Soft Touch:  
On the Renaissance Staging and Meaning of the "Noli me tangere" Icon

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In a brief article called "Viola's 'Do Not Embrace Me' as Icon," published in the December 1988 issue of Notes and Queries, I argue that Viola's admonition to her newly recovered twin Sebastian in act 5.1.251 of Twelfth Night alludes to the episode in John 20:11-17 where Mary Magdalen, in search of the crucified body of Christ, mistakes the resurrected Christ for the gardener. During a short catechism, Jesus implies the inappropriateness of Mary's tears with the question that, just before, the angels attending the tomb have posed to her: "Woman, why weepest thou?" When Christ calls her by name, she recognizes him as "Rabboni" (Master), and he immediately warns her, "Touch me not" ("Noli me tangere") because, he says, "I am not yet ascended to my Father." He instructs her to find the disciples and inform them that she has seen Christ resurrected. Viola's words to Sebastian include several features of this biblical passage. At first, Viola and Sebastian do not recognize one another. They catechize one another, almost absurdly, about parentage and birthmarks to establish who they are. Most telling, once Cesario has been identified as Viola, she forbids Sebastian to touch her until her female identity has been fully restored:

If nothing lets to make us happy both
Than this my masculine usurp'd attire,
Do not embrace me till each circumstance
Of place, time, fortune, do cohere and jump
That I am Viola—which to confirm,
I'll bring you to a captain in this town,
Where lie my maiden weeds; by whose gentle help
I was preserv'd to serve this noble count.

(5.1.249–56)²
In a subsequent essay, Yu Jin Ko, taking the allusion in Viola’s speech to Christ’s “Noli me tangere” for granted, refers to Viola’s “do not embrace me” as a “gesture of repulse” that qualifies as “an internal stage direction.” For Ko, Viola’s delay of Sebastian’s embrace works into the play’s larger concern with longing, and Ko elaborates on many instances in the play when desire dies just as it is achieved. Ko’s reading ultimately focuses on Viola’s repulse of Sebastian’s embrace but not on the two other parallels between the passages: the matter of mistaken identity and the questioning between parties. The result is an engaging interpretation of the play but an incomplete study of an embedded stage direction that, I shall argue, is richly informed by its medieval dramatic history and by contemporary Northern Renaissance images of the “Noli me tangere” icon. Close examination of these associations also suggests that the icon lies embedded at the close of *The Winter’s Tale*.

The “Noli me tangere” icon appears in European liturgical drama as early as the twelfth century, where it is part of the Type III *Visitatio sepulchri*, in which the three Marys and the disciples Peter and John visit Christ’s tomb, only to find it empty. The icon persists in the Towneley mystery cycle, where it is included as part of the Resurrection play, as well as in the Digby manuscript’s *Mary Magdalen*, a saint play. It also forms part of the Resurrection play in two manuscripts of the Chester mystery cycle,4 appears in the N-Town cycle, and was likely a feature of the Coventry pageants, which the Cappers’ took over from the Weavers’ in 1531, although this and other probable inclusions are now lost.5 Dramatic records from Coventry suggest that the *hortulanus* scene from John’s Gospel remained part of the performance until 1579, when the plays were suppressed.6 The records also list costumes, properties, wigs, and the like throughout much of the sixteenth century for the three Marys and, in particular, a costume identified in an inventory as “mary maudlyns goune” remaining as late as 1591.7 That the icon provided a source of continuous cultural interest in sixteenth-century Northern Europe—an interest that bridged the Reformation—is attested by the numerous Northern Renaissance popular prints of the subject, most of them by Protestant artists.8

The history of the icon in the religious drama seems largely determined by two gaps in the biblical narrative. One is the lack of explanation in John for Mary Magdalen’s mistaking Christ for the gardener. The
other is the lack of a clear motive for Christ’s command to Mary, “Do not touch me.” Exploring both lacunae can inform an understanding of how the icon was staged in a late-sixteenth-century Shakespearean play.

