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WILLIAM ETTY'S MAGDALENS:  
SEXUAL DESIRE AND SPIRITUALITY IN EARLY VICTORIAN ENGLAND

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Abstract

William Etty (1787-1849) is widely recognized as one of Britain's pre-eminent painters of the nude. However, his reputation has suffered as a result of the moral disapproval that often greeted his work. Much of the academic discussion of his work has focused on attempting to rehabilitate him as a serious artist. In this essay I take a different approach by arguing that debate cannot be most usefully advanced by presenting as critical alternatives the notions that Etty's work should be seen as either morally superior to, or as fatally implicated in, practices of pornographic viewing and production. By focusing on a series of his later works that illustrate his increasing interest in Catholic visual and material culture, notably those depicting the penitent Mary Magdalen, this essay argues that the religious and the erotic in his work should not be seen as incompatible phenomena. Rather, Etty should be regarded as an exponent of nineteenth-century attempts to create contexts of erotic desire that were also morally pure.

Keywords

William Etty, Anglo-Catholicism, Mary Magdalen, sexuality, prostitution, commodification.

William Etty has had a mixed critical reception. The year of his death, in 1849, was perhaps the high point of his fame. This was the result of the retrospective exhibition of 133 of his works at the Royal Society of Arts.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition, nevertheless, covered only a fraction of his total production, which, it is thought, amounted to something in excess of two thousand paintings and drawings. This body of work can be interpreted as one of the most sustained engagements by a British artist with the nude or as an ostentatious display of quasi-pornographic vulgarity. Increasing concerns about purity and eroticism in early Victorian England led some authorities to call for clarity in the separation of proper and improper images, and such impulses were to lead to the passing of the Obscene Publications Act 1857. However, others responded by seeking to find ways in which to establish pure forms of eroticism and erotic forms of purity. In this essay I will take Etty's late series of images of the penitent Magdalen as exemplary of the ways in which Etty was attempting to discover such a visual and moral synthesis. While he remained a devout man, he left behind the Methodism of his childhood to participate in Anglican worship. Furthermore, during his last years he was said to have flirted with Roman Catholicism and to have set up what was described shortly thereafter as a "dilettante" altar in his bedroom. I will argue that we can use these actions of Etty, and the dismay of his opponents, to understand his involvement in the emergence of a new form of Anglo-Catholic devotion that combined engagement with, and resistance to, sensuality into a unified spiritual practice.

Etty grew up in the family of a Methodist miller in York, and relied on an uncle who was a banker to fund his entry to the Royal Academy Schools in 1806. From then on he developed a career as a painter in London, traveling from time to time to the Continent, notably to Venice in 1824. He became an RA in 1825. At

probate his estate was worth £15,000; according to the financial terms of his own times, he enjoyed commercial success (Smith 70). Yet, although he has had his defenders, Etty has not, in general, had very good press. He has been called by Alison Smith the “most conspicuous” painter of the nude in the early Victorian period. Yet, in her opinion, his figures suffered from “bizarre proportions,” notably tiny feet and big hips (Smith 86). Etty painted with a lush intensity that has not been to everyone’s liking. On May 6 1837 the *Spectator* commented on “a disgusting combination of voluptuousness and loathsome putridity -- glowing in colour and wonderful in execution, but conceived in the worst possible taste” ([au: Please include full citation for this source.] Referring to Etty, *The Sirens and Ulysses* (1837), Anon., ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy – Opening of the new National Gallery’, *The Spectator* 462, May 6 (1837), pp. 426-8, at 427.). It was this lack of decorum that had alarmed *The Times* in 1822 when it had commented that “nakedness without purity is offensive and indecent” ([au: Please include full citation for this source.] Anonymous notice, *The Times*, January 29 (1822), p. 3). Part of the problem was that Etty’s female nudes looked like working-class girls play-acting as classical goddesses (Pearsall 37). An RA was not supposed to continue drawing models from life, as Etty was; rather, he was expected to elevate the human form through judicious idealization.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, as Martin Postle summarizes,

the highly naturalistic manner in which Etty painted a particular (as opposed to a generalized) body undermined its status as art, and focussed [au: Is this the spelling in Postle? Please advise. Yes it is] attention, possibly for the first time in British artistic discourse, on the semantic issue of the naked and the nude; the illicit versus the licit body; the “degraded” body, all too clearly

composed of flesh and blood, versus the incorrupt, idealized form epitomized by the art of Raphael. (Postle 168)

A robust defense of Etty, based upon the painter's letters, appeared in 1855 from the pen of the barrister Alexander Gilchrist. He defended his hero on such grounds as the relativism of moral custom, the eternity of nature, and the contention that only impure people see impure things. For instance, he drew attention to the fact that, at a display of Etty's art in his native city of York, ladies were observed to look away from the naked bosoms. Gilchrist notes acidly that he supposes these women never looked at themselves "for fear of contamination" (2:132). The 1899 biography of Etty by William Camidge is much less detailed than that of Gilchrist, but it does show the grounds on which the painter's further rehabilitation were attempted. Camidge saw Etty as a paragon of hard work who had come from humble yet respectable beginnings: "he was a genius if not actually talented, and hard work had compensated for what nature had not liberally supplied" (Camidge 9). He was defended as devout, modest, and chaste (he never married) and unconcerned with mere commercial gain since "money was never his idol" (14). It was known that "for six hours a day, in a cold marble hall, without fire in the bitterest winter, he painted until he could scarcely distinguish between life and the marble" (17). His qualities were such that "that he could produce without harm, that which would have debased other men" (22).

Yet the critical attacks continued.<sup>3</sup> In 1933 the then-editor of the *Burlington Magazine*, the eminent critic, Herbert Read, wrote an essay in that publication on "English Art." He declared:

the case of William Etty... is almost pathological in its absolute denationalisation -- its utter remoteness from any consciousness of an English tradition. Etty's sensuous colour, and his very sensuous appreciation of the human figure, are qualities very rare in English painting; but they are rare precisely because they are not English. (269)

As the writer of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography's entry asserts, "it would be difficult to overestimate Read's importance as an interpreter of continental art and as a supporter of advanced British work in the inter-war period" (Harrod). The accusation of un-Englishness had also been made in Etty's lifetime, so why did Read, like many other influential critics, position Etty as absolutely foreign to his own national identity (Schedler 17). Why was Etty so insistently distanced from English respectability?

