

The Madonna's body: The social construction of a neutralized body

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Abstract

This paper deals with the statue without female forms of Our Lady of Maidens, kept in the parish church of Civitella Roveto in the Abruzzo region, in Italy. After describing the religious rituals involving the statue of this Virgin in order to shed light on her title, the study goes on to analyze vernacular discourses about her and explore the prohibition regarding the touching of her body. The symbolic aspects of the shapeless body of the statue are then investigated and discussed in the light of Marian, anthropological, sociological, and feminist literature, considering them a specific device for expelling female sexual desire from the domain of fertility. The article, focused on the body of the Madonna, hopes to contribute to studies in religious materiality as well as to studies in the social construction of gender inequality.

Keywords

Virgin, body, gender, taboo, ritual, folk religion, Christianity

Preamble

The cultus of the Virgin Mary has been a key aspect in the history of devotional life within the Roman Catholic Church. Over the centuries, her figure has begun to represent a “system of values”: purity, chastity, femininity, maternity, royalty, and power—as emblem of the same church. Particular attention was focused on her body, which became the repository of these values (Iogna-Pratt et al., 1996: 5, 175, 183). However, I would clarify that the entity worshipped in folk religion with the name of Madonna is distinct from the Mary discussed by theologians. Her proper title derives from a specific place, miracle, or object-emblem, thus she is considered unique to her community and is a main subject of local worship. Although the Madonnas of folk devotions are considered to be different from the Mary of theologians,

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their aspects, attributes, and iconographies must inevitably interact with theologians' assertions and priests' directives. Thus, even though popular devotion and theological reflections express different levels of worship and different interpretations of the sacred, they interact continuously, and in certain ways overlap, in terms of obedience, mediation, hybridization, or even conflict.¹

Over the years, the image of the body of the Virgin tended, increasingly, to become evanescent in European representations. The images of *Maria Lactans*, where part of the breast can be seen during the nursing of the Holy Child, were discontinued from the sixteenth century onward (Jansen and Dresen, 2012: 225–228; Warner, 1990: 203–204). Moreover, it is important to draw attention to the shift in the iconography of the Virgin also in the production of statues for folkloric worships. The emergence of a new model for the representation of the body of the Madonnas is traced back to the Counter-Reformation, when the reactionary movement emphasized the veneration of Mary and her virginity as a clear reaction against the rationalizing Lutheran Reform (Accati, 1986; Jansen and Dresen, 2012: 227; Warner, 1990: 298, 312, 329). Moreover, Albert-Llorca (2010: 9) also reports the synodal act published at Vich (Catalonia) in 1628:

from this point onwards, such images, vulgarly referred to as *de bulto* (full relief), could not be represented totally naked, either by statue makers or sculptors, especially the *pudenda*, in order to ensure that they were not lacking in their honor (*my translation*).

As a consequence, Virgins with a shapeless body, the Virgins-poles, appeared.²

The case study

I will try to explore the symbolic meaning and the social relevance of the statues with a shapeless body of the Madonnas on the basis of the analysis of the Virgin kept in the church of an Italian village, Civitella Roveto, whose identity oscillates among “*Madonna delle Zitelle*” (Our Lady of Maidens), “*Nome di Maria*” (Name of Mary), and “*Madonna del Buon Consiglio*” (Our Lady of Good Counsel), and who is central to several processions in the ritual cycle of the community.

Many statues of the Virgin found in churches across Italy consist of a simple wooden pole with a face and hands and some can even be disassembled (Arduini, 2010; Silvestrini, 2010; Pagnozzato et al., 2003). This form of the Virgin's body is quite common in southern Italian regions. Nevertheless, there is no manifest reason why the body of the Virgin must be without female forms, while most of the male saint statues that are carried in processions have a fully structured, wood carved body. I will thus begin to inquire about the relationship between the representation of these shapeless Madonnas and theological and gender politics.

I studied the ethnographic data in depth using contextualized discourse analysis and combining anthropological and historical perspectives (Tak, 2000). Thus, the body of the Madonna will be understood as a field of relations that extend to different levels. On the first level there are the local Marian processions, and their changes over the last century, read in the light of the pertaining socioeconomic context, according to the hypothesis suggested by Bianco of “relations between festival expressions and socio-economic structure” (Bianco and Del Ninno, 1981: X). On a second plane of analysis there is the vernacular discourse set around the shape of the statue, the dimension of materiality in the worship of Mary, as introduced by Jansen and Dresen (2012), and the taboo surrounding the body of this Madonna, which I will discuss on the basis of the concepts of “purity and danger” as

elaborated by Douglas (1966). In a more ideological sphere, there is the relation with the overall cultus of the Virgin Mary in Europe, from which both theological dissertations and folk worships will be drawn, borrowing the overall interpretation of Warner (1990), and the lecture of the body of Mary as a model for western women, as suggested by feminist approaches, and its implications in the social construction of gender inequality (Scott, 1986).

I did not ask my female informants directly about the way in which they experience the relationship with the Madonna's body, and between the Virgin's ideal and their own sexual behavior, because that aspect concerns an excessively private and delicate sphere, about which they had a marked reticence. Therefore, I prefer to focus on the "agency" of the object on the *habitus*, reading in the sacred body of the statue the inscription of the structure of the cosmos, of the social order, and of the political division, given as a "natural-supernatural code" (Bourdieu, 1991: 5). Indeed, according to Bourdieu, in the objective relation to religious goods the "practical mastery" is a crucial attitude (1991: 10). Whereas the ritualized body is a body invested with social hierarchies and the ritualization of the body is a strategic mode of production intended to change (or maintain) specific social categories among a set of symbols in the nonritual world, "much of this, however, takes place at a level that is invisible and inaccessible to individual actors" (Magliocco, 2014: 5).

The research

Fieldwork took place at different times in the ritual cycle and during nonfestival periods during the years 1999, 2000, 2004, and 2007.