The question of why Mary mistakes Christ for the gardener is answered differently by two traditions, thus resulting in alternate meanings of the icon. Perhaps the more obvious of these is that Mary’s mortal eyes are faulty. This reasoning is supported by the translation’s wording in both the Geneva and Bishops’ Bibles, which have Mary “supposing” Christ to be the gardener. It is to be found in both medieval and Renaissance sources as well as in modern critical works. For example, the Roman Catholic martyr Robert Southwell, who was arrested north of London after having said Mass and finally was executed in 1595, makes much of the contrast between the Magdalen’s physical perception and the internal vision necessary to recognizing Christ when he is standing before her. In his treatise Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares of 1591, he explains that Mary’s “faith was unworthy to know him [Christ].” Southwell promises her that eventually she will know him through her faith: “what thy eye then seeth not, thy heart shall feele, and my silent parly wil find audience in thy inward eare.” Southwell adds plenty of justification for Mary’s failure to recognize Christ: she is not, he says, to be blamed for being mortal; she is a charitable soul who loves Christ with all her heart; and, if she mistook Christ for a gardener, she was not all wrong, since, in a figurative sense, he is indeed a second Adam come to redeem the first fallen gardener by planting virtue in humanity and weeding out sin. Still, Southwell holds Mary responsible for the misperception, as does Gail McMurray Gibson, writing about the same icon in Chaucer’s “Shipman’s Tale”: “So preoccupied was Mary Magdalen with the empty tomb, says the Gospel, that she at first mistook her risen Lord for the gardener.” The wording of this sentence is a bit tricky with regard to cause and effect: the Gospel does indeed imply that Mary was preoccupied with the body’s whereabouts and indeed says that she mistook Christ for the gardener, but it does not say that she misperceived because she was thus preoccupied.

The absence of clear explanation as to why the mistaken identity occurs gives rise to another, opposed tradition—that Mary Magdalen failed to recognize Christ because he was disguised in a gardener’s costume. If Christ appears to Mary in a gardener’s outfit, then her misperception of his iden-
tity is another matter entirely from her own weakness: she cannot be held responsible for it. In the twelfth-century Fleury Playbook that is possibly from the Abbaye St. Benoît de Fleury at St. Benoît-sur-Loire, Christ encounters Mary in a gardener's costume, which he removes at the end of the "Noli me tangere" episode—whereupon he reappears to the three Marys in his divine form.\textsuperscript{13} This blatant shift in Christ's identity reappears in a fifteenth-century Visitatio from Coutances in which, upon hearing from Mary that she is seeking the Lord, Christ withdraws and, quickly returning without his gardener's disguise, wears instead a silk cloak or pallium ("capa serica vel pallio serico") and holds a cross.\textsuperscript{14} He says her name, and she identifies him as "Raboni!"\textsuperscript{15} The editors of the new Early English Text Society edition of the Towneley mystery plays assume that the Christ in that cycle's Resurrection play wore a gardener's costume during the encounter with Mary Magdalen, although no reference to a change of dress occurs in the play's text. Their assumption is based, they say, on the "various contemporary visual representations" of Christ as a gardener.\textsuperscript{16}

Not all Renaissance illustrations of Christ as gardener, however, suggest that he is actually disguised. Where he does not seem literally disguised, his gardener's identity serves instead as a symbol. The engraving by Cornelis Cort, a sixteenth-century Dutch printmaker who reveals Italian influence, leans more toward a naturalistic rendering of a person in costume (fig. 1). Christ wears a gardener's sun hat and holds a spade. His gesture to Mary, as she reaches toward him, is ambiguous: although he is technically avoiding her touch, he could easily be perceived as reaching back toward her. In another image, one of Dürer's renditions, Christ again wears the gardener's hat and holds the spade, but he extends his hand to Mary so that she may see his stigma, evidence that he is the crucified Lord, now risen (fig. 2). This woodcut seems more about proving Christ's identity than confusing it in Mary's sight. Another sixteenth-century woodcut, by German artist Jost Amman, similarly depicts Christ in a hat, with a spade, and holding his hand up to reveal his palm (fig. 3). Yet this hand does not appear to bear a stigma and, though it may be admonishing her from touching him, could also be raised in salutation. (I am taking the marks on the joints of his hands to be dimples, not stigmata, because Mary Magdalen has similar marks on her hand.) As in Cort's engraving, Amman's Christ would seem to be playing a role for his audience of one. Another, sparer woodcut with Dürer's insignia (now attributed to
Fig. 1. Cornelis Cort, Noli me tangere. By Permission of Abaris Books.
Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, Noli me tangere (The Small Passion). By permission of Abaris Books.
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Schäuflein) dispenses with the hat, retains only the spade, and positions Christ's hands in the act of blessing Mary as well as perhaps greeting her (fig. 4). That Christ is attempting to cover his identity in this woodcut is unlikely. Rather, the spade appears to be functioning allegorically.