Recent critical responses to Etty have continued to provide responses that can best be understood by reference to entrenched notions of the necessary separation of overt eroticism and decency. Thus, Leonard Robinson, in the preface to the latest and most extensive biography of William Etty, is keen to assure us that "Etty was a man of exemplary character ... There were no scandals in his life" (3). Robinson elsewhere asserts: "Etty was ever a conformist in matters of behavior and personal morality. He was a pillar of the Church and a model member of society. Along with his fellow members of the Victorian middle-class, even before Victoria's accession, he was God-Fearing and law-abiding in the most demanding sense" (267). Robinson's moral defense of Etty consists of constructing the painter as an innocent, an *idiot savant*, who failed to marry due to shyness and inarticulacy (351). He is essentially repeating the opinion expressed by the reviewer of Gilchrist's biography of Etty that "we regret

that he constantly painted in such total oblivion of those who are sorely tried, as well as those who have fallen” (Anon. 292). This leads Robinson to turn on those who have attempted any sort of analysis of Etty in terms of deviance. For instance, he alleges that if Etty were a celebrity today

he would undoubtedly be the subject of much amateur psycho-analysis and, of course, feminist outrage. His fondness for the nude ... would be analyzed as the consequence of frustrated sexual longings, of a bachelor condition forced on him by sexual impotence, of a pathological shyness bordering upon paranoia, of deep-seated psychological disturbances, a possible “mother fixation,” even unsavory perversions. Very few men do not desire sexual experience and we have no reason to believe that Etty was abnormal. (350)

This list is, in essence, a sweeping response to a wide range of suggestions from recent critics who suggest that since Etty was the one of the very few mass-producers of art nudes in nineteenth-century England it is perfectly legitimate to suggest that even if he was sexually “normal” (whatever that might mean), he was certainly far from an average man of the times. Thus, to give a few examples, James Hall, in a review of an exhibition held in 1992, commented that Etty’s “main claim to fame is as England’s only painter of unapologetic, full-blooded nudes. Etty’s hotly-coloured brush loitered with singular intent” (10). Such works as *Candaules, King of Lydia, shews his Wife by Stealth to Gyges, one of his Ministers, as she goes to Bed*, exhibited 1839, and *The Wrestlers*, c. 1840, which shows a black and a white man grappling, have attracted particular comment even if precise conclusions remain elusive. So, for instance, Amanda Schedler, in her unpublished PhD dissertation on

Etty's reception, identified a complex intertwining of voyeurism with interests in both male and female strength and weakness, which in her view implied "unresolved, unmediated, and very peculiar obsession" (189). Peter Gay's view was that Etty displayed an "aesthetic voyeurism" that led him to explore strong interests in the naked of both sexes (385). Of Etty's ambitions as a serious painter, Gay writes:

In addition to his canvases of solitary nude women contemplating bowls of fruit, deciding whether to risk a dip in the pond, or just lying there, he produced well-received neo-classical machines [i.e. history paintings] with their budgets of nude bodies engaged in animated action or frozen in contemplative postures, and pious -- but naked -- Magdalens. Etty professed to study nudes the better to do his classical compositions, but I am persuaded that he created classical compositions that he might study his nudes. (386)

Such views, anathema to Robinson, suggest that works such as 1838's *Somnolency*, which shows a nude female whose arm covers one breast leaving the other poking out and caressed by a fallen plat of hair, are essentially high-class pornography (231). In the absence of astonishing simple-mindedness, this apparently leaves monumental hypocrisy as the only other explanation for Etty's statement that his aim was to paint woman as God's most glorious work (Postle 166). However, I will argue that we can advance the debate by looking again at those "pious -- but naked -- Magdalens" and by taking seriously Etty's claim of the spirituality of his desires.

## I Penitent Magadalens

Because only a portion of Etty's works have been documented we cannot be certain how many images of Mary Magdalen he painted. In major collections there is *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen*, of 1834 and three images of the *Penitent Magdalen*, of c. 1835, 1842, and 1845 (figs. 1, 2, and 3). The figure of "Mary Magdalen" in the arts is a conflation of a series of references to perhaps three different women in the New Testament (Haskins). The identification of the Magdalen as a penitent prostitute appears to have arisen first in the early Middle Ages and it was this identification which appears to have played a key role in the "strong revival of interest" in Mary Magdalen during the Victorian period, especially on the part of men. Mary Kruppa's article on this subject is titled "more sweet and liquid than any other," which is a quotation from a sermon of the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon who claimed, in 1855, that this is how the Magdalen's voice would sound in heaven (Kruppa 121). Since hardness and dryness was strongly associated with masculinity and softness and wetness with femininity, we can understand Spurgeon to have been evoking a powerfully gendered vision of Mary Magdalen as the epitome of woman. Her position as the antithesis of the male was emphasized a few years earlier by Charles Kingsley, a leading architect of Christian socialism and of what became widely referred to as "muscular Christianity," when he wrote in relation to the repentant Magdalen:

We, men, are made of sterner stuff; we do not feel pain as keenly as women; and if we do feel, we are rightly ashamed to show it. But a tender woman, who feels pain and sorrow infinitely more than we do, who need not be afraid of being frightened, and who perhaps is terrified of every mouse and spider --

to see her bearing patiently pain, and sorrow, and shame ... that is Christ's likeness. (Kingsley 181, 260)

Bearing in mind Kingsley's sado-masochistic sexual interests -- as displayed in the manuscript of c. 1843 which includes such images as that of the nude body of a young, beautiful crucified woman over which he wrote the word "darling," with, as Barker describes it, "the strokes of the letters suggesting cords that caress as well as bind and scourge" -- we can see that the figure of the Magdalen in penitence could have not just an erotic charge but also a perverse one (471).