Civitella Roveto is a village in the province of Aquila (Abruzzo region), in the upper valley of the Liri river. Until the first part of the twentieth century, the economy of the area was agro-pastoral, but this changed after the Second World War. The annual calendar of rituals in Civitella had been full of processions and festivals dedicated to the venerated saints since the beginning of, and throughout the twentieth century. In the course of my fieldwork, it became clear that some festivals had been discontinued or changed, both in dates and in the ritual structure (Fabbrini, 2009). I have therefore reconstructed the ritual cycle according to the testimonies of the elder inhabitants of Civitella, referring to the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. Structured and informal interviews as well as life history interviews were carried out and the rituals still under celebration were observed, relying on the "unobtrusive observation" method (Bianco, 1994: 45). In the first stage of my research, I spoke mainly to the older men and women who were retired shepherds and farmers. I went on to interview the middle-aged and younger inhabitants who were predominantly workers in industrial and tertiary sectors, and students or the unemployed, in order to understand the changes in the festival dynamics and in their relations with the *sacra*. This approach permitted me to identify significant divergences in the imagery of the Madonna between elder and younger inhabitants of the community.

Name and taboo

The statue of the Madonna, kept in the Civitella parish church of Saint John the Baptist, is of human height; she wears a wig of light brown human hair, while her head, hands, and feet are made of clay. During the year, she wears a very dark blue frock and she has no distinctive signs. The origin of this statue is not certain, because the parish register was destroyed by fire during the Second World War, although the parish priest plausibly maintains that the statue

dates back to the seventeenth century. The Virgin, in her dark blue frock, is kept all year long inside her niche above that of the dead Christ, while the elders maintain that the statue was kept in the sacristy before the construction of the niches, an arrangement which dates from the arrival of the new parish priest, in 1958.

At the present time, the statue is taken out of her niche on two different ritual occasions: on Good Friday and on 22, 23, and 24 June, for the patron festivals. During the first event, the ceremonies of Good Friday, she is dressed in a black frock with golden embroidery and a black veil. For the occasion, she is also adorned with a white handkerchief and a big silver brooch representing a heart transfixed by seven swords. The statue is carried in procession through the village, following the Dead Christ and thus performing the *Mater Dolorosa*. In the second event, the statue wears a white frock with golden embroidery, a light blue veil, and a golden crown and is carried in the processions of 22, 23, and 24 June. 22 June is now dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua, but before the arrival of the present parish priest, this festival was celebrated on its proper day, 13 June, and the Virgin did not take part in it. Before the Second World War, this statue was dressed in white and light blue and was carried in procession also for the festival of the "Name of Mary" on 12 September.

The research shows that the elderly people of Civitella call the statue by her ancient name, "*Madonna delle Zitelle*," affirming that her specific festival day was exactly on 23 June. Her shifting identity is due to the fact that the present parish priest, upon his arrival tried to change the name to "*Madonna del Buon Consiglio*," i.e. "Our Lady of Good Counsel."³ Thus, in the years of my fieldwork, new generations and even some elderly people refer to this Virgin with the name of "*Madonna del Buon Consiglio*," although when I tried to settle the question, the old people affirmed that her proper name was in fact "*Madonna delle Zitelle*." The motivation of the priest is obvious: no Marian festivity is officially provided for June 23; nowhere in Italy does the cult of a "*Madonna delle Zitelle*" exist; moreover, in modern Italian, the term "*zitelle*" can sound offensive as it is associated with the word "spinster."

Indeed, a peculiar norm does in fact exist. No one except virgins can handle the statue or witness the change of clothing, not even the priest. The statue of this *Madonna* is still looked after by an unmarried woman with the right to dress and undress her and clean and comb her hair. None of the other village women can do this. According to some older inhabitants of the village, this woman has always been a member of a specific family of the village, the Persia family, which was possibly appointed to offer their virgins for the cultus of this statue. Throughout my research, the spinster in charge of the statue was in poor health and could not do the dressing on her own. Her helper was a distant niece and, according to hearsay, she was a virgin too. The contemporary community can no longer control the effective virginity of the women who are in charge of looking after the Madonna, but belonging to the "lineage" can at least preserve the "blood tie," which is the most significant element in the passage of magical-religious prerogatives.⁴ Thus, the title of the Virgin could be explained as an unofficial and derogatory name, the consequence of her attendance by spinsters. This explanation is, in fact, very unsatisfactory: in the local dialect, the meaning of "spinsters" is expressed by the term "*vizzoche*," so if that was a vernacular name of the statue, she would be called "*Madonna delle Vizzoche*," a term which should be translated with "Our Lady of Spinsters." But, the dialectal term "*vizzoche*" contains the root "*vizz-*," which means that the generative quality of the woman is "*vizza*, *avvizzita*" (withered⁵). On the contrary, in ancient Italian, at the time of Virgin's fabrication, the term "*zitella*" has meant the same of "*zita*," that is, girl of marriageable age, or simply virgin girl, while the suffix "*-ella*" compounds a

hypocorism.⁶ Thus, from a certain point of view, “*zita*” is the opposite of “*vizzoca*,” because the fertile qualities of a “*zita*” are fresh, integral, and uncontaminated. As a matter of fact, the term “*zita*” refers to a precise and recognizable sphere, that of *virginitas*. A decisive argument is the fact that in Italian neighborhood folklore many festivals exist during which there is a procession of the “*zitelle*,” intended as unmarried girls of marriageable age, who parade behind or before the statue of the Saint or of the Virgin with a wedding dress, as at Palestrina (Rome), Ciciliano (Rome), Gallese (Viterbo). Furthermore, the “*Planctus delle Zitelle*,” a dramatic *lauda* performed during the festival of the Holy Trinity at the shrine of Vallepietra (Rome), is quite well known. Also in this case the “*zitelle*” are young girls who sing and perform the mysteries of the passion of Jesus Christ. For that reason, excluding any derogatory intention, the meaning of the title of “*Madonna delle Zitelle*” should be interpreted as “Our Lady of Maidens.”

