

## ‘A SUSPENDED, TIMELESS UNIVERSE:’ MACROHISTORIC APPROPRIATIONS OF CARAVAGGISM IN CHEVALIER’S *VIRGIN* NARRATIVE

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“It began with flickering,” Ella Turner says of her recurring dream in Tracy Chevalier’s *The Virgin Blue*, “a movement between dark and light” (32). The dream then shifts to a vibrant shade of blue—a blue Ella only later recognizes as the hue of Mary’s robe in Caravaggesque artist Nicolas Tournier’s early 1630s painting *Le Christ Descendu de la Croix*. Certainly, scholars such as Sophia Andres and Ilan Safit have identified similar instances of ekphrasis in Chevalier’s work as well as its film adaptations. In addition to interweaving visual representations with her fiction, Chevalier has made no secret of the inspiration she has gleaned from the artists’ lives themselves—sometimes spontaneously—when in the process of writing. When visiting the Louvre while writing *The Virgin Blue*, for example, she caught a glimpse of Tournier’s 1628 work, *Le Christ en Croix, la Vierge, la Madeleine, saint Jean et saint François de Paule*: “I had never heard of him, but he had the same last name as my characters and used the Virgin blue to dramatic effect. Not only that—I then discovered he was born only 30 miles from Moutier, where the Tourniers end up ... I couldn’t resist—I added him to the story” (*Tracy Chevalier, official site*). Yet Chevalier’s appropriation of art and art history does not end with the simple creation of biographically inspired fiction. Nor does it end with her impressively elaborate ekphrastic redrawings, a narrative strategy which, in James Heffernan’s words, enables “the silent figures of graphic art to speak” (304). Rather, Chevalier’s immersion in the visual nature of her historic subject matter is so pervasive, she intertextually appropriates artistic technique itself—much in the manner of A.S. Byatt, whose *Matisse Stories* narratively reproduce aspects of Impressionist style, as well as the images upon which the tales are based (Fishwick). Like the Baroque-era works of Tournier (and Caravaggio himself), the narrative Caravaggism of *The Virgin Blue* transcends the temporal limitations of individual historic scenes

and—perhaps even more importantly—lends iconographic complexity and power to the novel's challenges to gender- and class-based hierarchies, both past and present.

Laura Felleman Fattal notes a popular resurgence of ekphrasis in late twentieth and early twenty-first century culture: "The most cursory cultural investigator cannot help but notice that the visual arts have become a significant source and impetus for the narrative of contemporary books, theater, and dance" (107). Without a doubt, Chevalier's novels reflect this trend; *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *Burning Bright* both draw upon the lives of artists (Jan Vermeer and William Blake, respectively)—and *The Lady and the Unicorn* purports to tell the story behind a series of anonymously woven Flemish tapestries, considered to be among the finest surviving works of art from Europe's dark ages. Even Chevalier's non-artistically centered novel, *Falling Angels*, makes reference to late Pre-Raphaelite paintings. At one point early in the narrative, her early Edwardian-era character Kitty Coleman bemoans the dreary, passive appearance of one of Waterhouse's most well-known female depictions, complaining, "I want to scream when I see his overripe paintings at the Tate. The Lady of Shalott in her boat looks as if she has just taken opium" (*Falling Angels* 13). What's more, Chevalier borrows from Pre-Raphaelite imagery as a sort of narrative device, reconfiguring Pre-Raphaelite representations of Tennyson's Lady to "capture iconographically the forces that restrict women's roles and stifle their creativity," as Andres suggests ("From Camelot to Hyde Park" 21). In doing so, Chevalier appropriates visual art and wields it as historic metafiction, creating stories within stories which extend the expressive boundaries of both creative media, while simultaneously challenging the societal boundaries which stymie her female characters.