The reclamation of "fallen women" was a major cultural preoccupation of political and clerical reformers during the early Victorian period.<sup>4</sup> Charles Dickens, who founded a reformatory, Urania Cottage, in 1846, and William Gladstone were just two of the more prominent celebrity enthusiasts for this moral crusade.<sup>5</sup> In an interesting echo of Robinson's defense of Etty, Anne Isba in her book *Gladstone and Women*, asserts that Gladstone met prostitutes for moral rather than prurient reasons and that, when he used to whip himself afterwards, he did so not as a masochist, but because the scourge was a "deterrent" against desire (100). This picture of moral probity appears to fit with the serious young man who, in 1838, denounced a Magdalen attributed to Guido Reni on the grounds of the "tyranny of design over expression, of what is theatrical over what is spiritual"; however, we know that he owned at least one Etty (Pointon 77; Gladstone qtd. on 82). Moreover, in 1859, William Dyce painted a picture of a prostitute called Miss Summerhayes at Gladstone's instruction. Jonathan Conlin suggests, in his essay on "Gladstone and Christian Art, 1832-1854," that "the painting was, perhaps an attempt to contain his [Gladstone's] desire by painting her as a chaste *Cinquecento* lady -- or, perhaps, a

vision of the reformed Summerhayes he hoped would emerge from this rescue work.”

It is notable that Gladstone recorded in his diary for September 1, 1859 that his thoughts of Summerhayes needed to be “limited and purged” (Conlin 369-70).

The closest inspiration for Etty’s interpretations of the Magdalen in Penitence can be found in Venetian art, which is not surprising bearing in mind that Etty spent nine happy months in Venice and was known colloquially as the “English Tintoret.” For example, in a treatment of this subject by Domenico Robusti (Tinteretto’s son) Mary is central to the composition and her gaze is fixed upward toward the light that shines upon her. She is situated in the rocky landscape outside Jerusalem and surrounded by a set of attributes: two vessels, a skull, a book, and a crucifix. The objects are distinguished from their background by their lighter color, but they do not dominate the composition; rather they circle around the central figure of Mary. Turning to the Ashmolean Magdalen (fig. 1), we find some important differences. The first is that Mary is barely clothed, since she just has a fur draped over her legs. Secondly, the landscape has vanished, as have all the objects apart from the book and the crucifix. Crucially, Mary is turned away from the viewer and is looking at the book while the crucifix looks at her. Unlike in the Robusti, Mary is placed in communication not with heaven, but with her material attributes, such as the book, which is placed in a dominating position in the composition.

Turning to the Tate Magdalen (fig. 2), we find a composition that is closer to that of Robusti. This time Mary is looking up to heaven, but she is now placed directly opposite the crucifix (quite possibly the same object that appeared in the previous painting) and which again, effectively, is looking at her. There is a skull this time, which looks away from Mary, and also a book, this time smaller, but featuring illuminations. These illuminations have the effect of making this volume a powerful

focus in the composition and it is placed, as in the previous painting, at the foot of the crucifix. Again Mary is half-clothed and with a pose that mostly conceals her breasts. She is placed in a nebulous space.

Finally, in the Victoria and Albert Magdalen (fig. 3) we see a full-length reclining nude who is looking at a crucifix that is enlarged and, dramatically and perhaps a little alarmingly, glaring out at the viewer from the painting in a sort of full-frontal pose. A skull below looks at Mary. Absent in all of these paintings are the vessels from which Mary poured lotion to anoint the feet of the Lord. The scriptures, skull, and crucifix have been emphasized by their placement, in close juxtaposition to one another, and in the way that they are directly integrated into the systems of the gaze within these paintings. These Ettys, therefore, differ in two important ways from the Robusti: firstly, certain of the material attributes, notably the crucifix, have more prominence, and, secondly, Mary is in greater states of undress. I will go on to argue that in order to understand Etty's works we need to situate them in their historical and religious context. While the imagery and attributes employed by Etty were those traditional in depictions of Mary Magdalen, he was a Protestant painting for a largely Protestant art market in a country with a determined tradition of anti-Catholicism. Gothic sensationalism originating in the eighteenth century had popularized images of Catholics as being obsessed with sex and death. Etty's paintings of the Magdalen, therefore, were produced in a cultural context that was primed to find them immoral rather than devotional.

These paintings faced criticism in the nineteenth century (although references cannot always be tied to specific paintings since they were all referred to at the time as "The -- or A -- Magdalen"). The version exhibited in 1842 (fig. 2) was engraved and thus, was apparently the most popular. Gilchrist suggests this is because she was

the more decorous version, “which offended no prudish prejudice, [and] its possession was coveted by many, who might not venture on buying ‘less decorous’ specimens of the Master” (2:129). But the press still complained, on the one hand, of a “cadaverous countenance,” and on the other, of there being “for a Magdalen, *too much colour* in the cheeks,” and a bosom too luxuriant (Gilchrist 2:130). Etty was being criticized here on the familiar grounds of transgression from notions of decorous beauty, in which the Magdalen should seem attractive (but not *too* attractive) and repentant (thus pale, but not *too* unhealthily pale).

Etty’s brief autobiographical self-vindication appeared in the *Art Journal* in 1849 and also in the catalogue of the 1849 Society of Arts exhibition. In this he argued that, “if in any of my pictures an immoral sentiment has been aimed at, I consent it should be burnt ... but where no immoral sentiment is *intended*, I affirm that the simple undisguised naked figure is innocent” (Society of Arts 9). However, if we accept the argument advanced by Bernard Aikema, we do not need to see the resulting focus on physical beauty as an impediment to the use of the type of the eroticized Magdalen as a focus for devotion. He discusses a work of c. 1530 by Titian (c. 1488-1576) in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence:

Titian’s Magdalen covers her nudity with her hands, with her arms, and with her splendid long hair. Or rather she doesn’t. The position of the arms, deriving from a classical Venus pudica, traditionally indicates modesty; here, however, the effect is more sensual than chaste. The position of the right arm, which should cover both breasts but which directs the onlooker’s gaze towards them instead, is paralleled by the left arm and hand. Long hair is an old

symbol of licentiousness, and the grasping hand arouses the fantasy of the onlooker.<sup>6</sup>

But despite all of this attention to its eroticism, and the lascivious tutting of various luminaries including Jacob Burckhardt, Aikema argues that Titian's penitent Magdalen is "unequivocally moralising": by staring at the painting the (male) viewer obtains salvation by undergoing the same struggle against the flesh as, supposedly, had Mary (Aikema 49-50).