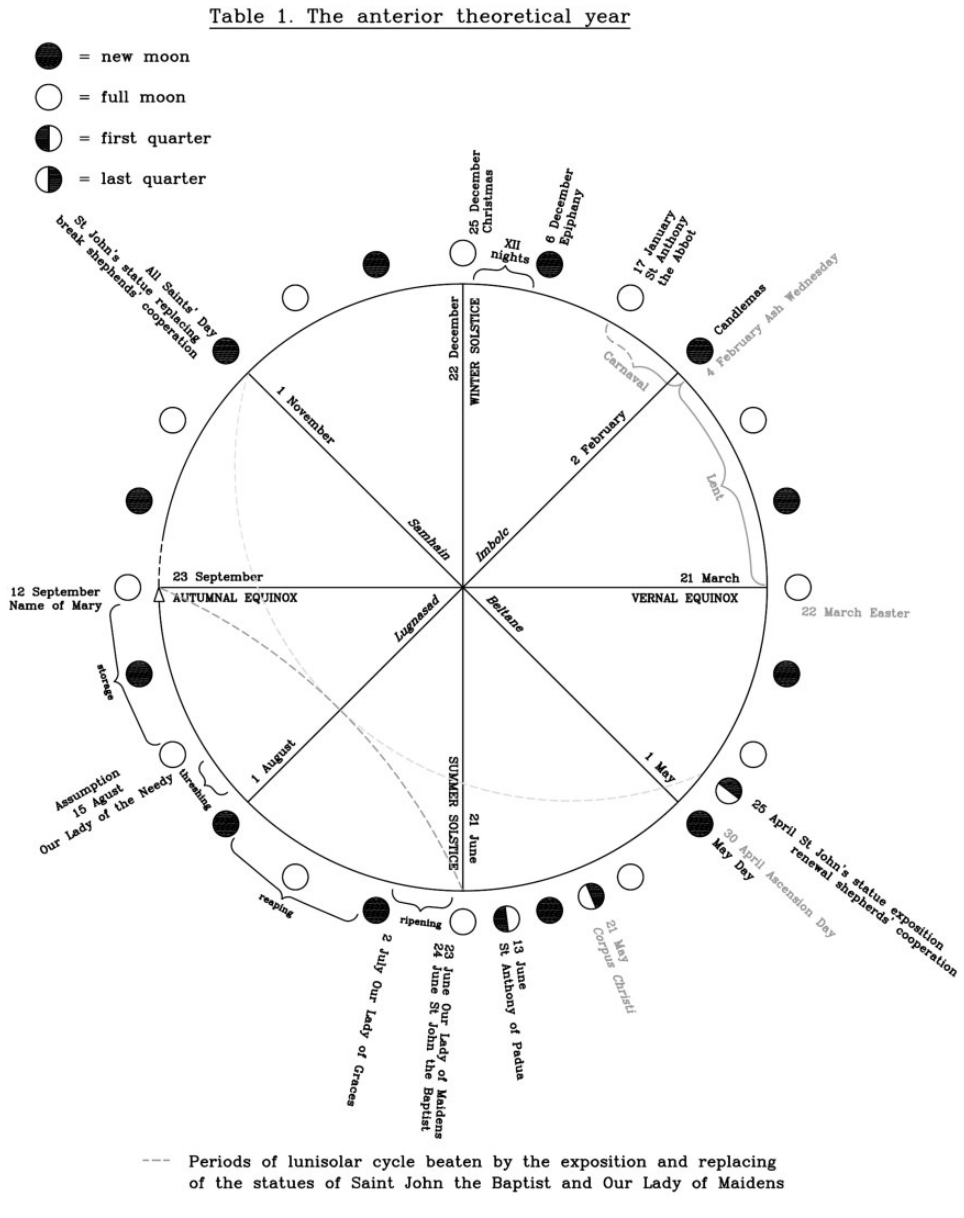
The wheat cycle

Examining the rituals in which the statues were involved at the beginning of the twentieth century helps us understand the meaning attributed to the Virgin kept in the parish church by the earlier inhabitants of the community. This study will allow us to confirm that, in previous times, the name of the statue was exactly “Our Lady of Maidens,” being strictly bound to the conception of virginity in the ritual cycle.

The ritual cycle of Civitella Roveto was constituted by a great number of festivals and processions, but it is possible to single out a summer micro-cycle, connected to wheat and under the protection of the Madonnas worshipped by the community. The first procession took place on 23 June during the big-*festa* of the community. The statue of Our Lady of Maidens was removed from the sacristy, dressed in the white frock, and at midday she was carried in procession through the village followed by the statues of Saint John, Saint Anthony of Padua, Saint Rocco, and Saint Emidio. The following day, Saint John’s day, she was again carried in procession, but this time behind the statue of Saint John, followed by the other saints. What is more, in these days the statues of Saint John and Our Lady always kept a preferential spatial and “kinesic” relationship, being displayed parallel to each other on the transept, inside the church, and facing each other at the ritual station in Buon Consiglio square, during the processions. These processions are part of the same ritual and can be related to two domains: the agricultural cycle and the cosmic cycle (Fabbrini, 2009). While the wheat is ripening, the change of the Virgin’s dress could be interpreted as a metaphor for the fecundation of the earth and of the generation of the crop. Moreover, on 21 June, during the anterior theoretical year, the Summer Solstice coincides with the plenilune, and the combined processions of Saint John and Our Lady of Maidens could mimic on Earth this union⁷ (Table 1). Thus, the changing of the Virgin’s frock, from dark to white, could be seen as a metaphor for the June full moon.

The second event was the procession of the Our Lady of Graces on 2 July. The statue of this Virgin portrays the Mother with the Holy Child and the colors of her dress are pink and light blue. At the beginning of the twentieth century, she was kept in a little rural chapel, located at the foot of the ancient village beyond the river. On the evening of 1 July, the inhabitants of Civitella undertook a pilgrimage to the peak of *Monte Bello*. Then, upon their return, at noon on 2 July, they celebrated the procession of Our Lady of Graces through the fields near the chapel. In the anterior theoretical year, this event took place a few days before the July new moon and it marked the beginning of the reaping at Civitella, literally

Table 1. The anterior theoretical year. Periods of lunisolar cycle beaten by the exposition and replacing of the statues of Saint John the Baptist and Our Lady of Maidens.



respecting the term *ante quem* when the wheat could not be touched. Moreover, harvesting during the period of a crescent moon was thought to increase abundance. This festival followed the propitiatory festivals on 23 and 24 June when the inhabitants of the village celebrated Our Lady of Maidens, wherein the Virgin could be compared to the bloom of a

fecundated earth, and Saint John, who could represent the fecundating-ripening force of the solstitial sun. As a consequence, on 2 July, they celebrated the festival of the Mother who had generated the Child, that is, the earth which had reached its moment of harvest.

During the month of July, the inhabitants were engaged in agricultural activities. The community's next festival was again dedicated to the Virgin and it occurred on 15 August, the day of Our Lady of Assumption. On this day, the inhabitants of Civitella undertook a pilgrimage to Pereto, the mountain sanctuary of *Madonna dei Bisognosi* (Our Lady of the Needy). This Virgin was a powerful figure, in which the chthonian elements of the mountain and her dark skin blended with the lunar ones of the white and light blue colors of her frock. Moreover, the day of her festival, 15 August, coincides with the full moon in the anterior theoretical year. When the Civitellesi returned to the village, the statue of Saint Anthony of Padua, which had been taken out on 13 June, was put back in its niche and they then took out Saint Rocco, who was to be celebrated the following day.

The closing festival of the cycle was the "Name of Mary" on 12 September. On that day, the statue of Our Lady of Maidens was taken out of her niche, dressed with the white and light blue frock, and carried in procession through the village. She was then dressed again in her dark blue frock and returned to the niche. No other saint was included in that procession. Furthermore, in the anterior theoretical year 12 September occurs in the phase of a full moon, an exact lunation (28 days) after 15 August. According to the inhabitants, there was a period of forty days, after the threshing of the crops, in which they "had to rest" and it was named "*le reposte*" (storage). Considering that the threshing ended in the first few days of August, the 12 September was the climax and boundary of that period of *vacation* from agricultural labors. Thus, the festival of the Name of Mary seemed to be connected with securing the storage of the crops.

In conclusion, the cycle opens and closes with the same statue whose functions shift from the title of Our Lady of Maidens in June to the Name of Mary in September. All iconography, attributions, and spheres of actions of this figure create a precise image, which could be interpreted as the paradigm of the Virgin as conceived by the inhabitants. If we attribute a sign with a binary code to these aspects (+/-), we can define this Virgin as a zero model, with which the cycle begins and ends, once the *status quo ante* is reestablished after the summer transformations (Table 2).

Thus, the figure of the local Virgin appears as the image of the earth itself, which has recovered its *virginitas* (all minuses) and which is also ready to fulfill its functions for the following agricultural year. Therefore, the dark frock worn by Our Lady of Maidens during the winter season represents the stasis of vegetative forces and the barren earth that keeps the seed waiting for the summer germination. In the three Madonnas, it is possible to see three faces of the same *numen* in charge of the protection and propitiation of the wheat cycle; she is a *numen* connected to the earth and the moon, of whom Our Lady of Maidens, the Virgin without female shapes, embodies the dimension of *virginitas* as a continuous and renewable reservoir of fertility.

The body

Fragmentary references to the Madonna's body still exist in the village, since no one knows how the statue of Our Lady of Maidens is made. Men are particularly involved in this discourse, because groups of four bearers (*squadre*) carry the statues of the saints and the Virgin during the processions on 22, 23, and 24 June. The statue of the Virgin is said to be

Table 2. The cycle of wheat.

23 June	2 July	15 August	12 September
Our Lady of Maidens	Our Lady of Graces	Our Lady of the Needy	Name of Mary
Virgin (-)	Mother (+)	Mother (+)	Virgin (-)
Without Child (-)	With Child (+)	With Child (+)	Without Child (-)
White skin (-)	White skin (-)	Dark skin (+)	White skin (-)
White/light blue dress (-)	Pink/light blue dress (+)	White/light blue dress (-)	White/light blue dress (-)
Inside (-)	Outside (+)	Outside (+)	Inside (-)
With saints (+)	Without saints (-)	With saints (+)	Without saints (-)
Full moon (○)	New moon (●)	Full moon (○)	Full moon (○)
Generation (-)	Beginning of harvest (+)	End of harvest (+)	Conservation (-)

the lightest of the five to carry and thus, in the ill-concealed opinion of some of the men, she is of lesser esteem. If these men cannot bear the statue of the patron Saint John, they prefer the statue of Saint Anthony of Padua, because he is the heaviest; this gives them the advantage of showing their strength to the villagers during the ceremonial occasion. The lightness of the statue of the Virgin has given rise to some interesting interpretations in the village. When the inhabitants were asked what the statue of the Virgin was made of, an animated discussion started among them: “The Madonna is a distaff,” “The Madonna is made of canes,” “The Madonna is empty like a mantis shrimp,” “The Madonna is made of a wooden framework and her breasts are straw,” “Once I spied on the dressing of the statue and I was astonished to see that the Madonna is a shapeless column of wax.”

From my research, it emerges that the statue is constructed like a horsehair doll, around a wooden structure. The body is quite compact and totally shapeless, without breast, hips, waist, backside, shoulders, legs, but it is impossible to describe other details because it is tightly bound by a third layer of clothing, which is firmly sewn on from the height of knees to the height of waist (Figure 1). However, one fact is clear: the statue of Our Lady of Maidens has no female shapes; it is as straight as a post, and not even the legs exist. The core of the Madonna’s body is concealed and unknown to all. The illusion of the female figure is constructed by something under the dress that vaguely simulates the breast, probably straw, and a frock pulled tight at the height of waist.

The inaccessibility of the Virgin’s body and the taboo connected to it are expressions of an underlying concept of virginity, a condition which must remain absolutely preserved and uncontaminated. The magical-religious dimension of *virginitas* is tied to the idea of the nonpollution of the original sexual energy, so the title of this Madonna could be interpreted as the “Virgin of the Virgins.” Nevertheless, as guarantor of the virginity of girls of marriageable age, this Virgin is also *Pronuba*. Actually, it is believed that human virginity assures generation, reproduction, and the family. According to Adriani, virginity expresses,

the *status* of a radical immunity from the evils of the world and the gap between the integrity and purity of the sacred and the pollution of the profane. Moreover, it has a function and value regarding life, fecundity, biological iteration, renewed continuance and fertile enterprise of the new beginning. (Adriani, 1976: 78) (*my translation*)



Figure 1. The dressing of Our Lady of Maidens, accomplished by the caretaker and her niece.
Source: Fabbrini, 2000.

Thus, the essence of this *numen* finds her roots in her radical alterity from the human world and from its pollution. Only in this case, after the “violence” of agricultural activities, can the Virgin be the guarantor of the earth’s ability to regenerate itself and its wild forces, as confirmed by the analyzed rituals. More specifically, the taboo and the name “Our Lady of Maidens” point out that the Madonna’s body must not be contaminated by the polluting sexual energy of men, or by women who have had sexual intercourse with men. Even if none of the inhabitants know anymore what would happen if the taboo were broken, it is possible to suggest that if the purity of the statue were not preserved, or if the virginity were contaminated, there would be the risk of famine and of the end of the generating powers of the earth and women, of production and reproduction, since virginity is the very source of fertility.

Ritual arrangements

Inhabitants of Civitella have always known more or less precisely that the statue—dating back to the seventeenth century and built on the basis of Counter-Reform directives—is without female shapes. In past centuries, on the basis of their ritual knowledge, interests, and needs, they interpreted her figure as a guarantee for the fertility of the earth and the fecundity of women, deciding to preserve her by entrusting her care to a woman who had to remain a

virgin. As a matter of fact, folk religion is not just the mere receptor of theological and hegemonic ideologies but can also express autonomous values. Some elements of local interpretations (and hybridization) of the “Marian paradigm” can be pointed out, as they emerge in the ritual performances. First, pre-Christian and rural concepts of fertility converged in the worship of Our Lady of Maidens: on 23 and 24 June (the days of the Summer solstice and of the Ancient Roman festival of the waters) the changing of the dress of the statue symbolizes the capacity of the earth to regenerate itself and to reproduce life.⁸ Every year, through this ritual, Our Lady of Maidens seems to confirm her ability to reacquire her virginity and thus her fertility, just like the earth and the moon do in their cycles. Second, in the middle of the twentieth century, the statue of Our Lady of Maidens became a mediator of political conflicts within the community between the upper village and the lower village. After the arrival of the new parish priest, her cultic prestige allowed the supporters of this statue to triumph over the supporters of the other little statue of Our Lady of Sorrows, so that Our Lady of Maidens was chosen to perform the *Mater Dolorosa* for the Good Friday procession.⁹

In more recent times and overall, the Second Vatican Council has not changed anything considerable regarding local devotional practices, even if a general tendency toward rationalization of the cult of the Virgin has emerged (Laurentin, 1987: 139–148, 284–301). An example is the removal of the celebration of the Name of Mary from the New Roman Calendar, in 1969. Nevertheless, in recent years, the worship of Our Lady of Maidens has been strongly antagonized and virtually outclassed by of Our Lady of Graces. The elder inhabitants of the village maintain that in their youth the devotion to Our Lady of Graces was not strong; she was a minor figure in the local pantheon, and the church dedicated to her was merely a rural chapel. The area of the chapel was known as the *Barracche* (sheds), the church as the *chiesetta* (little church), and even the service celebrated there was named *la messetta* (the little holy service)—all derogatory terms—as opposed to the church of Saint John located in the highest and most sacred point of the ancient settlement. Moreover, during the Second World War, the procession in July of Our Lady of Graces was discontinued and the devotion to her faded. But after the war, the new village—constructed at the foot of the upper one in 1915—grew through economic development, which led the *Barracche* to become the richest part of the community, and the festival of Our Lady of Graces was definitively reanimated by the arrival of the new parish priest in 1958. Shortly after, the chapel of Our Lady of Graces was destroyed to make way for a new modern church at the heart of the lower village. As a consequence, the wealth of the inhabitants of the *Barracche* and the new festival dedicated to her in August, in which their economic preeminence is displayed, have determined an ongoing rise in the worship of the full, wooden statue of Our Lady of Graces, who has become the representative of the new settlement (Fabbrini, 2009). When I asked my informants which image of the Virgin they kept in mind, the elders and the inhabitants of the upper village answered that she was Our Lady of Maidens, while the youngsters, middle-aged, and the inhabitants of the lower village answered that she was Our Lady of Graces. Moreover, for the latter group Our Lady of Graces is positioned exactly after Saint John the Baptist, the patron saint, while for the former Our Lady of Graces is displayed in their imaginary hierarchy not only after Our Lady of Maidens but even after Saint Anthony, Saint Rocco, and Saint Emidio. This clearly shows that whereas in earlier times the devotion toward Our Lady of Graces was scanty, by the time of this research, she is viewed as having reached, in the eyes of the greater part of the community, the position of second *numen* of the village, unseating the lighter Our Lady of Maidens from that position (Fabbrini, 2009: 168).