In an article about the spade as a medieval stage property, Steven May has shown that the spade is frequently brought onstage to identify Adam or to link all humanity with him. In many cases, the spade "signif[ies] the bitter necessity of toil for the Fallen Man," writes May, while it can also represent the antithesis of, or even antidote to, the sin of sloth. Although May does not discuss the significance of the spade in Christ's hand in the hortulanus scene, it clearly identifies the Savior as the second Adam. As Southwell writes in Marie Magdalen's Funeral Teares:

In a garden Adam was deceived, and taken captive by the divell. In a Garden Christ was betrayed and taken prisoner by the Jewes.... By disobedient eating the fruite of a tree, our right to that Garden was by Adam forfeited, and by the obedient death of Christ upon a tree, a farre better right is now recovered.

If the spade is Adam's instrument of toil, it is Christ's means of planting God's virtue in the hearts of mortals. Writes Gibson: "That the meeting between Christ and Mary Magdalen occurs in a garden was of great interest to medieval exegetes, who interpreted the garden as the typological perfection of Adam's fallen garden or as a moral emblem of mankind's own soul." For Nicholas Love, whose early fifteenth-century Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ is a translation of a popular Tuscan devotional text from the preceding century, Christ's identity as a gardener symbolized his cultivation of Mary's spirituality: "oue oure lorde was not bodily a gardinere. neuerles as pe same clerke gregore seip, he was so in sope gostly to hir. For he was, pat plantede in hir herte pe plantes of vertues & trewe loues." So intertwined in the medieval imagination were Adam and Christ as gardeners that Patricia M. King and Clifford Davidson, editors of the recent edition of the Coventry Corpus Christi plays, suggest that the "spade" entered for Adam in the Coventry Cappers' accounts of 1591 "could have been used [by Christ] for the [hortulanus] scene as well."

Whether or not Christ's spade carries quite the same allegorical weight in the more naturalistic images where he appears obviously engaged in role-playing is, I think, debatable. The interest that dominates in
these prints seems to be less in Christ's divinity than in his humanity—even more specifically, in his artistry. He is, after all, in disguise, deliberately playing with Mary’s perception. That the costume of gardener could carry such significance in both Renaissance images and medieval drama is indicated by a liturgical play from thirteenth-century Rouen in which the canons are called upon to impersonate the three Marys as well as Christ. After the actors playing Christ and Mary Magdalen exchange the speeches leading up to “Noli me tangere,” Christ disappears behind the left side of the altar and reappears on the right side, as if now in divine form, to speak to all three Marys. The theatrical self-consciousness of this slender playscript—especially the implicit contrast between mortal/divine incarnations and roles played at particular places “onstage”—reveals a connection in the imagination of the play’s creator(s) between Christ’s interaction with Mary and actors discharging their parts. A similar the-
atrial consciousness attends the moment in the Digby Mary Magdalen when, distinguishing between her ethereal and human selves, Mary, assisted by an angel, exchanges her white robe for something presumably more earthly: "Here Mari woydyt, and pe angyll and Mary chongg hyr clotheyng...."23 Her transformation from role to role—identity to identity—is indicated by what she wears.24

Although referring to Christ's "deception" in his gardener's costume may raise eyebrows, that is exactly what I believe is going on in the Renaissance prints where he is fully immersed in that role and toying with Mary

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Fig. 4. Albrecht Dürer (attributed to Schäuflein), Noli me tangere. By Permission of Abaris Books.
Magdalen’s vision. This reading of Christ’s disposition toward Mary is suggested by medieval visionary Margery Kempe, who says that Christ appeared to Mary Magdalen “in lekenes of a gardener,” eventually revealing himself to her by calling her name when he felt “pity and compassion for her.” Rather than lowering himself in the viewer’s esteem through such impersonation, however, he may be legitimating and ennobling role-playing in a way to which post-Reformation English playwrights would have warmed. Indeed, I want to argue that popular images of Christ fooling Mary Magdalen as to his identity persist in post-Reformation Northern Europe largely because they offer self-referential legitimation of religious images in a culture that was sometimes ambivalent, sometimes scornful toward such images. If Christ can practice artistry, these images implicitly ask, why can’t mortal artists? On this basis alone, the icon, as it had evolved both visually and theatrically in the sixteenth century, would be at home in Renaissance English drama, whose legitimacy was perpetually being questioned on religious and moral grounds.

Huston Diehl offers a framework for understanding how a Reformed appropriation of a medieval religious icon might have participated in the virtual remaking of religious images when she points out that “the iconophobia that characterizes so much of Reformation culture is, in a very real sense, the function of the iconophilia that pervades Western culture at the dawning of the modern age.” Whatever the express subjects of Reformed religious images may be, in other words, those images are often caught up as well in the matter of their own (of all art’s) legitimacy. In Diehl’s words, “the religious controversies surrounding the images and rituals of the medieval Church [raise issues] about representation, art, theatricality, spectacle, interpretation, and imagination [that also] clearly pertain to the drama.” Rather than rejecting religious images outright, Diehl argues, Reformed artists and dramatists alike reinvented “the complex system of symbols by which people in the late Middle Ages understood their world,” thereby “affecting the way the English people viewed images, engaged in ritual practices, interpreted the physical world, and experienced theater.” If, as Diehl contends, “the traditional religion in the fifteenth century continues to manifest itself in the sixteenth century,” rather than disappear entirely, members of a Renaissance audience might be expected to be attuned to a late-medieval
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icon—especially one that had endured in mystery plays through much of the sixteenth century and in seventeenth-century prints—as well as to the issues about human artistry associated with the icon.

It is within this framework, perhaps, that the visual and dramatic history of the "Noli me tangere" icon can be best appreciated. While the European interest in Christ as a potential model for the human player dates back to at least the thirteenth century, as in the *Visitatio sepulchri* from Rouen noticed above, that element of the icon appears to assume new meaning in a culture for which the practice of visual and theatrical artistry is in itself a source of conflict. Although not all Northern Renaissance images of the icon focus on Christ's role-playing, those that do suggest the appropriateness of the icon's inclusion in a Renaissance play that holds the practice of human artistry as a central concern. More specifically, in *Twelfth Night* disguise and other forms of artistry are constantly under moral scrutiny. Viola, who characterizes disguise as a "wickedness / Wherein the pregnant enemy does much," nevertheless clings to her identity as Cesario long after she is certain that Olivia has her gender wrong and stands to be hurt by her mistaken perception (2.2.27–28). Feste's later disguise as Sir Topas is equally dubious, especially in that it is superfluous to duping Malvolio (4.2.64–65). Feste's closing song, depicting the play itself as a "pleasing" antidote to the "rain" of everyday life, implicitly questions the purposes of drama: does it represent life or delude the audience about life (5.1.389–408)?

But the recognition scene between Viola and Sebastian in act 5, scene 1, an icon of John 20:14–17, does far more than underline the play's questioning of artistry. Most obviously, it enriches a secular moment of reunion, already rich in wonder, with reference to a corresponding biblical encounter, also full of wonder. The icon, informing and deepening a dramatic moment, implies that the reunion of family members is somehow sacred. In addition, it calls attention to the play's interest in identity through Viola's command to Sebastian not to embrace her until she has changed her clothes. Its capacity to do so traces back to the other lacuna in the biblical narrative: Christ's purpose in commanding Mary not to touch him, which is left mysterious. This lacuna, too, avails itself of two opposing interpretations that account for disparate readings of the icon.