There is no clear consensus on the question of whether Renaissance images of the Magdalen were originally meant to be erotic. On the one hand Rona Goffen has argued that, "however sensual Titian's Magdalens *may seem to modern viewers* [my emphasis] ... it is incorrect to deny the saint's -- and the Renaissance beholder's -- pious emotion" (186). On the other hand, Beverly Brown has argued that "by the beginning of the seventeenth century any lip-service to the picture's edifying qualities had been forgotten by the celebrated poet Giovanni Battista Marino, whose masterful description of the Magdalen's dazzling waves of erotic golden hair borders on the obscene" (288). What is hardly deniable is that the image of the penitent Magdalen powerfully lends itself to erotic readings and treatments. Richard Spear has suggested that Guido Reni (1575-1642) actively sought to downplay eroticism in his famous series of Magdalens by a stress on "the essentials of penance through their emotional state and frequent symbols of vanity (skull), conversion/sacrifice (crucifix), mortification (grotto or cave, roots as food), and weeping (eyes, hands)" (178). I have already highlighted the importance of religious context and of thinking about the difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant ways of seeing.<sup>7</sup> It was precisely because "Mary Magdalen stood in direct opposition to the Calvinist emphasis on

simple faith, unencumbered by the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist,” that her attributes appeared to Protestant viewers as peculiarly evocative of Roman Catholicism in general and of the perverse eroticism widely suspected at the time in relation to the confessional in particular.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, it was because skulls and crucifixes powerfully suggested sexual transgression for many Protestant viewers, that these compositions, following Aikema’s logic, were enabled to have a powerful spiritual potential. It was because Etty’s Magdalen’s were displays of fetishized eroticism that they could function as a spur to male virtue. Applying Aikema’s reading of the Titian to nineteenth-century practices, it is possible that Gladstone’s endurance of close contact with repentant prostitutes was not simply about reforming them, but was also intended as a spiritual trial of endurance for himself. Likewise, Etty’s practices of erotic viewing might be considered as attempts to ensure his own purity through courting the danger of, and resisting, the desire for physical contact with models who often were prostitutes. Gladstone, like Etty in his later years, was an adherent of High Church traditions of Anglicanism that were open to Catholic influence. A major element in the Anglo-Catholic revival of the mid-nineteenth century was the assertion of the moral value of practices of confession and penitence. However, these practices were condemned on the part of ecclesiastical opponents as representing, respectively, acts of voyeurism and sadism on the part of priests.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, what appeared to one party to be acts of spiritual probity their opponents read as scandalous evidence of illegitimate desire. Etty’s images of the Magdalen in penitence could have been produced as exercises in the delightful encounter with desire and of virtuous resistance to temptation by a man caught between Catholic devotions and Protestant prejudices and excitements. By contrast, the only way in which Etty’s opponents could enhance their Protestant

probity was through denouncing these images as obscenities that had the power to incite dangerous desires on the part of other, weaker people than themselves. In the next section of this essay I will suggest that this cultural reading can be applied to the production, arrangement, and reception of Anglo-Catholic visual and material culture in general.

## II Dilettante Altars

In his last decades Etty moved slowly away from the Methodism of his youth to embrace not only Anglicanism, but also the rising tide of Catholic sympathy that originated in the Oxford Movement. At the same time, the Ecclesiologists (originally based in Cambridge) promoted a return to practices of precision in church-building and liturgical furnishing inspired by the English Middle Ages. Beginning around 1850 press reports started to highlight the appearance of Anglican “ritualism,” an increasingly flamboyant style of liturgical performance featuring such “Catholic” innovations as the use of elaborate vestments, candles, crosses, and processions during the celebration of the “Mass.”<sup>10</sup> These innovations were challenged in the ecclesiastical courts. In 1857 judge Stephen Lushington gave as his opinion that “a decorous simplicity is the characteristic of the Church of England. What is lace and embroidery but a meretricious display of fantastic and unnecessary ornaments?” This is but a “servile imitation” of Rome, for “chastity and simplicity are not at variance with grandeur and beauty; but they are not reconcilable with jewels, lace, variegated cloths, and embroidery which are better fitted for the gorgeous pageantry of the Church of Rome than the pure and severe dignity of the Church of England.”<sup>11</sup> Fabrics were an important issue, notably in relation to the legality of decorated altar

cloths. Lushington here appears to be following the long tradition of thinking of the Church as female, and, therefore, of the decoration of churches as analogous to the respectable (or otherwise) dressing and adornment of women. In particular, his reference to a “meretricious display” associates emerging Anglo-Catholic visual culture not simply with women in general, but with prostitutes (commodified femininity) in particular.

Many of Etty’s apologists were almost as confused and defensive in relation to the painter’s religiosity as they were to his sexuality. For instance, in 1899 Camidge wrote of Etty: “to the Roman Catholics he had decided leanings; he cherished great gratitude to them for having conserved paintings, architecture, music and other fine arts, but he was a staunch Protestant and to the end of his days, vigorously declared his adhesion and loyalty to the Church of England” (20). Etty complained, in a letter he wrote to his friend Sydney Taylor in 1841, about those “ostentatious Temples the Methodists are building after the Pagan Model, i.e. York and Hull. Lofty unnecessary porticos Ionic columns . . . Candelabras of gilded brass, crimson linings in the pews and cushions, organs” (qtd. in Robinson 276). Further investigation reveals that Etty hoped to paint the altarpiece at Everingham Roman Catholic Chapel but that nothing came of it. In 1837 he was quoted as saying that he was Catholic, albeit not in the “Daniel O’Connell school,” but in that of Alfred, Augustine, St. Bernard, Raphael, and Michelangelo (Gilchrist 2:69-70). Meetings with A. W. N. Pugin took place in 1837 (when Etty attended High Mass at the consecration of the chapel at Oscott), in 1839 and 1841, and Rosemary Hill considers them to have been good friends.<sup>12</sup> Gilchrist emphasizes the sensual attractions of Catholicism for Etty: “an amateur Romanist, like many of his temperament, he now and again attended Mass for the music’s sake” (2:73). The crucial power of the visual contexts of worship for Etty

emerges in an undated letter to his brother Walter in which Etty wrote: “I am not a Catholic, nor probably ever shall be (unless they get their own Cathedrals back again)” (qtd. in Robinson 273).