Chevalier's 1997 novel, *The Virgin Blue*, engages in similar tactics. Rather than Waterhouse, however, the book expends its ekphrastic attention on a different painter and time period: Nicolas Tournier, a somewhat obscure artist from Montbéliard who studied under Bartolomeo Manfredi in the seventeenth century. Tournier was part of a school of French painters who followed the techniques of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, including the use of strong light and shadow, and rich, jeweled tones. Upon seeing a postcard print of one of Tournier's paintings in the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse, Chevalier's present-day narrator, Ella Turner, immediately identifies with the Caravaggesque artist, and becomes convinced that he is a distant ancestor: "I crossed myself again, said, 'Holy Mother, help me,' and began to laugh. I would never have guessed there had been a painter in the family" (*The Virgin Blue* 63). As with

her later appropriation of Pre-Raphaelite imagery in 2001's *Falling Angels*, Chevalier similarly seizes upon Caravaggesque iconography in *The Virgin Blue*—Tournier's portraits of Christ and the Virgin Mary, in particular—in order to illustrate the gendered limitations of her characters' worlds. Yet in doing so, she reconfigures *this* iconography as well, redrawing the "Holy Mother" as an empowered female figure who offers both Ella and her ancestor Isabella a means of transcending sociocultural restrictions and patriarchal violence.

Certainly, Ella Turner lives in a less restrictive world than Isabelle Tournier; yet she still struggles with issues of identity. Ella is culturally and spatially displaced, having moved to a pastoral region of France after spending her entire life in the American cities of Boston and San Francisco. She is also professionally displaced, having not secured a job before following her husband to Europe. "I wasn't used to having free time," she narratively complains. "I'd always been busy either training or working long hours. Having time on my hands took some getting used to; I went through a phase of sleeping late and moping around the house..." (*The Virgin Blue* 28-29). Eventually, Ella's floundering for a stable sense of self affects her marriage and her general sense of well-being. Her verbal sparring match with Jean-Paul over which name to use on her library card—and the resulting tears ("to my mortification," she narrates)—only underscore the deep anxieties she is experiencing as a result of having her identity and stability subsumed by her husband's career (42). By comparison, Isabelle Tournier's identity has been subsumed as well, but far more violently. Her "writing lesson" with Etienne quickly turns to coerced sex—but not before he has symbolically replaced her name with his: "I write my name. And I can write your name, he added confidently" (12). He then guides her hand to form the first two letters of Etienne: E and T. When Isabelle protests that she had wanted to write *her* name, querying, "How can that be your name and my name both?" he dismisses her desire for individuality: "You wrote it, so it is your name. You don't know that? Whoever writes it, it is theirs" (13). The conversation concludes when Etienne pushes her against a boulder, parts her legs, and extracts "payment" for the lesson. He does not gaze upon or acknowledge her face with this act, choosing instead to enter roughly from behind and push this additional aspect of her humanity—her identity—away from his view. When she rises, the imprint of Etienne's writing—*his* identity—has been smudged onto her face, adding additional emphasis to the moment's dehumanizing sense of erasure.

Their later marriage only reinforces Isabelle's dehumanization. Marked by beatings, taunts, and accusations of witchery, it provides

Etienne a stronger social vehicle by which to dominate Isabelle and shape her. “When you are my wife,” he tells her, “you will not be a midwife” (*The Virgin Blue* 16). Interestingly, midwifery is the same career that has been ripped away from Isabelle’s descendant (and doppelganger) Ella centuries later. Yet where Rick’s professional overshadowing of Ella seems to be an afterthought—the unexamined result of lingering patriarchal values that continue to prioritize male spouses’ careers over female spouses’—Etienne’s challenge to Isabelle’s midwifery is quite deliberate. He likens it to witchcraft, which he then conflates with her resilient Catholicism: “You love the Virgin, yes?” he asks her before delivering the verbal blow, “And your mother was a witch” (16). In Isabelle’s view, by aligning herself with her earthly mother’s work and her “Holy Mother’s” faith, she has done nothing wrong. Yet in Etienne’s view, the “evidence” he is presenting against Isabelle is nothing short of damning. *Any* strong female figure, whether sacred or secular, represents a threat. He even displays spite for his *own* mother’s authority, something Isabelle realizes early on, in the face of Etienne’s ill treatment: “Why do you want me? she asked in a low voice he could not hear. She answered herself: Because I am the one his mother hates most” (16).