Glosses in the Geneva and Bishops' Bibles assume that Christ's "Noli
me tangere" is aimed at Mary's worldliness: "Because she was to muche addicted to the corporal presence, Christ teacheth her to lift vp her minde by faith into heaven where onely after his ascension he remaineth, & where we sit with him at ye right hand of the Father." Gibson expresses a similar understanding about Christ's purpose: "[Christ] urges Mary not to rely on the tangible proof of the sensory world, but to believe in the spiritual mystery." In a fascinating discussion of the hortulanus scene as the foundation of the anonymous medieval poem Pearl, Lynn Staley [Johnson] concurs: "Mary's dialogue with Christ was thought to have suggested a new way of seeing the world around her, of seeing it as a sign of another, more real, world."

As valid as this explanation obviously was in the sixteenth century—witness the authority of not one, but two prominent Bibles from the period—it does not clearly match the wording of the biblical passage: "Touche me not," reads the Geneva Bible, "for I am not yet ascended to my Father...." The word "for" suggests that Mary should not touch him because he has not ascended to heaven—reasoning different from that involving Mary's inadequate earthly perspective. Although the difference may at first seem slight, it is actually substantial because in the one case the reason for not touching lies with Mary's weakness, but in the other case it lies in Christ's not having come into his ultimate divine identity. In the first case, Christ is likely criticizing Mary and, in Ko's word, "repuls[ing]" her embrace. In the latter, Christ's words are more explanatory than chiding.

Many of the liturgical plays from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries would seem to adopt the latter understanding of Christ's injunction. The exchange of the gardener's costume for the robes of divinity—depicted in such plays as the fifteenth-century Visitatio from Coutances—makes even more explicit the notion suggested by the thirteenth-century play from Rouen in which the canon impersonating Christ travels around the altar, from the left to the right side, to signify his changed identity. In these instances, although Mary presumably never touches Christ, he nevertheless transforms from his mortal shape, in which he originally meets Mary, to his divine incarnation, in which he often closes a liturgical play by addressing the three Marys. This interpretation of "Noli me tangere" is also, I think, visible in all four prints of the
icon that I have already referenced: in each, Christ is not so much repulsing Mary as engaging with her, whether by manifesting the stigma on his palm (fig. 2) or by a gesture such as greeting (fig. 3), blessing (fig. 4), or, as in the Cort engraving, half reaching back toward Mary (fig. 1). Cort’s work visually echoes the characteristically beautiful engraving (late-fifteenth-century) by Martin Schongauer (fig. 5). Schongauer’s Christ is not made out as a gardener, but the configuration of hands in the image, like that in Cort’s rendering, suggests the paradox of not touching while reaching to touch—not a rebuff, but something more complex.
Most of these prints, in fact, feature the act of witnessing. Despite what Christ may imply in John’s Gospel about the inadequacy of physical touch as proof, he is repeatedly shown to be displaying his stigmata or extending his hand to Mary in greeting, thus validating his existence and identity. John’s account concludes when Christ enjoins Mary to bear witness of his resurrection to the disciples, whereby she becomes his first and, according to some traditions, foremost apostle. Time and again, Northern Renaissance images of the icon document the dramatic moment in which Mary sees the physical proof right before her eyes that will enable her to preach the Gospel and that will eventually parallel Christ’s revealing his mortal wounds to the doubting Thomas. Neither rebuking nor repulsing Mary for her inadequacies, Christ is preparing her to represent him in this world by augmenting her understanding of what has transpired and what is to come. The popular images gathered here tend to imply a mysterious union between two figures who have yet to be physically joined—one of the figures, in some cases, even receiving the blessing of the other.

This reading of Christ’s “Noli me tangere,” in which he gently instructs Mary about his mortal and divine forms, more readily reflects the stage business of Twelfth Night 5.1 than does an interpretation in which Christ is rejecting Mary. Viola’s “Do not embrace me” certainly can be performed as a repulse, but need not be. Instead of an implied criticism or rejection of Sebastian, it can be played as an explanation to her brother that resonates with Christ’s similar words to Mary. Rather than suggest displeasure or ambivalence at having Sebastian restored to her, Viola may well indicate to him—and to the larger audience—that, glad as she is to see him, she will not be fully restored to her brother until she is fully restored to herself and as herself. Stephen Orgel recognizes the significance of Viola’s maiden’s weeds in establishing her identity:

The flummery at the conclusion of Twelfth Night about the impossibility of proceeding with the marriage of Orsino and Viola … until Viola’s clothes have been found declares in the clearest possible way that, whatever Viola says about the erotic realities of her inner life, she is not a woman unless she is dressed as one…. Clothes make the woman, clothes make the man: the costume is of the essence.

Much as Mary Magdalen never touches the resurrected Christ in John’s Gospel, so Viola never embraces Sebastian within the play’s scope. Yet
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the audience of neither story doubts that both embraces will happen, even if Mary's occurs in heaven, on the right hand of God.

The choice of a less rejecting "Do not embrace me" in production indirectly addresses Ko's sense that the internal stage direction in that line is hardly ever observed in performance. Although, as Ko points out, many productions ignore Viola's request altogether, allowing Viola and Sebastian to embrace, an alternative is available: a staging in which Viola and Sebastian come physically close together without actually touching does not necessarily ignore the stage direction and, as I have shown, finds a close correlative in Northern Renaissance visual renderings of the same icon. It is also in keeping with the prevailing joy at discovery and recovery at the play's end, although that joy is not without its challenges. More to the point, however, the icon embedded in the twins' encounter may have less to do with unfulfilled desire than with the matter of unfulfilled identity, a salient preoccupation in Twelfth Night. The dominant effect of the icon, in other words, may be to call attention to personal development, even if the end point of the maturation is never shown or clearly defined. As the play's very title suggests, Twelfth Night participates in numerous epiphanic processes for which Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalen without fully revealing himself is a fitting parallel. Viola's misleading disguise as a male resembles Christ's as the gardener; both must undergo a last change before becoming what they essentially are. Yet what, exactly, it will mean for Viola to become a woman again—played, as the character is, by a young male—may be every bit as mysterious to the audience as what, exactly, it means for Christ to ascend to his Father.

The embedded icon in Twelfth Night, as I have been discussing it here, enmeshes the twins' encounter in issues of art's legitimacy, of mistaken identity, and of personal fulfillment. The stage direction for which it calls in Viola's refusal to be embraced on the spot is less likely a rejection than a reassuring delay. This understanding of the icon is reinforced by a similar occurrence of the same device at the end of The Winter's Tale, another play that vigorously interrogates the legitimacy and uses of art. Although the conflicting claims to the authority of nature and art are most obviously debated in act 4, scene 4, when the disguised Polixenes defends the moral virtue of art to the disguised Perdita, the same questions hover around Paulina's art by which Hermione is restored to her family and by
which Leontes's suffering is aggravated. Paulina is fulfilling the Oracle of Apollo by forbidding Leontes to marry and by preserving Hermione until Perdita is recovered, but not all of her actions in the name of art are so obviously legitimate—in particular, her strident rebuke of Leontes upon the sudden "deaths" of Mamillius and Hermione: "Do not repent these things, for they are heavier / Than all thy woes can stir; therefore betake thee/To nothing but despair" (3.2.208-10). Paulina's recommendation of the unpardonable sin of despair to a sinner places her motives and character in some question. The play's final scene, then, stands to arbitrate between views of human artistry as, on the one hand, arrogant and as, on the other hand, sufficiently humble to assist the divine plan revealed by the Oracle.

Hermione's reappearance in the likeness of a statue in act 5, scene 3, is another instance of resurrection, in this case as unexpected to the first-time audience as to the characters. The implicit comparison between Hermione and divinity is furthered when one remembers that the Oracle at Delphi was represented by a statue, as revealed in an anonymous Renaissance image after Goltzius (1558-1617), the prodigious Renaissance engraver of German descent (fig. 6). That association, in turn, helps explain why the process by which Hermione has been preserved and is eventually resurrected—the extent to which Paulina has involved herself and that to which Hermione has herself been responsible—is shrouded in mystery. Although Hermione eventually attests that she has "preserved" herself (5.3.127-28), just how she has done so, particularly after the audience has heard Paulina vow sixteen years earlier that she is dead (3.2.203-04), is a prospect as unfathomable as Christ's triumph over death. Moreover, that Hermione is first presented as a statue in this scene suggests Shakespeare's nostalgia for Catholic tradition as well as, once again, his legitimation of palpable icons that date from before the Reformation.

The statue scene revolves around not touching the one who is newly brought back from death and whose identity is also mistaken, if only technically. Twice Paulina forbids others to touch the statue, once telling Perdita that its paint is wet and next warning Leontes that he will "mar" the statue's lips and "stain" his own with paint if he dares to kiss it (5.3.46-48, 80-83). As in the final scene of *Twelfth Night*, attention is focused on not embracing, not touching, until the object of affection has fulfilled
her identity. Once Paulina calls for “Music” to “awake her,” Hermione stirs and descends from the pedestal, on which she was figured and preserved as artifice, to become her fully realized human self (5.3.98, 103). Now Paulina invites touching, urging Hermione to “present” her “hand” to the husband who wooed her in his youth (5.3.107-08). Leontes, coming close enough to her to sense her “warmth,” wishes the “art” that has brought Hermione back to life to prove “as lawful as eating” (5.3.109-11). Polixenes’ next remark delivers a stage direction for Hermione: “She embraces him!” (5.3.11). Camillo adds, “She hangs about his neck!” (5.3.112). Hermione’s return to her former life and identity is complete; she is ready to touch and be touched.

That touching actually occurs in this play differs from the instances in both Twelfth Night and the biblical narrative. In The Winter’s Tale, moreover, the injunction against touching is delivered by a third party,
Paulina, who must serve as Hermione's voice until she “bequeath[s] to death” her “numbness” (5.3.103). Otherwise, however, the elements in this episode bear striking resemblance to those in both the encounter between Viola and Sebastian and John 20:14–17 where identity is mistaken, touch is forbidden, and personal identity awaits final realization. Paulina's orchestration of the scene can be staged as bossy and overbearing, but the internal evidence in the scene suggests that instead her tone is subtly seductive—in keeping with the reading of the “Noli me tangere” stage direction as gently didactic rather than repulsive or judgmental. Paulina aims to tantalize Leontes and Perdita with the possibility that Hermione might be alive. Her wording repeatedly seems designed to increase her audience's attraction to the statue, not to turn them away from it. Even her offers to “draw the curtain” around the statue enhance the audience's desire to gaze more in wonder of the statue's life-likeness (5.3.56–59, 68–70, 83). As Paulina arouses the other characters' interest, she also teaches them how to further Hermione's transformation into her former self. Urging them to “awake” their “faith” so that Hermione may also awaken, Paulina evokes not only the apostle who is her namesake but also Christ's catechistic disposition toward Mary in John 20 (5.3.95). In both passages, faith in resurrection itself is “requir'd” (5.3.94).

In *The Winter's Tale*, that faith also “redeems” in at least this peculiar sense: when Hermione returns to life, her family having proved their readiness to receive her, she is brought back from a death that is associated with human artistry through her paralysis as statuary (5.3.103). As if art has outworn its usefulness, it is given over as surely in this play as it is in the liturgical dramas where Christ forsakes his gardener's costume for his divinity and as it is in *Twelfth Night*, where it is no longer sustainable. As E. Catherine Dunn writes about the “Noli me tangere” icon in the Towneley Resurrection play, it serves as “the most crucial dramatic moment in the entire cycle, for it is the peripeteia (in the Aristotelian sense), the recognition and reversal that suddenly transform the passion catastrophe into a glorious fulfillment.” That fulfillment means the shedding of earthly trappings, whether the corporeal body or the art it wears and makes.

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NOTES


2 Quotations from Shakespeare’s plays as cited in my text are from The Riverside Shakespeare, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).


During a research seminar in which I participated at a recent Shakespeare Association of America conference (April 2001), a question was raised about whether Viola’s embrace can be considered an allusion to Christ’s tangere, since tangere would more properly be translated touch. I do not feel, however, that Viola’s use of embrace, rather than touch, calls the existence of a biblical allusion into question. For one thing, embrace scans; touch would not. For another, the two words are interchangeable in the last scene of The Winter’s Tale, a passage I discuss below; they are, apparently, synonymous for Shakespeare. Finally, to expect a direct translation in the allusion (when a perfectly clear synonym appears instead) may well be to expect more than the ordinary allusion involves, as well as more than Shakespeare characteristically provides in his appropriation of sources. I am not arguing that the icon in Twelfth Night reveals a one-to-one correspondence to every detail in John 20, but rather that it involves a few carefully selected correspondences to its source.


6 Records of Early English Drama: Coventry, ed. R. W. Ingram (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 334 (hereafter cited as REED: Coventry); King and Davidson, eds., The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays, 40. The suppression of the pageants in 1579 is reported in the City Annals, quoted in REED: Coventry, 294: “this yeare the padgins were layd downe.”


8 The Victoria and Albert Museum also houses two English alabaster carvings of this icon, one of them, from the fifteenth century, revealing Christ fully outfitted as a gardener, with both a gardener’s hat and a spade; see Francis Cheetham, English Medieval Alabasters (Oxford: Phaidon-Christie’s, 1984), nos. 211–12.

9 Robert Southwell, Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholar’s Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), 47.

10 Ibid., 62.

11 Ibid., 46–47.


Ibid., 1:409.

Ibid., 1:409.


Gibson, “Resurrection as Dramatic Icon,” 108.


King and Davidson, eds., *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 40; *REED: Coventry*, 334.

Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1:370-71.


The entire story of Mary Magdalen, whether in *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine or the Digby play, constitutes what Theresa Coletti has recently referred to as her “spiritual transformation” (“Paupertas est donum Dei: Hagiography, Lay Religion, and the Economics of Salvation in the Digby Mary Magdalen,” *Speculum* 76 [2001]: 362). Coletti discusses that transformation in the intriguing terms of late medieval East Anglian spiritual economics.


Ibid., 4.

Ibid., 4.


Gibson, “Resurrection as Dramatic Icon,” 110.


John 20:17; italics mine.


Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1:408–10.
Two recent studies of medieval views of Mary Magdalen discuss her subordination in Church history as both preacher and apostolorum apostola. Susan Haskins (Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993]) shows how Thomas Aquinas adjusts his interpretation of the story in John 20 to justify women’s exclusion from preaching:

Aquinas carefully explains that although the women had seen the risen Christ first because of their great love, their subordinate position prevented them from announcing publicly that they had seen him. They had indeed been the first witnesses but did not preach the good news. Instead they had told the apostles who had themselves become witnesses to the people: it was preaching which made witness public, and preaching was not a woman’s function.... Thomas further argues that because Mary Magdalen did not actually see Christ rise, her witness to the resurrection was in some way diminished. Proscription against public witness is, according to Thomas, the reason for Christ’s saying ‘Noli me tangere’ to Mary Magdalen, as against his allowing Thomas the Apostle to touch his side, since Thomas as a male would become a witness to the people, and his reliability as a preacher would not be questioned. (178–79)

Katherine Ludwig Jansen analyzes Mary Magdalen’s stature in the Church relative to St. Peter’s: “Though Mary Magdalen may have been apostolorum apostola, it was never to be forgotten that Peter, prince of the apostles, represented the authority of the institutional Church.... [T]he Magdalen, though deemed a great preacher and miracle worker in her own right, was not to be regarded as an ecclesiastical authority” (The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000], 189).


Ibid., 391–92.

A possible third instance of the “Noli me tangere” icon in Shakespeare’s canon occurs at the conclusion of The Tempest. Prospero, newly resurrected to the sight of Gonzalo and the “three men of sin,” draws a circle, within which he can protect himself from his enemies Sebastian and Antonio but also touch the kind Gonzalo, to whom he says, “Let me embrace thine age” (5.1.121). Incidentally, in this same scene, when the comedic Stephano is brought onstage, he cries out, “O, touch me not;—I am not Stephano, but a cramp” (5.1.286–87). I wonder whether this is a comic appropriation of an icon cum stage direction familiar enough to the audience members that they would appreciate the allusion.