In addition to Etty’s own admitted sympathies with Catholic art, Gilchrist also tells us that in his bedroom the painter had a

dilettante ... monkish altar: a pure white cloth with beautiful fringe; on *it* a splendid crucifix. Above that a drawing of the Entombment by Raphael and figures of Justice and Theology after Raphael on either side. Beneath the crucifix, a silvery butterfly, emblem of the Soul, enriched with a crown of thorns in wrought silver; a Chalice and Sacramental Cup, a row of Catholic Beads and cross; an hour glass, three ancient books (centuries old). On the right, look! and you’ll see a piece of deep black velvet, with border and tassels of gold; on it a cross of richest crimson velvet: lift up the corner and you will see -- not what we are, but what we soon shall be.<sup>13</sup>

Gilchrist also tells us that Etty “carried on much innocent and elaborate child’s play (by letter) under the assumed characters of ‘Abbot,’ ‘Monk,’ or ‘Hermit’” (2:25).

It is perfectly possible to read such behavior not as being sincere but as directly descended from such eighteenth-century erotic burlesque as that shown by William Hogarth in his *Sir Francis Dashwood at his Devotions* of 1757, in which Dashwood is shown as St. Francis before a libidinous “dilettante altar” in contemplation not of the body of Christ but of Venus.<sup>14</sup> Sir Francis Dashwood had been involved in founding the Society of Dilettanti, in c. 1732-3, as a drinking society for gentlemen who had been on the Grand Tour, and the brotherhood of the knights of

St. Francis (also known as the “Medmenham Monks”) about a decade later. This “order” was widely reported as having been devoted to the cult of Venus (i.e. sex) as, indeed, the Hogarth picture rather implies.<sup>15</sup> Bearing all this in mind it is hardly surprising that the adjective “dilettante,” which originally referred to “amateur lovers of the arts,” had developed distinctly negative connotations of aristocratic decadence and indulgence in the English of Etty’s time.<sup>16</sup>

William Beckford (1760-1844), who had had to absent the country for several years after a homosexual scandal, appears to have placed the painter firmly in the rakish camp. He is reported as saying, in 1838, in a fascinating pre-echo of Lushington’s comparison of the Roman and Anglican Churches, that Etty’s “beauties” were ““for the most part of a meretricious character, would do well enough for a mistress; but there,’ pointing to the St. Catherine (by Raphael) ‘there are personified the modesty and purity that a man would wish to have in a wife’” (Lansdown 11). Beckford provided Etty with one of his rare commissions in the form of *Adam and Eve at their Morning Orisons*, and he bought a *Prodigal Son*; even “in the depths of his [eventual financial] misery ... [he] so valued it, it is said, he tied it up as an heirloom” (Gilchrist 2:82). Whitney Davis has described Beckford’s extraordinary Gothic Revival construction at Fonthill, built in stages by James Wyatt between 1793 and 1812, as being a “site of sexuality” centered upon an immense phallic tower (“Site of Sexuality” 110). Beckford’s practices of flamboyant connoisseurship and accumulation have been interpreted, in the context of other homoerotic art collections, as an attempt to create the expression of alternative sexual tastes through the development and display of an unorthodox canon of erotic works.<sup>17</sup> Gilchrist reports that Beckford referred to Etty as being the “only painter for immortality of his day” (qtd. in Gilchrist 2:46). This would suggest that Beckford valued “meretricious”

images of male sinners as exemplary in relation to the project of the expression of his (in contemporary terms) perverse eroticism. Moreover, since Etty was clearly fascinated by the arranging of images, models, and artifacts, this appears to position Etty, like Beckford, as possessing a strongly male scopical authority, which he manifested through collecting and arranging beautiful things for his personal pleasure. Nor need his lack of sociability have disqualified him from such libidinous practices. He might be compared to Frederick, the protagonist of John Fowles's 1963 novel *The Collector*, whose very lack of social skills drive him to the isolated collection first of butterflies and then of women.

However, if we look again at Etty's domestic altar something else becomes apparent: an anonymous reviewer of Gilchrist's biography commented that Etty's "fondness for a dilettante prayer-table with other knick-knacks of devotion (as [Charles] Kingsley calls them), may easily be ascribed to his indulgence in poetic fancy, rather than any real attachment to Romish doctrines" (Anon. 296). The word "knick-knacks" is described by the Oxford English Dictionary as referring to "a light, dainty article of furniture, dress, or food; any curious or pleasing trifle more for ornament than use; a trinket, gimcrack, kickshaw."<sup>18</sup> The use of this word suggests a feminine assemblage. A parallel to this dismissal of Etty's domestic altar has been identified by Nellis, who has argued that the powerful critique of William Hazlitt had the effect of transforming the "assemblage of objects in [Beckford's] Fonthill Abbey from the logical and masculine 'collection' to effeminate 'acquisition'" (Richter 553). However, Davis's work implies that we may not be seeing here the mere accumulation of antiquities but rather practices of bricolage that created new meanings from novel juxtapositions of artifacts.<sup>19</sup> The notion of bricolage has also been explored in the context of religious practices on the part of gay men who have

come to the “often-painful realization that there is in fact no religious tradition that fully embraces them and their sexual practices without some caveat” (Savastano 12). Thus, we can understand both Beckford and Etty as bricoleurs who were working to articulate novel forms of sexuality through the manipulation of material culture.