Etienne’s equally rough treatment of Marie in subsequent years illustrates his continued contempt for female power—something his young daughter has exercised in invoking God’s name to the man on the road during the family’s flight (“If you hurt us, she said, God will hurt you. He will hurt you very very badly” (*The Virgin Blue* 88)) and in donning the Virgin blue cloth beneath her dress to a Calvinist service, in defiance of the congregation’s standards as well as her father’s. Marie’s burgeoning head of hair—red, like her mother’s and that of *La Rousse*—presents an additional challenge to patriarchal strictures. For centuries, women’s unbound hair has been regarded as a threat to male observers due to its simultaneous eroticism and lack of subjection. As Susan Brownmiller observes, “In myth, the beautiful Lorelei, who sang while she combed her long blonde hair, lured sailors to wreck their boats on treacherous rocks. Sight of Medusa’s hair of living snakes turned men into stone” (60-61). The discovery of Marie’s red hair, in fact, triggers Etienne’s first full-scale physical assault on Isabelle. His violent reaction is disproportionate to the event, suggesting an extreme internal sense of threat and anxiety. Despite Isabelle’s good intentions, Petit Jean’s retrieval of the nest unleashes a slew of other wild accusations, a frenzied search of the house—and ultimately, a severe beating after Etienne recounts rumors that she is involved in something unseemly, perhaps even witchcraft. “What are you hiding?” Etienne interrogates his wife before delivering a blow

that knocks her across the room. “What did you do with the goat? Kill it? Sacrifice it to the devil? Or did you trade it with that Catholic pedlar looking at you like that?” (*The Virgin Blue* 147).

Violence, of course, is a common theme in Baroque art as well as Chevalier’s novel. In particular, religiously inspired paintings of Tournier’s day often reflected tales of beatings and martyrdom, recasting tortured victims as triumphant sufferers. As Michael Kitson explains:

The overt dwelling on the physical effects of torture ... is less a feature of baroque martyrdoms than one might expect. This is because the paintings had a religious purpose corresponding to the doctrines of the Counter-Reformation. The martyrs were represented as heroes, not as the limp, broken, helpless victims they would have been in fact. Physical agony was softened by spiritual exaltation in their expressions. (41)

Chevalier evokes a comparable sense of religious martyrdom in her handling of Marie’s murder. Like a Baroque-era artist, Chevalier shrouds Marie’s death in shadow—which also produces a similarly spiritually exaltative effect. And like a Baroque artist, Chevalier carefully chooses which portions of Marie’s death to illuminate in *The Virgin Blue*, as Ella experiences it retroactively in her dreams, painting the event in flashes of color and emotion—Caravaggesque glimpses, to be sure:

It began to press into me, the pressure of water rather than stone. I could hear a voice chanting ... I cried until I couldn’t breathe. The pressure of the blue closed in around me. There was a great boom, like the sound of a heavy door falling into place, and the blue was replaced by a black so complete it had never known life. (32-33)

Despite the horrific nature of Marie’s suffering, like Tournier, Chevalier also chooses to center her attention on Mary’s pain, rather than on her Christ figure’s (i.e., Marie’s). From childhood, Isabelle has been identified as “La Rousse,” or the Virgin Mary, due to her red hair and suspected Catholic sympathies. Her eventual fate, as well as her child’s, is foreshadowed in *The Virgin Blue*’s first chapter—in the destruction of a statue of the Virgin and Child, which the young Isabelle seems to experience vicariously, despite her involvement at the crowd’s urging:

I can’t do it again, Isabelle thought, but the sight of the red faces made her swing once more. The statue began to rock, the faceless woman rocking the child in her arms. Then it pitched forward and fell, the Virgin’s head hitting the ground first and shattering, the body thumping after. In the impact of the fall, the Child was split from his mother and lay on the ground gazing upward. Isabelle dropped the rake and covered her face with her hands. (9)

Later, when Marie's body is uncovered, she, too, greets her descendant from the ground, having been severed violently from her mother's arms centuries before. In positioning her thusly, Chevalier transforms Marie into the slain Christ whom Isabelle/the Virgin mourns. Yet this reconfiguration also happens earlier in the novel as well. When her dress is discovered at church—during Easter weekend services, no less—Marie is beaten, then paraded through the streets with her arms outstretched between her brother and father, echoing aspects of the Crucifixion. At one point, like Christ, she stumbles in the road, prompting Etienne and Petit Jean to grab her arms all the more tightly. The contrast between her black dress and blue undercloth at the moment she is led away to be killed further confirm this reading; any student of Eastern Christian iconography, including that used by Caravaggio and his artistic followers, understands “the undergarment of the Christ figure as a representation of his divinity, while the overdrape represents the humanity Christ assumed” (Joncas 41). By echoing this pattern (overdrape/ undergarment), and substituting black (associated with her family's harsh, authoritarian version of Calvinism) for Marie's outer shroud of humanity, while substituting blue (associated with her mother's subversive Catholicism) for Marie's underlying divinity, Chevalier is making a bold, and challenging, suggestion. In this tale, to transgress boundaries—to embrace a forbidden religion and align oneself with a powerful female figure, rather than the submissive role Marie's masculocentric society dictates—is a divine act. Hence, Marie is crucified not for her human faults, but for embracing the divine identity symbolized by her blue underrobe, which her body is then framed by in death, echoing Christ's positioning against his white shroud in Tournier's *Le Christ Descendu de la Croix*.

Interestingly, Ella's discovery of Marie's body is marked by a sort of secularized stigmata, similar to the phenomena reported by Catholic mystics who relived physical symptoms of Christ's execution: “The back of my head was damp and sticky. ... When the stars disappeared I lifted my head and lowered my arms. Drops of blood left the broken psoriasis patches in the creases of my elbows and rolled down my arms to meet the blood on my hands. ... I stared at the tracks of blood. ‘This is the place, isn't it?’” (*The Virgin Blue* 241). However, unlike the tale within Gospel accounts, when the stone is removed from the opening to Marie's place of entombment, Ella is confronted not with an angel and the folded Shroud of Turin, but with something far grislier and more corporeal: the sight of a bones, blue cloth, and a strand of hair, “red like mine,” prompting intense *déjà vu*, and a flash of mournful identification with Isabelle (*The Virgin Blue* 264). Ella's drop to the ground and unintentional repetition of

Isabelle's prayer, the thirty-first Psalm, reconfigures both characters as the Virgin figure gazing down at *her* slain offspring in *Le Christ Descendu*, at a moment that offers little hope in the form of a risen child. Likewise, both characters' expressions of maternal loss while clutching the blue thread against their cheeks echo "the Virgin's face, dead centre in the painting, moved and changed, pain and a strange peace battling in her features as she gazed down at her dead son, *framed by a color that reflected her agony*" (*The Virgin Blue* 63, emphasis added). The implication is clear: Like Christ in Tournier's painting, Marie has died for patriarchy's sins—yet the wide-eyed hope she embodied from birth (6) has yet to be resurrected. Her tale has instead been arrested at a static moment of anguish and despair—something for which Ella and Isabelle metatemporally mourn. Ella's somber remarks elsewhere in the text reflect this suspended state of affairs: "the Virgin is always mourning the death of her son" (*The Virgin Blue* 227).

By allowing the Virgin Mary, Isabelle, and Ella to experience simultaneous loss within the text, despite separation by centuries (or, in the Virgin's case, millennia), Chevalier has narratively achieved Tournier's aesthetic goal, "the quest for a suspended, timeless universe" (Musee des Augustins). Furthermore, by mirroring the moments visually as well as symbolically, Chevalier has crafted picture within a picture: Ella's suffering reflects Isabelle's, which in turn, reflects the Virgin's—once again replicating Tournier's technique as well as his iconography. Of course, this tendency to visually layer one moment in time over another shows itself elsewhere in Tournier's artwork, as well. In his 1624 painting *Saint Paul écrivant les épîtres*, the elements on Paul's desk at first appear anachronistic. Scrolls appear alongside flat sheets, as well as a printed and bound copy of the Bible. Taken together, however, the items represent a progression from first-century techniques of recording scripture to seventeenth-century methods. Their visual juxtaposition suggests the macrohistoric importance of the scene, as well as later readers' co-collaborations in creating scriptural text; in other words, by opening a printed Bible such as the one to Paul's right (and the viewer's left) and interacting with the text, a reader can somehow insert him or herself into the moment of its inspiration and inscription, blurring past and present in a way that disrupts temporal boundaries altogether. In a visual turn that further emphasizes this moment, Tournier extends both the image's pictorial and symbolic space by including a reflection—a picture within a picture, or *doorkijkje*, as his Dutch contemporaries would have described it—on the table's surface (Safit 61). Rather than mirroring Paul's face, the reflection is that of Christ, complete with thorny crown, an image that further complicates



the ontological status of the moment. Paul is at once reflecting Christ and becoming Christ through his writing, thus appropriating the symbolic power of the Christic imagery itself.

In many ways, Tournier's aesthetics are not his alone, but a reflection of his larger-scale artistic influences, which a Musée des Augustins interpretive guide describes as "typically Caravaggesque": "From Caravaggio," the online guide explains, "Tournier borrowed a sense of grandeur, a true monumentality and a theatrical light that reveals or obscures at will" (Musée des Augustins). Chevalier, in turn, borrows this theatrical light from Tournier, using it multiple times within the novel as an illuminative tool—and thereby reflecting *her* artistic influences and inspiration. When Ella first comes upon the *Christ Descendu* painting in Toulouse, the moment is marked by a brilliant flash in her vision, which makes her "look toward a painting on the opposite wall. A shaft of light had fallen across it and all I could see was a patch of blue" (*The Virgin Blue* 62). Conversely, the narrative scene falls black when Chevalier wishes to suggest horror, but at the same time obscures its explicit details, as in Etienne's beating of Isabelle "till the room went black" (147) and Isabelle's discovery of her daughter's fate: "No! Isabelle cried, and threw herself onto the hearth, sobbing and banging her head against the stone. ... Then there was no more blue; all was red and black" (264).

Light and shadow support one another in Caravaggesque artwork, despite their often violent contrast. Rene Huyghe points out Tournier's serene, balanced handling of these elements in particular, as an example of "equilibrium ... similar to the harmony of Gothic statuary" (272). Likewise, Chevalier attempts to establish some sort of harmony between light and shade in Ella's dreams. Early on in *The Virgin Blue*, Ella suggests that the vivid blue in her dreams is "bright and yet dark, too ... It's beautiful but in the dream it makes me sad. Elated too. It's like there are two sides to the colour" (52). Later in the novel, as Ella struggles to describe her nighttime visions to a cousin in Switzerland, she again references their visual and emotional ambiguity—and likens their hues once more to those found in Tournier's paintings of the Virgin Mary:

It has two parts: there's a clear blue, the top layer, full of light and ... It moves with the light, the colour. But there's also a darkness underneath the light, very somber. The two shades fight against each other. That's what makes the color so alive and memorable. It's a beautiful colour, you see, but sad too. ... even when [Christ] is born. Like she knows already what will happen. But then when he's dead the blue is still beautiful, still hopeful. It makes you think that nothing is completely one thing or the other; it can be light and happy, but there is always that darkness underneath. (227)



Tellingly, the novel's final moments are illuminated, rather than cast in shadow. Isabelle kneels in prayer at a crossroads, bathed in a blue light that is then reflected in her son's eyes before he "looks around and takes the road leading west," back to France, and, more importantly, away from the site of Marie's murder (302). Likewise, this blue is reflected in the sky above Ella as she swims in a river, echoing the actions of her ancestress—albeit in a century and relational situation that portend a far happier ending, in her case.

Chevalier's treatment seems to imply that Jacob and Ella both are destined to overcome the Tournier family's gruesome history. Yet Isabelle's illumination in those final, meditative moments—reflective of Mary's enigmatic, kneeling pose in *Le Christ Descendu* as she seems to similarly search for comfort in the face of violent death—is also transformative, in that it allows Isabelle to transcend the patriarchal cruelty that has externally robbed her of her daughter, her religion, and her power. Through her appeal to her "Holy Mother"—still an outlawed icon, by her husband's brutal standards—Isabelle is granted "solace," if but "for the briefest moment" (*The Virgin Blue* 302). Even more poignantly, she is granted a sense of what she has never been allowed to have: subjectivity, self-determination, a choice. Her road from this point is not spelled out; nevertheless, she has once again aligned herself with a higher power than Etienne's, and, notably, it bears a feminized face.

Gendered and temporal restrictions are not the only boundaries Chevalier's characters transcend. Isabelle's social status as a rural peasant certainly affects her fate. The du Moulin family's roots are humble; Isabelle's father owns a small farm and is looked upon with disdain. "My family is poor, we have nothing, but they are rich, they have a Bible, a horse, they can write. ... Jean Tournier is the Duc de L'Aigle's *syndic*, collecting tax from us," she muses to herself on the eve of her engagement (*The Virgin Blue* 15). Chevalier's elevation of a Languedoc peasant to Virgin Mary figure echoes the typical Caravaggesque conflation of working-class humanity and divine representation. Caravaggio himself aimed to re-establish the "reality" of biblical stories and characters, and did so provocatively, painting the *Conversion of St. Paul* (1600-1601) in rustic tones, with a horse's rump predominating the foreground and blocking the dramatic lighting so common to Caravaggesque works (Huyghe 192). Kitson describes Caravaggio's treatment of religious subjects in similar terms, opining that the painter "excels in truth to the physical and psychological facts" of a scene:

His Bible episodes take place in dark corners, his Christs and Saints are dressed in drab clothes and are often half-obscurd by shadow.

They are not larger or purer than life but, on the contrary, tough working men who would hardly stand out in a crowd. Ordinary people press round them. ... Moreover Caravaggio sometimes shows both saints and peasants with dirty feet. (101)

Perhaps Caravaggio's own somewhat spotty background influenced this approach. After all, his life was not one of pampered, leisure-class ennui. He once stabbed a man to death at the end of a disagreement in Rome and fled to Sicily, then to Naples, a band of rough mercenaries in pursuit (Vaizey 47). On other occasions, he was arrested for hurling a plate of artichokes at a waiter and for abusing the police themselves (Wilson-Smith 17). Yet Caravaggio's passion for gritty realism was adopted by followers of Caravaggism as well—even those who lived far more pious (and less colorful) lives. Nicolas Tournier's celebrated paintings of the denial of St. Peter, for instance, include numerous earthy details in true Caravaggesque fashion: gambling soldiers, the shadowed, erotic curve of a woman's exposed cleavage. Kitson notes that Caravaggesque depictions of saints as "ordinary" people were "held to be disrespectful to religion," by many of the Caravaggesque painters' seventeenth-century European contemporaries, "with the result that Caravaggio's altarpieces were regularly rejected by the church authorities who had ordered them" (101).

Etienne's early revulsion at Isabelle's resemblance to the Virgin Mary echoes this historical Western aversion to the intermingling of Christian iconography with the base and the common. As a youth, Etienne is among those jeering "*La Rousse!*" when Isabelle is forced to topple the statue in the blue niche. Later, he displaces blame for his parents' rejection of the peasant girl, redirecting it at her red hair and "idolatrous" affinity with the Virgin, instead of the complex sociocultural prejudices that marginalize her: "If they don't like you," he tells her, "it's your own fault, *La Rousse*" (*The Virgin Blue* 16). Marie's similar appropriation of a divine symbol—the donning of her blue underskirt—would simply be interpreted as child's play in another cultural setting. Yet in a tense Huguenot community beset with strict hierarchal boundaries governing gender and status, it is the transgression that makes her a target for sacrifice, and her mother a target for scorn. Rather than confirm Etienne's patriarchal authority as the head of the household, Marie's subversion challenges its very spiritual and theological validity, by alluding to a feminized icon to whom she and her mother may instead direct their prayer and appeals. Etienne and the larger Calvinist community cannot tolerate the challenge to gendered and social hierarchies that such an act would suggest.

It is important to note that Etienne's violence against his daughter is not a solitary man's crime; rather, it is a condoned execution and serves as a microcommunal repudiation of Marie's transgressive behavior. The slaying is aided and abetted by Petit Jean as well as Gaspard, and although it is almost certain that everyone else in the family knows what the three of them have done with Marie's body, nobody will speak of it to Isabelle directly. Hence, she is walled out, further marginalized, by this collective closing of rank. Her voice, re-experienced by Ella only in hazy dreams as Isabelle fervently chants the thirty-first Psalm, is effectively silenced in its immediate cultural context. In a sense, Isabelle's suffering becomes as mute as the Virgin Mary's in paintings, for her voice has lost its power to influence and guide others, and most importantly, to protect her child.

It is no mistake that when we last see Ella, she is at the end of writing a manuscript about her family's history. Where previously, a figure like Isabelle was historically silenced by gender and class strictures, Ella's final act gives Isabelle—and by extension, Nicholas Tournier's mute Virgins—a voice, subtly reflecting the ability of ekphrastic narratives to transform and break the oppressive silence of previously static, stereotyped female representations in the visual arts. As Andres suggests, such literary reconstructions amount to prosopopeia, the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object, and challenge the socially constructed "laws" of gender, as well as genre ("From Camelot to Hyde Park" 10). When Jean-Paul's potential criticism of Ella's scholarship is mentioned, Elisabeth advises Ella to shrug his opinion off, if unsupportive: "So? It's *your* history, after all. *Our* history" (*The Virgin Blue* 302). In contrast to Etienne's repeated silencing of Isabelle, which had forced her to conceal fundamental facets of her identity and faith, Elisabeth's statement casts middle-class, educated *male* perspectives as the ones that should be considered marginal, at least when it comes to representing female history and identity.

By narratively painting Isabelle, Marie, and finally Ella in symbolic hues of Virgin Blue, Chevalier has aligned their experiences of victimization, and yet paradoxically, their hidden power, with that of Christ's mother. Despite Ella's problematic victimhood—she has far more freedom and subjectivity than either of her sixteenth-century relatives, and hence participates more fully in creating her unhappiness—she is nevertheless still bound by conventions of class and gender which complicate her existence in the present day. When *The Virgin Blue* was first released, a London Times reviewer enthused that it challenged *fanatical* bigotry: "Four hundred years after the Massacre of St Bartholomew initiated waves of religious persecution in France, acts of terrorism by fundamentalists still dominate our front

pages. *The Virgin Blue's* exploration of the prejudices of fanaticists is well placed in today's world" (Times). Yet a careful examination of Chevalier's text casts a dramatic, even Caravaggesque spotlight on more widespread, subtle, and firmly engendered prejudices than those which propel terrorists or similar "fringe" figures. Enduring hostilities between French speakers and Anglophones, the pressures of dual-career couplehood in a culture that persists in privileging male "breadwinner" status, and the intimate strain caused by continued patterns of female disempowerment and silence all contribute to Ella's modern-day sense of displacement and loss. As she and Rick are ending their marriage over lunch, she asserts that her voice has been shut out and distorted over the course of their relationship—a revelation that takes Rick by surprise:

I brought my hand down hard on the table. 'God dammit! *Why* do you do that?'

The few people in the restaurant looked up.

'What?' