Comparing images of Eve and Mary reveals some of the complexities that underlay breastfeeding. Therefore, the following section addresses

the visual representation of the typological relationship between Eve and Mary, especially the Nursing Madonna.

3. The (Nursing) Madonna as the New Eve

There was a typological relationship established in the visual representation of the Late Middle Ages between Eve and Mary. I will focus especially on images that contrast Eve with the Nursing Madonna, which could indicate a relationship of breastfeeding with the original sin; for example, the Virgin feeds the redeemer as Eve had done with Adam.

The correspondence between Eve and Mary had existed in the early centuries, but only in extracanonical gospels and theological writings, not in religious imagery (Schiller 1980, p. 81). In the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* from the 6th century⁷, Eve, who has been rehabilitated from her sin, witnesses Mary giving birth, symbolically uniting the two moments:

Joseph looked far away and saw a woman coming from a distance (. . .) And as the two went together, Joseph asked her on the way and said: “Woman, tell me your name that I may know who you are.” The woman said: “Why are you asking me? I am Eve, the foremother of all, and I have come to behold with my own eyes the redemption that is wrought on my behalf.” (. . .) they bowed down and fell prostrate, and raising their voices they blessed God saying: “Blessed are you, Lord God of Israel, who today wrought salvation to the children of men by your coming.” (Eve added): “And you restored me from that fall and established (me) in my former glory. (. . .) And the foremother entered the cave and took the infant into her lap, hugged him tenderly and kissed him and blessed God. (. . .) When the foremother came out of that cave, she suddenly met a woman who was coming from the city of Jerusalem whose name was Salome.” The foremother approached her and said to her: “I bring you recent good news: a virgin who had never known a man gave birth to a male child.”. (8:9–9:3; Terian 2008, pp. 43–45)

Likewise, Severian (4th cent.) interprets Gabriel’s greeting to Mary as a revelation of the “whole economy of Christ” in which Eve’s salvation is revealed while Mary becomes the “advocate” for her sex (Beattie 2002, pp. 167–69). Mary’s acceptance, in contrast to Eve’s disobedience, led to her designation as the new Eve in the 12th century, since the Incarnation of Christ occurred because of her sacrifice, thanks to which the original sin was redeemed. We can find iconic representations of this idea in that century. The Miègeville doorway (early 12th cent.) of the Basilica of Saint-Sernin of Toulouse, for example, is flanked by capitals with the *Annunciation* on the left and the *Fall of Humanity* on the right (Figure 3). Even before, the enthroned image of *Maria Regina* in the manuscript of the *Gospels of Bernward* is flanked by the busts of Eve and Mary (Figure 2). The typological correspondence of the two women is thus established, with Eve as Mary’s type, while Mary is Eve’s antitype. The woman from the Old Testament acts as a figure or precedent of the Mother of God.

However, the visualization of the theological contrast between the two female figures began to converge in the 14th century. The images showing the semi-naked effigy of Eve at the feet of the Nursing Madonna are particularly noteworthy (Figure 4a). In some cases (*Nursing Madonna*, Paolo di Giovanni, after 1370, San Marino, private collection; *Nursing Madonna*, Paolo di Giovanni Fei, c. 1385–1390, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; *Madonna of Humility*, Carlo da Camerino, c. 1400, Cleveland Museum of Art, Figure 4a) Eve is holding the fruit she fed Adam, in contrast to the food that Mary gives Christ: her own milk.



Figure 5. *Nativity of Christ*, Guillaume de Digulleville, *Pèlerinage de Jésus-Christ*, 1393, Paris, BnF, French 823, fo. 182.

In the West, examples of the *Virgo Lactans* were rare until the 13th century, when devotion to Mary had become fully established. The success of this iconographical type is mainly explained by the spirituality of the era, fed by texts such as *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (1220–1310), which called for a more intimate relationship from worshippers with Christ and the latter with the Virgin, always for the purpose of providing a more humane aspect of God, and thus a more compassionate one: “How readily she nursed Him, feeling a great and unknown sweetness in nursing this child, such as could never be felt by other women!” (chp. X; Miles 1986, p. 203; Blaya Estrada 1995, p. 168).

The contrast between Eve and the Virgin, though not a new subject, pivots around the importance of Mary’s virginity, motherhood, and breastfeeding. These differences are contrasted in the relationship between the two women and will lead to the redemption of the former. However, not only do we find images of the Nursing Madonna in the iconographic type of the *Virgo Lactans*, but also in the images of the Madonna of Humility, which became widespread between the 14th and 15th centuries, as we will see in the next section.

4. Breastfeeding in Sacred Images

Since the subject of our study is sacred images of breastfeeding, and above all those of Mary, we cannot fail to mention the iconographic type of the Virgin of Humility, because most images of this type show Mary breastfeeding the Infant. In the painting by Carlo da Camerino (Figure 4a), she is even represented as the antitype of Eve, who is also holding the fruit and is accompanied by the serpent. By considering this image alongside medical sources about breastfeeding, one can better understand the Nursing Madonna imagery. Could their creation and reception by devotees have been influenced in some way by extra-religious issues such as medieval knowledge of the female anatomy?

4.1. The Virgin of Humility: Another Iconographical Type of the Nursing Madonna

In case the visualization of the divine suckling may not sufficiently show that the Son of God has become flesh, many of these images include a reference to the episode of the Annunciation. Sometimes the full iconographic type is shown, with the figures of Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin (Figure 4b)¹¹; in others, there are just some attributes such as the lilies or, if we can consider him as such, the Archangel Gabriel (Figure 4a). In the *Madonna of Humility* by Silvestro dei Gherarducci (after 1350, Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia), a book recalls Mary reading and being interrupted by the angelical greeting, and the christomorphic God sends the Holy Ghost, as in the images of the Annunciation/Incarnation.

The Incarnation occurred, as mentioned above, due to Mary's positive willingness. The humility shown by Mary in accepting being the mother of Christ would explain the name given to the iconographic type: the Virgin of Humility. That title would not be related to the fact that Mary is directly seated on the ground or that there is evidence of her poverty¹², but to the written and visual references to the Annunciation found in many of the images of the Virgin of Humility (Mocholí Martínez and Montesinos Castañeda 2021; Mocholí Martínez 2019). Another possible interpretation is based on Mary's humble act of breastfeeding her child (Sperling 2018b, p. 889), in addition to her mother doing the same¹³. Unlike Mary, religious sources (the apocryphal gospels) offer some information about Anne's breastfeeding. These references should be taken into account, along with the other visual, medical and social sources, which we will discuss later, to consider the connotation of breastfeeding in the Middle Ages.

4.2. Breastfeeding in Religious Sources

According to medieval believe, Anne also fed her daughter, at least for most of the time, without resorting to wet nurses, since "when the days were fulfilled, Anne purified herself and suckled the child and called her by the name of Mary" (*Book of James*, 5:2) or "when the child was three days old, the midwife was ordered to bathe her and to put the bandage gently; and she was presented to her (mother), and she gave the breast to the child, to be nursed with milk" (*Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, 2:8; Terian 2008, p. 11). Still in the Jewish environment of the Middle Ages (as can be read in *Les infortunes de Dinah: Le livre de la generation*, 13th and 14th centuries, Southern France), it was believed that the mother's milk would be of poor quality, especially in the first days after childbirth (Alfonso Cabrera 2016, p. 31). This was an ancient and widespread belief in the Christian society, too, as we shall see later. In any case, they all agree that Anne breastfed Mary: "when the circle of three years had rolled round, and the time of her weaning was fulfilled, they brought the Virgin to the temple of the Lord with offerings" (*Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*, 6:1) (Alfonso Cabrera 2013, pp. 189–90).

However, the images, which should support the benefits of maternal breastfeeding (Alfonso Cabrera 2013, p. 190) do not always correspond to the sources: the representation of Anne breastfeeding the Virgin is not common; it is even rarer immediately after birth, as we can surmise in an image in which Anne, with an uncovered breast, is about to receive her daughter in her arms (Figure 6a). On the other hand, there are images showing Mary being fed from the breast of another woman (Figure 6b), which logically occurred before "the days were fulfilled" (*Book of James*, 5:2). This hesitation in medieval visuality evidences the debate around mercenary breastfeeding as opposed to biological breastfeeding¹⁴.



(a)



(b)

Figure 6. (a) *Birth of the Virgin*, altarpiece of the church of San Juan Bautista, Master of Velilla de Jiloca, c. 1430–60, Velilla de Jiloca, Zaragoza (Spain); (b) *Birth of the Virgin*, altarpiece of the church of Santa Maria la Mayor, Fernando Gallego, c. 1485, Trujillo, Extremadura (Spain).

In any case, the breastfeeding could have been considered an act of humility and charity, based on the negative consideration the action may have acquired, as a result of Eve's curse. Breastfeeding studies (Williamson 2009, pp. 132–47; Bergmann 2002) conducted in different parts of Europe suggested that the widespread use of nurses by aristocratic mothers—but also by other women, even the humblest ones—might be due to the belief that breastfeeding was demeaning. The reason could be, as explained, that breastfeeding was a consequence of the original sin, on being associated with the painful childbirth with which Eve was punished. Although this may not have been the reason for the significant demand for nurses, it is not to be excluded that breastfeeding was considered an act of humility; that is how we should interpret the central panel of Antoni Peris' *Altarpiece of the Nursing Madonna* (Figure 7a), where Mary is the nurse of Christ and of all believers in Christ: Mary's milk, apart from feeding her Son, also goes to a crowded group of faithful, who are trying to collect it in different receptacles, as they are accustomed to doing with the blood of Christ in representations of the mystical winepress. In this image, the Mother of God as *Mater omnium* is also the *Nutrix omnium*, the channel through which the waters of grace reach us (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *De aquaeducto*; PL CLXXXIII), since God wants us to receive everything through Mary¹⁵.



Figure 7. (a) *Altarpiece of Nursing Madonna* (detail), Antoni Peris, 1404–1423, Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes; (b) *Madonna of Humility*, Llorenç Saragossa, 1363–1374, Barcelona, Fundació Francisco Godia.

4.3. Breastfeeding in Medical Sources: Lactation and Chastity

On the contrary, it has been put forward that breastfeeding would not have been considered a humiliating or undignified act and that resorting to wet nurses would have been motivated by medical and social reasons (González Hernando 2010, p. 106). Since antiquity, medical tradition had perpetuated the belief that it was safer to resort to wet nurses, at least during the first twenty-one days of the child's life. On the one hand, it was thought that in the weeks following birth the maternal milk was not good. The Greek physician Soranus of Ephesus warned in the 2nd century of the danger posed by colostrum for the newborn, since it was “thick, too cheese-like, and therefore hard to digest” (*Gynaecology*, 2.18). On the other hand, resorting to wet nurses avoided using up the nutritional qualities of the milk due to successive births and breastfeeding by the mother (Rivera 2016, pp. 21–22).

It was also believed that sexual relations and pregnancies influenced the quality of the milk, as affirmed by Soranus of Ephesus and by doctors and philosophers, the Persian Avicenna (c. 980–1037) and the Jew Maimonides (1135–1204) (Phillips 2018, p. 13; Rivera 2016, p. 25; Bergmann 2002, p. 94), so it was preferable to avoid them during lactation. Hence, breastfeeding acquired positive connotations because it was associated with sexual chastity and even purity in the case of the Virgin¹⁶, but impregnation was believed to have an effect upon the breasts, so that large, loose breasts signaled sexual experience and “did not meet the contemporary cultural requirements for an erotic female image” (Miles 1986, p. 203). Phillips considers that “images of the Virgin Mary nursing Jesus employ several tactics for resolving problems of how to depict breasts that are at once virginal and lactating [...]”: only one bare breast is displayed, while the covered breast remains flat; on the other hand, Mary's virginal status is shown by her bare neck, flowing hair and youthful face (Phillips 2018, p. 8).

In the case of the iconographic type of the Virgin of Humility, Mary's connection with the earth, seated on soil with wild plants, as we can see in many of the images (Figure 4b),

could refer to metaphors of her virginal status ([Mocholí Martínez 2019](#)), such as in the example of St. Bernard:

Christ, then, may be symbolized both as a bee and as the flower springing from the rod. And, as we know, the rod is the Virgin Mother of God. This flower, the Son of the Virgin, is “white and ruddy, chosen out of thousands.” It is the flower on which the angels desire to look, the flower whose perfume shall revive the dead, the flower, as He Himself declares, of the field, not of the garden. This flower grew and flourished in the field independent of all human culture; unsown by the hand of man, untilled by the spade, or fattened by moisture. So did the womb of Mary blossom. As a rich pasture it brought forth the flower of eternal beauty, whose freshness shall never fade nor see corruption, whose glory is to everlasting. O sublime virgin rod, that raisest thy holy head aloft, even to Him Who sitteth on the throne, even to the Lord of Majesty! And this is not wonderful, for thou hast planted thy roots deeply in the soil of humility. O truly celestial plant, than which none more precious, none more holy! (*Sermones de Tempore. In Adventu Domini. Sermo II, 4; PL 183, 42; Bernard of Clairvaux 1909*, pp. 17–18)¹⁷

Elsewhere, St. Bonaventure forges a metaphor, whereby Mary is defined as “*terra ista, in qua homo non est operates* [land not worked by man]” (Saint Bonaventure, *De Annuntiatione B. Virginis Mariae. Sermo III*).

Naturally, only the upper classes could afford wet nurses who lived with them, ensuring their abstinence and even exclusivity, and for them to comply with certain requisites: they should not have given birth recently nor be pregnant ([Holmes 1997](#), p. 188), since the milk would become watery or even be harmful to the nursing child. The milk was of greater quality if the wet nurse had had several children, she should be free of illnesses and alterations in skin color, have well-developed breasts and be beautiful; otherwise, the child could develop a bad character or develop an illness involving seizures ([Arroñada 2008; Alfonso Cabrera 2013](#), p. 197).

Due to the difficulty in finding a suitable wet nurse, such workers were held in high esteem, as represented in an Italian sculpture (*Wet Nurse*, Mariano d’Agnolo Romanelli, last quarter of the 14th cent., Florence, Museo del Bargello). In Castile they were covered by a special protection: anybody who seriously wounded a woman’s breast was severely punished, with the legislation recognizing that maternal milk was vital for the child during their first two years of life ([Bergmann 2002](#), p. 91). This period could last even longer: Soranus of Ephesus had prolonged the period of lactation, advising it until even after three years of age ([Hernández Gamboa 2008–2009](#), p. 3)¹⁸.

The use of a full-time wet nurse as of the 1st century was a sign of wealth and social status. It also had aesthetic implications, since it avoided wearing out the mothers. Given Mary’s humble condition, the Mother of God could not have permitted herself such a luxury. Perhaps that is why, in order to counterbalance her apparent simplicity shown by the act of breastfeeding the Infant, many images of the Madonna of Humility are shown with a crown, especially in Aragon (Figure 7b), but also in Italy ([Mocholí Martínez and Montesinos Castañeda 2021](#), p. 13).

But female liberation from their maternal functions was due to the predominance of their conjugal and nobiliary obligations, in the case of noble wives. The sexual abstinence required of mothers during lactation ([Rivera 2016](#), pp. 24–25) was incompatible with the reproductive demands of the economic and social elites. Women had to provide their husbands with descendants to ensure their lineage ([Holmes 1997](#), pp. 187–88), not to mention their sexual satisfaction, since it was positively accepted that masculine impulses were irrepressible. Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo (*De arte, disciplina et modo aliendi et erudiendi filios, pueros et juvenes* [Treatise on technique, method and manner of raising children and youths], 1453) privileged the reproductive role of upper-class women ([Rivera 2016](#), pp. 17, 25; [Bergmann 2002](#), pp. 93–94), since the value of lineage in the Middle Ages was more important than the value of family.

[. . .] the mother, in the child she engenders, puts only part of her blood, from which the male's virtue, shaping it, makes flesh and bones. The wet nurse that raises the child also provides the same, since milk is blood, and in that blood the same virtue from the father, who lives in the son, makes the same creation. But the difference is this: the mother provided her flow for nine months, and the wet nurse for twenty-four; and the mother did so during birth when the child was a trunk with no feelings at all, but the wet nurse did so when the child begins to feel and recognize the good he or she receives; the mother influences the body, the wet nurse the soul. Thus, taking proper stock, the wet nurse is the mother, and the one that gave birth to the child is worse than a stepmother, since she alienates the child from herself and makes a bastard of one that was born legitimately, and is the reason one who could have been noble is born badly; and in a way she commits a kind of adultery, a little less ugly and no less harmful than the ordinary kind. Because in one case the woman sells the husband a child that is not his; and in the other one that is not hers, making the successor the son of the wet nurse and of the lass, who is more often than not a villain or slave (345)¹⁹.

By the early modern period, Fray Luis de León (*La perfecta casada* [*The Perfect Wife*], Salamanca, 1584), on the contrary was recommending that nobles' wives should give birth to few children and breastfeed them with their milk to make them good, since it was believed that maternal lactation not only continued the child's physical formation, but also infused the mother's virtues into the children's souls (Castiñeira Fernández 2017). In addition, by doing so the descendants' legitimacy and nobility was protected, since mothers who did not raise their children turned them into bastards and villains. It was believed that wet nurses who were villains or slaves²⁰ corrupted children's good natural conditions (Antonio de Nebrija, *Tratado sobre la educación de los hijos* [*Treatise on the education of sons and daughters*], 1509), whereas wet nurses nourished them through the period of lactation—twenty-four months, generally—they had only received nourishment from their mother for nine months during pregnancy.

Moreover, following the ancient tradition, it was said that mothers who did not breastfeed were incomplete or "half-mothers" (Rivera 2016, pp. 13, 14, 17, 21; Villa Prieto 2011–2012; Bergmann 2002, pp. 92, 95, 97; Arroñada 2007, pp. 17–18). In the case of Mary, as Mother of God, the link between lactation and lineage would have made it unthinkable to resort to wet nurses (González Hernando 2010, p. 107). A shift occurred in the 16th century, when it became advisable for mothers to breastfeed their own children. Together with moralizing literature, it would be Renaissance humanism that established the family model that lasted until the early modern period.

But, returning to the Middle Ages, medical sources have provided information that allows us to delve into certain Marian identities, such as her condition as co-redeemer.

5. Milk as Eucharistic Fluid

In this section, we return to medieval beliefs about the anatomy of women to study how this "knowledge" could have affected the Virgin's mediating condition, and especially her Eucharistic character. The divine maternity of Mary supports her nature as intercessor and even as co-redeemer, always in accordance with Christian dogma. This means that Mary is the most effective advocate before Christ because she is his mother. Indeed, it has been said that, during the Late Middle Ages, the Virgin's participation in the act of salvation was beyond her role as intercessor, because it was at the same level as that of Christ himself, to the point of being considered a co-redeemer of humanity (Mateo Gómez 2001; Domínguez Rodríguez 1998; von Simson 1953). Based on these beliefs, one can even establish three levels of mediation, according to the degree of her participation in the history of salvation.

First of all, as has been mentioned, Mary's acquiescence after the announcement by the Archangel Gabriel lends this evangelical episode special significance in the redeeming story of Christ. That is why the Virgin can be considered a passive mediator simply because

she gave birth to the Son of God. That is, Mary would have been the means by which Christ acquires the human condition. Secondly, her condition as the Mother of God makes her an extremely effective intercessor. In some iconographic types, in order to get something from her son Mary reminds him that she is his mother and that she nursed him. Further, in numerous images, the Virgin shows Christ the breasts that fed him in order to move her Son to compassion (*Scala Salutis*²¹, epitaph for the Pecori family, attributed to Lorenzo Monaco, before 1402, from Florence, New York, The Cloisters). No other intercessor can make those same arguments. Moreover, the situations in which Mary may get to intervene are very diverse: for one or several devotees or for an entire population; at the time of death or faced with imminent danger such as an epidemic; with the devil himself; and even for humanity as a whole, in the apocalyptic context of the Last Judgment.

Lastly, Mary's mediation and co-redemption may also be based on the medical treatises on female anatomy and the changes occurring in the female body before and after giving birth. These texts of a "scientific" nature could be interpreted from the perspective of the Eucharist, such that they become sources analyzing the medieval religious visual repertoire. It was believed that during pregnancy the child's body was formed with the mother's blood and, after birth, it rose to the breasts to become milk to feed the newborn (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, c. 560–636; Arib Ibn Sa'id, 10th cent.; Hildegard of Bingen, *Causae et Curae*, mid-12th cent.; Physici, *Anatomia magistri*, second half of 12th cent.) (Phillips 2018, p. 13; Giménez Tejero 2016, p. 49; Rivera 2016, p. 18; Alfonso Cabrera 2013, pp. 194, 197; González Hernando 2010, p. 107).

Based on this, it was concluded that Mary had not only enabled the redemption of humanity on engendering, giving birth to and breastfeeding Christ, but she also continued participating in her Son's work of salvation every time that wine was consecrated in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This became the blood of Christ (transubstantiation, established as dogma in 1215 in the 4th Council of the Lateran) which was Mary's own blood, thus acquiring an equally Eucharistic worthiness. Given that the Son of God had received the body from his mother, Mary was also the source and origin of Christ's Eucharistic body. The consecration of the bread and wine, which by transubstantiation becomes his body and blood, actualizes Christ's sacrifice on the cross, by which he redeemed humanity from sin. In this way, with Mary sharing the Eucharistic sacrifice with her Son²², through consanguinity, her status as co-redeemer is reinforced.

The equivalence between the milk of Mary and the blood of Christ had been revealed before. Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–1167) exhorted the monks to have crucifixes in their cells so that Christ could "delight them with his embraces and offer them the milk of sweetness from his naked breast" (Sperling 2018b, p. 874), while Heinrich Suso (c. 1295–1366) wrote about visions of suckling from Christ's wounds (Sperling 2015, pp. 64–65). According to Sperling, between the Late Middle Ages and the early Modern Age, this equivalence is visually expressed, for example in images by Gossaert, in "a gender-bending manner by alternating between showcasing the Virgin's and the Christ child's engorged breasts and nipples" (Sperling 2015, p. 67).

Iconographic types concerned with the Incarnation of Christ can be associated with the transubstantiation of bread into the body of Christ. Some of these may be the Annunciation or the Nativity (Williamson 2004, p. 351), but especially the nursing Virgin. Based on the biological suppositions described above, Beth Williamson interprets the *Nursing Madonna* by Paolo di Giovanni Fei (Figure 8) as a Eucharistic symbol. The odd position of Mary's breast in an image of accentuated naturalism must necessarily bear some meaning. Holmes argues that the 14th-century Italian images of the Nursing Madonna showed one of Mary's bare breasts as deformed or in an anatomically incorrect place, to reduce their erotic appeal and increase the symbolic one²³ (Holmes 1997, pp. 175–78). Williamson, on the other hand, compares it to a chalice: with the breast's cup-like shape, it is to be understood that Mary's milk would end up turning into Christ's Eucharistic blood, thus consecrated in a chalice (1996, pp. 195–232).



Figure 8. *Nursing Madonna*, Paolo di Giovanni Fei, c. 1385–1390, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As opposed to Eve, Mary distributes the Eucharist in the other species: bread; Eve, who is still the temptress, does the same with apples in an image of the Tree of Death and Life (Figure 9). Just as Eve is the mother of humanity, which was stained by the original sin because of her actions, Mary is the “Mother of the Eucharist,” as Jean Gerson calls her (Miles 1986, p. 201). Both kinds of food, the body of Christ and the fruit that allowed sin to be introduced, spring from the same tree. A crucifix, that is, Jesus sacramentalized, hangs from it. But the perception of the figure of Eve had begun to change long before.

It is also worth mentioning the representations belonging to the iconographic type for the Dream of the Virgin, such as the one by Simone dei Crocefissi (c. 1365–1380, National Gallery in London). Emphasizing Mary as an instrument of salvation, Simone depicts her as *radix sancta* from the Tree of Life, fused with the tree of the cross (Montesano 2009, p. 349). This image also involves the figure of Mary as the origin of Christ’s Eucharistic body, since the leaves of the tree on which he appears crucified look like vine leaves. They are also similar to the leaves in another version of the subject by the same painter (Pinacoteca Nazionale in Ferrara). The trunk stems from the Virgin’s belly, making it unnecessary to portray the breastfeeding to accentuate the link between Christ and his mother. Furthermore, at the bottom of the painting, a hand that seems to be a prolongation of the cross through the mother takes the hand of Adam, who is followed by Eve, to take him out of Hell, whose gates lie on the ground. Thus, albeit preceded by Adam, Eve is represented as having been redeemed of her sin.



Figure 9. *The Tree of Death and Life*, Missal of Bernard von Rohr, Berthold Furtmeyer, 1481, Munich, Bayerisch Staatsbibliothek, Clm. 15710, fo. 60v.

In this vein, in some of the typological images that compare Eve with Mary (*Nursing Madonna*, Paolo di Giovanni Fei, c. 1385–1390, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; *Nursing Madonna*, Paolo di Giovanni, after 1370, San Marino, private collection; *Madonna of Humility*, Carlo da Camerino, c. 1400, Cleveland Museum of Art, Figure 4a), the first woman is presented with a polygonal halo. Occasionally, straight-edged or star-shaped halos hover over the patriarchs of the Old Testament or the Just that have died before Christ. In this case, the representation of Eve with a halo recalls her redemption through Mary. Her disobedience was even seen as a necessary evil to reach the Savior. Hence, the temptress *par excellence*, the sinner, the cause of humanity's perdition, is also redeemed by Christ thanks to his mother.

An image belonging to an exclusive iconographic type from Valencia, supported by local sources, presents Eve already fully redeemed. I shall dedicate the last section of this paper to this image.

6. Redeemed and “Sanctified” Eve

In this section, I intend to close the circle that was opened in the first one. We have seen how Eve bore the greatest guilt of the original sin and suffered its consequences. However, by the Late Middle Ages, her image appears to have been slightly whitewashed, which

is visually represented by touching her with a polygonal halo and placing her at the feet of Mary, through whom she will reach redemption. The image of Eve in the Valencian iconographic type of the Calvary of the Redemption already presents her as a sacred figure.

It is after the death of Christ on the cross, during those three days before his resurrection, when the descent of Christ into Hell takes place (*Descensus ad inferos*, *Gospel of Nicodemus*, part II) to rescue the patriarchs from limbo. The iconographic type that visualizes this shows the Son of God, after wrecking the gates of Hell, sometimes taking Adam and Eve by the hand, followed by the rest of the Just. Nevertheless, the *Calvary of the Redemption* in the Museo de Bellas Artes in Valencia (Figure 10) is noteworthy. It is not the only image of this type held by the museum, since it seems to be characteristic of the Kingdom of Valencia (Gregori Bou 2016b, pp. 69, 80), although the one by the Master of Perea has a significant peculiarity, which we can interpret in the context of Eve's redemption.

Toward the end of the Middle Ages, religious authorities around Valencia, such as Francesc Eiximenis in 1404 (Eiximenis 1420–1430, bk. 9, chap. 117, fo. 334v), Saint Vicente Ferrer in the sermon *Surrexit, non est hic*, Easter Sunday (April 23) 1413 (Ferrer 1485, 24ff) and Isabel de Villena (1497, chp. 201, fo. 204), included in their writings on the descent to Hell an episode in which the patriarchs recently rescued from limbo express their wish to witness the moment of his redemption, that is, to venerate the image of the crucified one in gratitude for his sacrifice. It should be noted that the vision of Christ crucified could take on a Eucharistic nature, since the sacrifice of the Eucharist actualizes the one by Christ on the cross. However, during the Middle Ages communion was not common by lay people, since attending the consecration alone had acquired similar importance, to the point where the faithful tried to see as many Eucharistic consecrations as possible, which is known as visual communion.

Hence, the patriarchs' viewing of Christ sacrificed could come to be considered a kind of visual communion. In 1215, the 4th Council of the Lateran took steps to encourage effective reception of the Eucharist by the faithful (Mocholí Martínez 2017). In the work by Isabel de Villena specifically, it is the women headed by Eve (Gregori Bou 2016b, pp. 73–75; Ramón i Ferrer 2021) who decide to ask to see the effigy of Christ crucified. In this way, the Son of God appears twice: on the cross in the center of the composition, and at its foot, pointing to his own image for Adam and Eve and the other Old Testament characters.

All of them, even the good thief, have star-shaped halos over them, except for Eve (Gregori Bou 2016a). The first woman shares a round halo with the figures of the New Testament, among them the Mother of God, who is symmetrically opposite Eve. Between the two women at the foot of the cross, there is a third woman, who has also been forgiven by Christ: Mary Magdalene. Hence, not only is Eve's redemption manifested (*"Veni, venerable mare, per mi molt amada: acostau-vos a mi e sereu coronada segons mereix vostra virtuosa penitencia, car ja són finides les vostres dolors"* [Come, venerable mother, much beloved by me: come close to me and you will be crowned as your virtuous penitence deserves, since your pains have ended]²⁴, de Villena 1497, chp. 198), but her saintliness is also recognized (*"Aprés ve la santa Eva, que santa fo per gran penitencia"* [Afterwards comes Eve, who was a saint due to great penitence]²⁵, Ferrer 1485, 24ff). Unlike the previous period, these devotional texts reject a natural female inclination for sin by the first woman, so that Eve's liberation from captivity enables her to occupy a notable place in Paradise together with her husband Adam.



Figure 10. *Calvary of the Redemption*, Master of Perea, end of 15th cent., Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes.

Although with this latter work we have deviated from the main theme of the text, which is the imagery of the Nursing Madonna, it should be remembered that the study of those works has been conditioned by the possible negative or at least humble condition of the act of breastfeeding, as part of Eve's punishment, which affected all women except Mary. Although the reception by the faithful of the images of Mary breastfeeding the child could have been mediated by beliefs that were not exclusively religious, her condition as the Mother of God has led her to share with her son a Eucharistic and even redemptive character. In this sense, it should be noted to what extent, shortly before the Reformation, the redemptive capacity of Mary had led Eve to be considered even a sacred character.

7. Conclusions

In Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve's sin had negative consequences for the female gender as a whole, who were not only subjected to man, but also shouldered practically all of the burden for the survival of the species: sexual attraction to her husband and the painful act of giving birth. After human birth, the woman's body continued to suffer the effects of the divine curse, such as producing milk to feed the newborn. Unlike the desire and pleasure associated with the sexual act (and even the physical sexual act itself) or the pain associated with childbirth, the Virgin could not avoid lactation. The paradox implied by this gave rise to opposing interpretations regarding how humiliating (due to its punitive

nature) or simply humble and charitable the act of breastfeeding was considered for women in general, and for Mary in particular.

However, beyond religious sources, what was believed to be known about the female anatomy, the social customs and even the aesthetics of the Late Middle Ages make it difficult to acquire a proper perspective about this matter, and more specifically about some of the iconographical types of Mary as the Nursing Madonna or as the Virgin of Humility. In this latter case, as it was a widespread belief in Europe that sex reduced the quality of milk and was therefore incompatible with breastfeeding, we have proposed the possibility that the visual representation of Mary's lactation is compatible with allusions to her virginal character in the same image—or even reinforces it. Such allusions are characteristic aspects of the iconographical type of the Madonna of Humility, who is breastfeeding the child: her representation seated on ground covered with wild plants, which refers to virginity, as Saint Bernard and Saint Bonaventure state.

Nevertheless, all of this enables a more incisive interpretation to be made about the typological correspondence between Eve and Mary, and especially the role of the Virgin in the story of salvation, to the point that she may be considered not only a co-redeemer of the human species, but also to have a Eucharistic nature similar to that of Christ. This statement can be made based on the medical “knowledge” of the time according to which the child's blood came from the mother's blood, previously converted into milk in her breasts. In this way, it is another woman who redeems Eve, who had unjustly borne all the burden of the Fall, together with all other women. Her redemption reaches the point of being considered a saint by revered authors in the Late Middle Ages in Valencia. This idea has been visually translated by means of a circular halo into a significant image of a particular iconographic type, the Calvary of the Redemption.

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Notes

- ¹ CEV <<https://www.biblegateway.com>> (accessed 9 October 2021). “*Et ait Dominus Deus ad serpentem: [. . .] Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius: ipsa conteret caput tuum, et tu insidiaberis calcaneo ejus*” (Vulgata Clementina <<https://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/html/index.html>>, accessed 15 September 2021).
- ² “*Haec et muliebria nuncupantur; nam mulier solum animal menstruale est. Cuius cruoris contactu fruges non germinant, acescunt musta, moriuntur herbae, amittunt arbores fetus, ferrum rubigo corripit, nigrescunt aera. Si qui canes inde ederint, in rabiem efferuntur. Glutinum asphalti, quod nec ferro nec aquis dissolvitur, cruore ipso pollutum sponte dispergitur*” (Documenta Catholica Omnia <<https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu>>, accessed 24 September 2021).
- ³ CEV <<https://www.biblegateway.com>> (accessed 9 October 2021). “*Mulieri quoque dixit: Multiplicabo ærumnas tuas, et conceptus tuos: in dolore paries filios, et sub viri potestate eris, et ipse dominabitur tui*” (Vulgata Clementina <<https://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/html/index.html>>, accessed 15 September 2021).
- ⁴ Christian Classics Ethereal Library <<https://www.ccel.org>> (accessed 30 September 2021). “*Si tanta in terris moraretur fides quanta merces eius expectatur in caelis, nulla omnino uestrum, sorores dilectissimae, ex quo Deum uiuum cognouisset et de sua, id est de feminae condicione, didicisset, laetiolem habitum, ne dicam gloriosiolem, appetisset, ut non magis in sordibus ageret et squalorem potius affectaret, ipsam se circumferens Euam lugentem et paenitentem, quo plenius id quod de Eua trahit -ignominiam dico primi delicti et inuidiam perditionis humanae- omni satisfactionis habitu expiaret*”.
- ⁵ Medieval medicine attempts to explain the sexual desire in women compared to the model established by female animals: while in females sexual appetite disappears after conception, in the case of women it did not respond only to an alleged reproductive need. On the other hand, female pleasure was analyzed according to the ecstasy model that was devised for men and, therefore, it was held that women reached orgasm when they expelled their “seed”. Therefore, men had to attend to the enjoyment of their partners for conception to occur (Moral de Calatrava 2008, pp. 136–40).
- ⁶ <http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae-Tertia_Pars,_EN.pdf> (accessed 23 October 2021). “*Augustinus dicit, in sermone de natiuitate, alloquens virginem matrem, nec in conceptione, inquit, inventa es sine pudore, nec in partu inventa es cum dolore (. . .) sicut dicit Augustinus, in sermone de assumptione beatae virginis, ab hac sententia*

excipitur virgo mater Dei, quae, quia sine peccati colluvione et sine virilis admixtionis detrimento Christum suscepit, sine dolore genuit, sine integritatis violatione, pudore virginitatis integra permansit".

Peeters considers that this gospel, along with the rest of the childhood cycle gospels, derives from a common source, due to the thematic overlap between them. The *Armenien Gospel of the Infancy* was based on the *Book of James* and the *Gospel of the Infancy of Thomas*, as well as fragments of the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*. It is presupposed to be a translation of a Syrian text, which in turn would have been translated from a Greek one (Piñero 2009, p. 300; Olivares 2019, p. 1610). Western religious images were affected by the influence of this gospel, for example, by depicting the birth of Christ in a cave or transforming the three wise men into kings with proper names: Melkon, king of the Persians; Balthasar, king of the Indians and Gaspar, king of the Arabs (Grau-Dieckmann 2011, p. 170).

Miles considers that the greater popularity of the nursing Virgin, especially in the iconographic type of the Virgin of Humility, in early Renaissance Florentine society is due to the characteristic chronic malnutrition and anxiety about food supply at the time (1986, p. 198). However, for the Virgin of Humility, Mocholí Martínez and Montesinos Castañeda (2021) propose a development directly related to changes of a theological nature.

CEV <<https://www.biblegateway.com>> (accessed 9 October 2021). "*Factum est autem, cum hæc diceret: extollens vocem quædam mulier de turba dixit illi: Beatus venter qui te portavit, et ubera quæ suxisti*" (Vulgata Clementina <<https://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/html/index.html>>, accessed 15 September 2021).

Other extracanonical text are as follows: "And by little and little that light withdrew itself until the young child appeared: and it went and took the breast of its mother Mary" (*Book of James*, 19:2); "The child, enwrapped in swaddling clothes, was sucking the breast of the Lady Mary his mother" (*Arabic Infancy Gospel*, 3:1); "And he came and took the breast of his mother, as he was fet with milk" (*Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, 9:2; Terian 2008, p. 45).

Regarding the redeeming character of the Virgin and, specifically, of the Madonna of Humility, the presence of a penitent brotherhood in the lower part of the altarpiece should be noted. Other confraternities also dedicated their altarpieces to the Virgin of Humility: *Madonna of Humility*, Bartolomeo Perellano or Bartolomeo da Camogli, 1346, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia.

As some of the authors who have written about the *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen* (Master of the Mérode Altarpiece, c. 1440, London, National Gallery) have suggested (Williamson 2004, p. 394).

According to ancient medical theories, as the woman both emitted and received semen during satisfying sex, which would flow into her womb, such flux may have filtered into the breastmilk; So Saint Anne would have breastfed her daughter to prevent the residues of eternal sin from polluting her immaculate being (Sperling 2021, p. 285; Phillips 2018, p. 13).

As early as the 11th and 12th centuries, images on the bronze door of the Basilica of San Zeno in Verona (11th–12th centuries) and on the doorway of the Church of San Esteban in Sos del Rey Católico (Zaragoza) (late 12th century) have been interpreted as representing the adulterous woman or the mother who refuses to breastfeed her children or orphaned children, as opposed to the mother who does (Alfonso Cabrera 2016, p. 42).

The same idea has been given by Williamson in relation to the image *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*. According to this author, the Virgin offers her milk to the viewer, not to the child, "because of the general associations of the Virgin's milk with mercy and charity" (Williamson 2004, pp. 402–3).

However, virginity and chastity posed medical problems for women. Although Soranus of Ephesus considered it healthy, a poor understanding of his theory led to the belief that sexual abstinence caused uterine or hysterical suffocation. Further, despite being previously known (Avicenna, *Summa conservationis et curationis*, 1285), sex as the most effective treatment was not proposed until the 14th century (Moral de Calatrava 2008, p. 136). Indeed, the iconographic type of the Madonna of Humility was created in the 14th century.

"Ex his manifestum jam arbitror, quænam sit virga de radice Jesse procedens, quis vero flos super quem requiescit Spiritus sanctus. Quoniam Virgo Dei genitrix virga est, flos Filius ejus. Flos utique Filius Virginis, flos candidus et rubicundus, electus ex millibus (Cantic. V, 10); flos in quem prospicere desiderant angeli, flos ad cujus odorem reviviscunt mortui, et sicut ipse testatur, flos campi est (Cant. II, 1), et non horti. Campus enim sine omni humano floret adminiculo, non seminatus ab aliquo, non defossus sarculo, non impinguatus fimo. Sic omnino, sic Virginis alvus floruit, sic inviolata, integra et casta Mariae viscera, tanquam pascua aeterni viroris florem protulere; cujus pulchritudo non videat corruptionem, cujus gloria in perpetuum non marcescat. O Virgo, virga sublimis, in quam sublime verticem sanctum erigis! usque ad Sedentem in throno, usque ad Dominum majestatis. Neque enim id mirum, quoniam in altum mittis radices humilitatis. O vere coelestis planta, pretiosior cunctis".

Religious sources are also confusing as regards the age for weaning. The *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* narrates that Jesus stopped breastfeeding immediately after nine months: "When the child Jesus became nine months old, he was no longer fed from his mother's breasts. And upon observing him, they were very surprised and kept asking each other and saying: 'What (child) is this? He neither eats nor drinks nor sleeps, but stays up, wakeful and watchful day and night.'" (12:6; Terian 2008, p. 61); but the *Gospel of the Nativity of Mary* affirms that Anne breastfed Mary for three years: "and when the circle of three years had rolled round, and the time of her weaning was fulfilled, they brought the Virgin to the temple of the Lord with offerings" (6:1).

- ¹⁹ In the case of Tuscan towns of the early Renaissance, Miles echoes the words of Petrarch, who called the slave wet nurses *domestici hostes* (domestic enemies). The consideration of these women as hostile and untrustworthy must have contributed to the anxiety surrounding wet nursing (1986, p. 199).
- ²⁰ Translated by the author from “[. . .] la madre, en el hijo que engendra, no pone sino una parte de su sangre, de la cual la virtud del varón, figurándola, hace carne y huesos. Pues el ama que cría pone lo mismo, porque la leche es sangre, y en aquella sangre la misma virtud del padre, que vive en el hijo, hace la misma obra. Sino que la diferencia es ésta: que la madre puso este su caudal por nueve meses, y el ama por veinticuatro; y la madre, cuando el parto era un tronco sin sentido ninguno, y el ama, cuando comienza ya a sentir y reconocer el bien que recibe, la madre influye en el cuerpo, el ama en el cuerpo y en el alma. Por manera que, echando la cuenta bien, el ama es la madre, y la que le parió es peor que madrastra, pues enajena de sí a su hijo y hace borde lo que había nacido legítimo, y es causa que sea mal nacido el que pudiera ser noble; y comete en cierta manera un género de adulterio, poco menos feo y no menos dañoso que el de ordinario. Porque en aquél vende al marido por hijo el que no es de él, y aquí el que no lo es de ella, y hace sucesor al hijo del ama y de la moza, que las más veces es una o villana o esclava”.
- ²¹ Christ and Mary interceding with God (Mocholí Martínez 2015, pp. 512–89).
- ²² We could relate this co-leading role of Mary to the statement by Jutta Sperling that “Mary’s divine fluids grace the beholder, the fiction of patriarchal blood is deconstructed”, based on the eroticization of maternal power through the lactating breast (Sperling 2018a, p. 119).
- ²³ Since this author, the Renaissance’s naturalism was to be imposed on the *decorum* owing to the Marian representations, which would entail the temporary disappearance of the iconographic type of the *Madonna Lactans* from the mid-1440s to the 1470s.
- ²⁴ Translated by the author.
- ²⁵ Translated by the author.

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