Virginity and hierarchy

The statue of Our Lady of Maidens is at the center of opposing tensions which spread vertically between Catholic hierarchy and some villagers, and horizontally between genders. In the first instance, the priest, who is not autochthonous, though does not get close to her, by virtue of his authority has changed the name of the statue to “Our Lady of the Good Counsel” and now the majority of the population knows only this name. In doing so, the priest shows an obeisance to a project of rationalization and “*recatholicisation*” of the folkloric ritual practices and devotions, which is a process dating back to the Middle Ages and which is also central to the modern politics of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰ The resistance is represented by the elder inhabitants of the village, who know the ancient title of the statue and can still reveal it. Among them, there is in particular the caretaker, who always referred to the statue by her previous name and preserves her mastery over the statue, and the authoritative figure of the auctioneer, who carries on publicly proclaiming her “*Nome di Maria*” during the auctions. In such regard, when I asked the elder inhabitants the significance of the ancient name, they all said to me that they did not know the reason for it, but “the statue has always had that name.” Some middle-aged and cultivated people of the lower village, though calling the statue “Our Lady of Good Counsel”, in the presence of their parents who maintain that the proper title was “*Madonna delle Zitelle*,” have tried to account for an epithet that they themselves do not use, whereas their parents could not explain it, supposing that the name derives from the fact that “the statue is looked after by the spinsters of the old village.” In their perspective, the term “*zitelle*” is interpreted as in modern Italian, i.e. spinsters, and perhaps, in postmodernity new narratives may emerge. However, none of the inhabitants seem to be spontaneously involved in this discourse, since the old name is vanishing. On the other hand, it must be said that, in fact, “the spinsters” of the upper village as a social entity do not exist. Only one woman is in charge of the statue and her niece help her only because now she is in poor health. They can do that because they are supposed to be virgins and this norm was once well known in the community. All the other women are excluded from touching the statue. Furthermore, this statue is rarely displayed for the veneration, being closed in her niche. However, the caretaker has no particular power within the village and no voice in the festival dynamics, being relegated only to the ceremonial office of dressing and undressing the statue. Her ritual prerogative consists in not allowing anyone to manipulate the statue. Actually, when I asked the priest for permission to document the dressing of the statue, he said to me that I had to obtain the concession of the caretaker. However, the male ethnographer was not allowed to see the complete undressing of the statue and only the third layer of the frock was changed in his presence. In contrast, only men can bear the statue of the Virgin during the festival processions and they have to pay a great deal of money to do so, competing during the ritual auction. As the male bearers themselves admit, they “would not allow women to bear the statue of Saint John, not even if they were Olympic champions.” This assertion implicitly includes all the major saints (the Virgin, Saint Rocco, Saint Anthony, Saint Emidio) proclaimed in the auctions, as the festival practice confirms. Women can only bear the smaller statues of the minor saints, such as Santa Barbara, Santa Philomena, Saint Laurent, and others, and the standards of the saints. This possibility is shared with the children, demonstrating a dynamic of empowerment and subordination at the same time. However, men cannot directly touch the statue of Our Lady of Maidens, but only the base. Men of the confraternity put the golden *ex voto* on the statue of Saint John, but only the caretaker can put the golden *ex voto* on the statue of Our Lady of

Maidens, while the statue of Our Lady of Graces can be decorated by different people, men and women. Thus, it can be argued that in the experience of the inhabitants, Our Lady of Maidens still polarizes the genders.

In the case of Our Lady of Maidens, the lack of female shapes can also be an expression of the taboo regarding the Virgin's body. According to Foucault (1998: 104, 121–122), as far as the body is concerned the issue of power emerges, and in the body power relations are localized through the ritual, “creating within each person a scheme of hierarchy of social power” (Magliocco, 2014: 5). Furthermore, the female body is especially central to the body politic and, in this regard, the Virgin Mary is a main object of emphasis and manipulation among all sacred figures (Dubisch, 1995; Turner and Turner, 1978: 155). As a matter of fact, some names used to indicate Mary's body in Christian literature are “*claustra, septum, signaculum*” (Russo, 1996: 184). These definitions point out that the mystique of her body is based on virginity. Finally, like other prohibitions, the taboo concerning the body of the Madonna may “trace the cosmic outlines and the ideal social order,” being an issue involving relations of power between the sexes and their hierarchy in society (Douglas, 1966: 90, 4). It could be assumed, since the female body must be preserved from the males, men are the ones who can contaminate women, and such a belief could testify to a previous hegemony of women in that community. But no evidence supports this interpretation. On the contrary, a pastoral and patriarchal social organization was dominant in Abruzzo from the Roman and pre-Roman Age until the Modern Age and beyond (Petrocelli, 1999). Although it is undoubtedly true that the Italian culture is a culture with strong masculine domination, it has always needed to be continuously reaffirmed via social and symbolic devices.¹¹

If the concept is turned around, perhaps the Virgin's body, instead of being at risk of contamination, is seen as the contaminating agent. As Douglas (1966: 174) explains: “we find pollution ideas enlisted to bind men and women to their allotted roles.” It is quite clear that the power of the *simulacrum* is based on the image of the female body, a body which can reproduce life. This power is too strong, and even though males knew it, they would not concede it. Thus, the body of this Virgin has been constructed with no female shapes; it is an asexual body, a body/nonbody. The evidence may suggest that such a powerful entity—the [*Ma*]donna—is reconducted into the ambit of the negation of sexuality, both through narratives which spread from the dogma of the virginal childbirth of Mary, i.e. without sexual intercourse, and through the construction of a neutered ritual body. Actually, the Christian theologians:

symbolise the body as an imperfect container which will only be perfect if it can be made impermeable. Further, the idea of the high value of virginity would be well chosen for the project of changing the role of sexes in marriage and in society at large (Wangermann). The idea of woman as the Old Eve, together with fears of sex pollution, belongs with a certain specific type of social organisation. If this social order has to be changed, the Second Eve, a virgin source of redemption crushing evil underfoot, is a potent new symbol to present. (Douglas, 1966: 195)

In accordance with these ideologies, the body of Our Lady of Maidens seems to be the emblem of the perfect body: light, intact, without any orifices.¹² Indeed through orifices, pollution can enter and exit at the same time (Douglas, 1966: 150). Actually, male bearers always bring the statues of the Virgin in procession, and this may be dangerous, because from orifices female contamination may be issued. Thus, it can be suggested that the Madonna's body—built to be lighter than the ones of male Saints, and deprived of its

attributes of power and desire—fulfills the aspirations of men, since it exorcises their fears and sanctions male predominance, expunging female sexuality from the domain of fertility; it is the neutralized body.¹³

As a consequence, it is possible to crosscheck our data with the interpretations of the virginal image of Mary as model and parable of a woman's body in western societies (Scott, 1986: 1067; Warner, 1990; Hermkens et al., 2009: 5). Furthermore, according to Chesler (1972: 47), denying sexuality is a strategy for controlling women's fertility, and it can be said that her conclusions coincide with those of Warner: "the very conditions that make the Virgin sublime are beyond the powers of women to fulfill unless they deny their sex" (1990: 77). This ideology has been brought about with patience and determination by men's theology: "the Virgin Mary is not the innate archetype of female nature, the dream incarnate; she is the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as a God-given code" (Warner, 1990: 338). Many female informants said that they model themselves on the figure of Mary, even if her perfection is unattainable. However, the internal representation of Mary of the inhabitants was modeled on Our Lady of Maidens. As a matter of fact, in ancient peasant communities the mental image of the Virgin was essentially the one represented by that community's statue. The priest speaks about Mary, but the devotees see their own Madonna. That Our Lady of Maidens was a model for women is confirmed by the fact that she was showed also as the ideal of female beauty, as an informant told me the proverbial formula referring to a beautiful girl: "*Occhj' 'a si' bell'! Par' a Madonn' e' Zitell'!*" (Look at you, how beautiful you are! You look like Our Lady of Maidens!)

In this scenario, the shapeless body of the Madonna could be seen as a relevant strategy in the dominion of imagery and social rules. It refers to a pervasive negation of sexuality, as opposed to the bodies of Eve and Magdalene, bodies of sinners, and thus *antiexempla*. Exactly the same denial of their sexuality—together with forced motherhood—has affected women, in order to establish and maintain the male dominion (Tabet, 1998). Therefore, I would argue that the Madonna's body is a social construction built by different actors at different levels. This is a body built, not by adding but from subtracting from the body of the woman—a project ideologically directed by ecclesial institutions and, then, realized by male handicraftsmen. All that was left for women to do was to fill the dearth with straw and *strata* of dresses, laboriously sewn and embroidered, every layer more sumptuous than the last, and to adorn her with their hair and jewels, offered as gifts, in order to mold a female shape from a pole, preserving in the meanwhile the secret of its inanity. As a result, the symbolic body of the Virgin becomes material giving a form to the immaterial, through the patient work of social actors, such as theologians and devotees, both men and women. At the same time it is the Christian imagery of purity and incorruptibility, which incarnates itself in its only possible reification: a neutralized body. As a consequence, men and above all women are directed in their lives, beliefs, and behaviors, by what they construct themselves. The shapeless body of the Madonna, built by men and laden with gold and silver embroidery by women, shows the ideal pattern of the absence of female sexual desire.

Conclusions

The *simulacrum* of Our Lady of Maidens seems to reflect in a paradigmatic way the Catholic and Counter-Reformation concept of the Madonna's body. The body of the statue is truly

without female shapes and without any opening; it is perfectly integral and untouchable because of the taboo that envelopes the Madonna. Thus, by means of the material object of the statue, which incarnates the idea of the perfect body and around which the rituals and the statements of the community rotate, an implied discourse is spread. The evidence suggests that the ritual statue, made by men, represents the ideal model of absence of sexual desire for women, who are even forbidden to touch her because of their impurity. However, this does not detract from the fact that the worship of Our Lady of Maidens was a mainly feminine devotion in the community, sometimes carried out by reciting vows, which often imply an abstention from sexual activity. However, the only way to get close to the Madonna is to dedicate one's whole life to chastity—as represented by the caretaker. Thus, the spinster who attends to her seems to be the *alter ego* of the statue: the realization of the perfect woman, eternally deprived of her own sexuality. Indeed, in the Catholic vision, sexuality and virginity are totally irreconcilable. Thus, the cultic oxymoron, which in pre-Christian religions was a sacred mystery connected to the lunar cycle and to the regeneration of life (the *status* of Virgin and Mother of the Goddess), has become a paradox.¹⁴ Douglas suggests that the model of the Second Eve introduced a better social order compared to the previous pattern represented by the Old Eve. This is true for the shift from Jewish to Christian ideology. However, in Europe, and particularly in Italy, the role of women was not so impoverished before the advent of Christianity, also because the previous female image was bound in some respects to pre-Christian agrarian religions.¹⁵ On the contrary the idea of reproduction without sexual intercourse, represented by Mary and expounded by the Catholic *élite*, is a causal narrative in the subordination of women in society and at the same time an expression of it.

On the whole, at the present time the emergence of the veneration of Our Lady of Graces, the incursion of the worship of the “ghostly” Madonnas of Lourdes and Fátima, the “individualisation of cosmologies” (Augé, 1994: 88) have all determined a decrease in the importance of Our Lady of Maidens in the local pantheon (Fabbrini, 2009). Perhaps this is due to a decline in the importance of agricultural activities bound to her, as well as the changed “identity” arising from the new name given by the priest to the *numen*. Moreover, modern Civitella is very different from the little village it was in the early twentieth century and its ancient pastoral and patriarchal cultural heritage is vanishing. The male dominion has diminished and, thanks to secularization, compulsory education and to the diffusion of mass media, more equal relations between the sexes and new sexual models have emerged.¹⁶ For instance, the value of female virginity is fading in present-day Italian society, and the social pattern of the “maiden,” which had a specific *raison d'être*, is no longer relevant. In this context, Our Lady of Maidens has lost her position in the local imagery and her ancient title connected to the sphere of virginity, which was already considered unseemly, is no longer comprehensible for the inhabitants of the community and it is vanishing. In conclusion, given the decaying of hierarchical relationships in traditional systems, where the sacred figures acted as mediators of the individual integration within the social corpus, the shapeless Madonna loses relevance also because gender representations no longer answer to the collective requirement of virginity (and asexuality), but to choices bound up with personal management of the body and expressed in new fluid forms of behavior, style, and thoughts.

Notes

1. I chose to use the term “hybridization,” which I took from the work of Sigal, because it is not rare to find cases where ancient pre-Christian elements have merged Christian practices and beliefs

- (Lanternari, 1972; Sigal, 2000). As far as the complex relations between official religion and popular religion are concerned, I refer also to the studies of Berzano et al. (2014), Cirese (1997), Kapaló (2013), and Prandi (2002).
2. Concerning the diffusion of the “dressed Madonnas” during the Counter-Reformation, I refer to Arduini (2010: 33). As regards the term “shapeless” and “without female shapes,” I refer to the structure of the sacred body, lacking of physical female attributes, and not to the overall appearance of the statue.
 3. Our Lady of Good Counsel is a wooden icon, venerated in the sanctuary of Genazzano (Rome). The worship of that Virgin is attested at Civitella by the presence of a painting kept on the right of the High altar in a specifically dedicated little chapel. She is represented as a mother with the Holy Child in her arms, dressed in red, blue, and brown. In his history of the worship of Our Lady of Good Counsel at Civitella *don* Gaetano Squilla, the previous parish priest, does not mention the statue at all, referring exclusively to the wooden icon (Squilla, 1979). Evidently, during the period of his pastoral activity the name of “*Madonna del Buon Consiglio*” referring to the statue was not attested.
 4. As regards the conception of blood in Italian folk religion I refer to Lombardi Satriani (2000).
 5. The term “*vizzo*” derives from the Latin adjective “*vietius*” and the verb “*viescere*,” which means “to wither” (Devoto, 2012: 3125).
 6. The use of the term “*zitella*” as young girl has an attested literary tradition; for example in Boccaccio (Devoto, 2012: 3160).
 7. The anterior theoretical year occurs when Easter Sunday falls on 22 March, i.e. the day after the vernal equinox. In this way, the fundamental days of the solar path (solstices: 21 June/22 December; and equinoxes: 21 March/23 September) coincide with the phases of the full moon. According to Gaignebet it would be the basis of all ritual calendars in Europe (Fabbrini, 2009; Gaignebet and Florentin, 1974).
 8. The Ancient Roman celebration of the virgin goddess *Fortuna* was exactly on 24 June and it was the Italic festival of the waters (Hild, 1896: 1269).
 9. The elderly inhabitants remember the presence of a statue of the *Addolorata* in the church. According to them, she was made of paper-maché, a material of little prestige, and corresponded exactly to the model of Our Lady of Sorrows, with the black dress, the white handkerchief, and hands joined in weeping. Some clearly remember that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the statue, which was carried in the procession on Good Friday, was this one.
 10. The phenomenon of *recatholicisation* of festivals has been investigated by Dosseto (2004: 73–80). In this case, I use the term in the sense of a return to a more orthodox conception, by the priest’s active interference.
 11. Some references to the male dominion in Italy are present in the works of the Italian ethnologist Tabet (1998). With regards to the fact that in western societies male dominion is effective with recurring features both in practice and in the symbolic universe, I refer to Bourdieu (2001).
 12. When Guillaumine refers to the medical tables displayed in European pharmacies states that: “women have to be lighter than men to a greater or lesser extent [...] This difference is considered to be natural, normal and desirable, being part of the order of things” (Guillaumine, 1992: 124) (*my translation*). Regarding “collective expectations” about “femininity” in male-dominated societies, which is built as a contrastive identity by means of embodied schemes of oppositions (big/small, gross/delicate, heavy/light), I refer to Bourdieu (2001: 28, 61, 63–68, 104).
 13. I use the term neutralized in all its possible acceptations: negated, nullified, offset, overcome, counteracted, made neutral, made neuter. Moreover, it has the same root as neutered.
 14. As regards the status of virgin and mother of the goddesses in pre-Christian worships I refer to Gimbutas (1982: 198).
 15. Discussing the condition of women in ancient pre-Christian and agrarian societies would be impossible here. Scholars show distinct approaches and interpretations, but at least in the cultic sphere the female image enjoyed an indisputable prestige (Duby et al., 1994; Gimbutas, 1982).

However, I could make references to the condition of women in Ancient Roman society—which preceded the Italian one—where women could enjoy considerable sexual freedom (Cenerini, 2002).
 16. As far as the issue of secularization is concerned I refer to Prandi (2002: 133–134). In “super-modernity” (Augé, 1994) different tendencies, such as laicization, *re-catholicisation*, processes of heritage of local worships, irruption of global devotions, coexist, collide, and do not exclude each other. However, according to the general tendencies of Italian society, for the new generations the sexual domain turns out to be the most emancipated from the Church’s precepts (Milani, 2012).

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