It is also important to re-emphasize the significance of gothic contexts steeped in Catholic allusions since, as O’Malley has argued, “Catholicism could become the model for sexuality [in England] because it wrestled with the very structure of what constitutes a minority subjectivity” (557). George Haggerty has identified gothic as a pre-eminent site of alternative sexuality because “transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of gothic” (Haggerty 2). Etty increasingly included elements in his work that were open to gothic readings. Skulls, illuminated manuscripts, and crucifixes, thus, could appear in his penitent Magdalens not simply to be elements of traditional iconography but also gothic references to erotic subversion. There was such a widespread anti-Catholic fear of idolatry in early Victorian England that a series of complex legal cases had to be fought in the 1850s to justify the presence of crosses (let alone crucifixes) in Anglican churches (Schedler 2). It is thus significant that a close parallel for at least one of the Magdalens, that of 1842, can be found in the set of images of another transgressive holy woman, Joan of Arc, over which Etty labored in his final years. In particular, *Joan of Arc ... is Suffered to be a Martyr*, exhibited in 1847, shows the saint clothed up to her waist but with bare shoulders, clasping a crucifix to her bosom and looking devoutly upward while a confessor holds a crucifix out to her as she waits to burn on the pyre.<sup>20</sup> Etty’s apparent perversity emerges in his sensuous celebration of the martyrdom of a cross-dressing Frenchwoman who had done her best to defeat his own country.

Etty's practices of bricolage may have been distinctive in their use of Catholic objects and imagery, but they can also be seen as having emerged from Protestant traditions, interestingly ones associated with women. For instance, Etty's penitent Magdalens are also influenced by Protestant traditions of depicting women reading the Bible in popular prints. Mary Wilson Carpenter has traced the ways in which publishers, from the mid-eighteenth century, began to print "family-edition" Bibles for reading at home by the paterfamilias, but which, by the early nineteenth century were increasingly promoted to the female consumer (8). The good Protestant wife was, as David Morgan has demonstrated, frequently depicted reading the Bible to her children or, as in the case of a print that may approximately be dated to the 1840s by the prominent American printmaker Nathaniel Currier, reading alone as she remembers her mother and father (depicted in the top right hand corner of the composition).<sup>21</sup> Colleen McDannell has explored this phenomenon in relation to the increasing coding of the domestic space of the home as both feminine and holy.<sup>22</sup> As she explains, "Protestants elaborated a domestic ideology describing the sacred quality of home and family life. Manufacturers accommodated the Protestant desire simultaneously to sanctify and decorate their homes" (57). Thereby, women, excluded from the power structures of mainstream churches, were "leaders of their domestic altars" (38).

Richard Littledale, hailed by at least one contemporary supporter as being as influential as Pusey in the development of early Anglo-Catholic practice, admitted that it initially attracted aristocratic supporters with their "supposed monopoly of aesthetic perceptions," who found delight in "Anglo-Catholicism, with its black-letter learning, its pretty asceticisms, and its religious *bric-à-brac* in the shape of antique calf bindings, velvet faldstools and *prie-Dieus*, and engravings after Overbeck"

(Green-Arymtage 8; Littledale 35). If we view the penitent Magdalens, like the bedroom altar, as still lifes illustrative of Etty's practices of domestic bricolage, we might want to bear in mind Norman Bryson's conception of the "irresolvable ambivalence which gives to feminine space a power of attraction intense enough to motor the entire development of still life as a genre, yet at the same time apprehends feminine space as alien, as a space which menaces the masculine subject to the core of his identity as male" (Bryson 172-73). Such apparently unsystematic assemblages were denounced by the likes of Lushington as "meretricious" because they suggested the seductive dangers of material consumption, which threatened male mastery and subjectivity. This is precisely why Anglican ritualists such as Littledale and the Ecclesiologists labored hard to create authoritative rules to define correct forms of church furnishing. Etty, like Beckford, was seeking to use practices of bricolage to reformulate his masculine self. While Beckford was interested in establishing novel means of expressing same-sex desire, Etty was, as we have seen, involved in a project of flirting with the moral danger of effeminate subservience to the world of alluring objects (including bodies). In the final section of this essay I will explain how this strategy enabled Etty, albeit by unusual means, to participate in a distinctively Victorian desire to combine erotic pleasure and spiritual purity.

### III Conclusions: "Touch me Not!"

Many early Victorian Protestants were exercised by the problem of "fetishism," but what they meant by this was what they tended to think of as a characteristic error of "primitive" peoples: the belief that inanimate objects are alive. Karl Marx made a

famous inversion of this assumption by asserting that primitive beliefs were alive and well in contemporary capitalist valuation of commodities.<sup>23</sup> Marx was not writing in a vacuum. His idea reflected widespread unease over the emergence of mass-produced material culture, a wave of unease that can be said to betray “the uncanniness of things in a society that is simultaneously consumerist and fundamentally anti-materialist, afraid of locating happiness in things” (Pinch 139). How do commodity notions of the fetish shed light on Etty’s penitent Magdalens? We may observe that the boundary between things and people are blurred in these paintings. In the Ashmolean Magdalen the sitter is turned away from us so reducing her status from an identifiable person into a body. One could argue that this objectification is typical of Etty’s nudes and that it is clearly visible in the Victoria and Albert Magdalen. In that painting the sitter shows no obvious reaction to the crucifix at which she is supposedly staring, if only for the obvious reason that, since it (the crucifix) is twice the size of its otherwise identical counterparts in the two other Magdalens, it was probably the same object which was added separately afterwards. Etty had a tendency to talk about his models as animals, that is, as more than a thing but as less than human. He thus described one model in equine terms as follows:

her name is H--, of a fine form and bright colour. I am endeavouring to persuade her to get money in way more artistical: to sit to Artists and Academicians. She would be an acquisition. She sat for me for me for an hour and a half, to make sketches from: and I think she might soon be broken in. (Letter to Mr. Patten, 7 Apr. 1836; qtd. in Gilchrist 2:44)

While he seems to have thought of his models more as objects than as subjects, the objects in his penitent Magdalens, seen through a gothic perspective, bear traces of uncanny subjectivity in so far as skulls and crucifixes are evidence of past life anticipating future reanimation.

Etty was also notorious for his focus on the torsos of his models and his comparative lack of interest in limbs and faces. An interesting parallel here may be with Courbet's 1866 *Origin of the World* that, notoriously, showed a woman's naked lower torso (and not the rest of her). Jennifer Shaw has commented of this painting that:

The presentation of the female body as fetishised object is nothing new to the history of art, but the reduction of the extended body and the extreme focus on the genitalia is certainly a new and graphic development ... [which] points to a new conception of the body as divorced from narrative presentation, a development Courbet helped to bring about. The body as part object is displayed in a void of signification. (478)

What she suggests is that Courbet shocked viewers by exposing the strategies employed in mass-market pornography, which stripped images of any associations other than those of immediate eroticism, which might give them a value on the market as commodities. Thus, she concludes, "Courbet's move makes visible the circuit common to both painting and women, to pornography and the morgue, science and colonisation, the market and the Academy, and the body as it is displayed and circulated, a never-ending, repetitive series of exchanges of visible objects" (481-82). Etty's implication in such commoditization **[au: Do you prefer "commoditization"**

**to “commodification?” Please advise. I don’t mind,** ] is not only evidenced by his mass-production of paintings of the nude, and by the blurring of subject/object divisions in his compositions, but also by his practice of creating nudes out of sections from different models following “his ordinary custom, painting a bit from one, a good point from another” (Gilchrist 2:45). Occasionally, this technique is sufficiently obvious as to evoke models who appear to have been stitched together in some monstrous fashion (Robinson 341).

We know from a letter of 1843 that Etty studied cadavers, and he may have practiced physical as well as scopic dissection (Robinson 347). Such practices outside the medical profession gave rise to widespread moral concerns. When Parliament passed the Obscene Publications Act in 1857, its intention was not specifically the repression of pornography, but to enable the police to more easily prosecute publishers and purveyors of material thought to be dangerous to public morals. Thus, in 1860 Louis Lloyd’s anatomical museum in Leeds was prosecuted under the act in order to prevent the dissemination of allegedly dangerous knowledge of the body.<sup>24</sup> Conceptual “slippage” between surgeons, dissectors, artists, writers, murderers, creators, and destroyers was deeply entrenched in early nineteenth-century culture, as evidenced most famously by Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*.<sup>25</sup> There is, of course, a vast literature on this famous novel, but key issues that might be singled out are confusions between the agency of the creator and of his creation, between the scientist and the artist, between the living and the dead, and between a refined and a monstrous sensibility.<sup>26</sup> Etty was widely spoken of as appearing grotesque (he was “one of the oddest looking creatures,” a “sight,” and would be the “ugliest man in London” if it were not for his refined and gentle nature) (Robinson 351). He could, therefore, be read as another modern Prometheus,

attempting to breathe life into all-too-dead matter through his mass-production of nudes as commodities.

That Etty's artistic practices were an extraordinary substitute for normal modes of reproduction is suggested by a letter to his friends the Bulmers, in which he talks of "seven children, alias Pictures, calling for attention" (Gilchrist 2:81). As the sins of the father were widely considered as being visited on the children, so Etty as monstrous parent could be read as having given birth to a race of fallen women whose attractions were all too evident to him.<sup>27</sup> Thus, he had deliberately placed himself in a position of monstrous inter-relations with his creations, which threatened his destruction as a respectable artist. Yet he was strongly aware that the risen Christ had told Mary Magdalen, "noli me tangere" (John 20:17).<sup>28</sup> It was precisely because he did *not* have sex with his models that Etty can be seen to have been involved in Catholic practices of harnessing sexual desire to the generation of spirituality in a way which was powerfully transgressive in nineteenth-century England.

For many of Etty's critics, spiritual reward was incompatible with eroticized practices of play with the material realm. This is what underlies the denunciation of the *The Times*, for instance, when it described *Phaedria and Cymochles on the Idle Lake* (1835) as a "most disgusting thing ... Phaedria is the true representative of one of the Nymphs of Drury Lane, and Cymochles looks like an unwashed coal-porter" (qtd. in Whitley 299-300). Fetishistic play was more generally understood to lead not to heaven but to orgasm. For instance, in 1864, Hannah Cullwick, who was the servant and lover of Arthur Munby, a civil servant with the Ecclesiastical Commission, was asked to pose as Mary Magdalen (fig. 4).<sup>29</sup> Cullwick, who enjoyed not washing for Munby's pleasure, nevertheless recorded her discomfort at baring her breasts in this image, but went through with it anyway, thus becoming a model for Catholic-

themed pornography. Such kinkiness might seem to have been exceptional, but Danahay has argued that even if such power plays of Munby's were rarely enacted, nevertheless, it can be seen as revealing what was implicit in the mainstream sexual-dynamics of a society that was strongly hierarchical and patriarchal (108).

Edwards has asked the question: "is the visual appearance of homoeroticism only categorically available in artworks depicting same-sex bodily contact more generally, or same-sex genital or anal contact specifically? ... [or] does that not depend on what one imagines an erogenous zone or scene to look like?" (10).

Applying this insight to heterosexual desire, the lesson is that there is no set cadre of erotic images. Cullwick was posed in essentially the same position as the woman in the abovementioned print by Currier, and we may, therefore, assume that a lascivious gaze had been applied to many such items of religious art that appear, on the face of it, to be quite innocuous. It is notable that the picture of Cullwick, like the penitent Magdalens, is "presented in a largely de-narrativized context in which the act of viewing and possessing the body is pre-eminent" (Griffin 71). As such, the subject of the image becomes an eroticized object in the image.

For Etty spiritual triumph was precisely dependent on encountering and resisting the powerfully pornographic potential of visual and material practices that flirted with the semiotic emptiness of commodification. But many of those who, in public, denounced the perversity of Catholic-inspired bricolage, were, in private, also dreaming of ways in which to combine eroticism and spirituality. Thus, he may have sneered at "knick-knacks of devotion," but Charles Kingsley's attacks on what he claimed to see as dilettante Anglo-Catholicism were based on his perception of its failure to unite the flesh and the spirit, as Barker argues:

Whereas Newman and Hopkins largely reasserted a celibate devotional eroticism in which desire is redirected toward Christ, Kingsley, in effect, heralded the arrival of a new god. By sanctifying lovemaking as a manifestation of divinity, Kingsley helped pave ways for theories -- such as Bersani's -- in which sex is implicitly figured as an overwhelming, grace-like force capable of transfiguring the whole social field. We still hope to touch heaven when we lay our hand on a human body. (483)

Etty's practices of bricolage lay him open to effeminate disempowerment at the mercy of the monstrous eroticism of feminine physicality and its fetishized attributes. Such a practice of divine slavery fitted well with Catholic traditions of spiritual subservience but was incompatible with muscular Christian desires, such as those of Kingsley, for the combination of spiritual and erotic mastery. It was one thing for the Magdalen to suffer and be saved, quite another for Newman, Hopkins, Gladstone, or Etty to claim the same exaltation.

In Longleat, Wiltshire, seat of the Marquess of Bath, there hangs a painting entitled *The Fallen Madonna mit ze Big Boobies*. The British Broadcasting Corporation presented it to the 6th Marquess after he had provided assistance with an episode of the popular BBC comedy series *'Allo 'Allo!* (1984-92) set in France during World War Two. This painting appears as a running joke in the series and illustrates a popular notion that much "art" is nothing more than expensive pornography.<sup>30</sup> This essay has argued that we need to look at the debate over Etty's work and reception in terms more complex than those rooted in a set of simplistic oppositions between art and pornography, respectability and dissidence, materialism and spirituality. As Debora Shuger has argued of representations of the Magdalen from the Middle Ages

to the Renaissance, “investigation makes it clear that this schematic contrast between subversive eroticism and puritanical orthodoxy has limited applicability. Even unquestionably orthodox representations of Mary’s conversion exude an erotic fragrance” (168). I have been arguing that Etty’s life and practices are powerfully illustrative of the complicated interactions of production, consumption, sexuality, and religious devotion in the first half of the nineteenth century. Etty’s penitent Magdalens stimulated desire not simply through their display of female semi-nudity, but also because of gothic fetishization of Catholic spiritual attributes and of contemporary feminization of bricolage and bricoleurs. Further work could, therefore, explore the role of material objects in Etty’s personal and religious life, studio practices, and as represented in his artistic output as a whole. While much of his art is likely to have circulated as part of a developing pornographic economy, he himself appears to have been involved in a perverse spiritual project based upon performances of resistance to the very eroticism that he was instrumental in orchestrating. This can be seen to have been the practice of other men attracted to newly emergent forms of Catholic devotion in the Church of England. It can also be viewed as an example of the various nineteenth-century attempts to discover an erotically fulfilling form of religion and a spiritually exalted form of erotic fulfillment.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Society of Arts.

<sup>2</sup> See Gaunt and Roe 22; Robinson 336.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of Etty’s critical reception, see Schedler.

<sup>4</sup> See Janes, “Spiritual cleaning.”

<sup>5</sup> See Hartley.

<sup>6</sup> Aikema 48-49. See also Goffen 173-92.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Loftus. **[au: Would you consider expanding this note to clarify for the reader the relationship between your point and Loftus? ‘For an interesting case study in the importance of acknowledging the variety of religiously oriented gazes, see Loftus.’]**

<sup>8</sup> Hedquist 356. See also Janes, *Victorian Reformation* 149-55.

<sup>9</sup> See Janes, “Sex and text.”

<sup>10</sup> See Janes 35; Reed 57; Yates, *The Oxford Movement* 10 and *Anglican Ritualism* 69.

<sup>11</sup> Moore 26, 32, 41, 45, 48, 50, 52, 54, 55, 73, 76-7 and 81. **[au: If possible, please specify from what pages in Moore the quotations come from and to which pages you are directing the reader for further information. My apologies – not sure what went wrong here. You should delete all page references other than 76-7.]**

<sup>12</sup> See Farr 80 and Hill 327.

<sup>13</sup> Gilchrist 2:73. See also Gaunt and Roe 46-7. John Everett Millais, *Mariana* (1851), shows a domestic altar. Two small triptychs and a censor were owned by Thomas Combe, Millais’s friend, head of the Clarendon Press and a strong adherent of the Oxford Movement. Since the painting was worked on while Millais was staying with Combe, this may be evidence of contemporary practices of domestic altar construction; see Grieve 295.

<sup>14</sup> See Paulson 153-55.

<sup>15</sup> See Kelly 760 and 780-83, figs. 1, 5, and 6.

<sup>16</sup> See “Dilettante,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>17</sup> See Elfenbein 39-62 and Davis, “Homoerotic art collection.”

<sup>18</sup> See “Knick-knacks,” *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>19</sup> See Davis, “Homeroetic art collection.”

<sup>20</sup> Robinson 319. The 1840s saw a wave of cultural enthusiasm in Britain and France for Joan of Arc. See Saunders 590.

<sup>21</sup> See Morgan 109-10.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to McDannell, see also Karusseit.

<sup>23</sup> See McLennan xvii and Marx 42-50.

<sup>24</sup> See Bates.

<sup>25</sup> See Marshall 13.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of these categories in *Frankenstein*, see Wohlpart [au: Does this sentence convey the original intent of the endnote? If not, please revise. Yes I think it does – to make it clearer you may wish to replace the word ‘categories’ with ‘issues’.]

<sup>27</sup> Compare the exploration of the artist as father figure in Balzac’s short story *Le chef d’œuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*) of 1831, in Nead 59.

<sup>28</sup> Etty, *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen* (1834), Tate Gallery, London. [au: It is unclear to what specifically this note refers: Does Etty include the verse in the painting or is his knowledge of the verse clear from his representation? Please specify. The latter. May want to change footnote to - ‘Etty painted his vision of this encounter, *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen* (1834), Tate Gallery, London.’ ]

<sup>29</sup> Reay 86-87 and Haskins 346-47. See also Atkinson.

<sup>30</sup> See Cole.

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## FIGURES

1. William Etty, *The Penitent Magdalen*, 1835, by permission of the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.
2. William Etty, *The Magdalen*, exhibited 1842, by permission of the Tate Gallery, London.
3. William Etty, *Study of a Magdalen*, c. 1845, by permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

4. James Stodart, *Hannah Cullwick as the Magdalen*, 1864 (Munby 114/5a), by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

**[au: For each figure, can you include the medium and dimensions of the painting?] 1. 59x47cm 2. 55x44cm 3. 54x64cm 4. This is a photo from a negative so it can be printed at a range of sizes... I don't know what size this print is but I don't think it matters.**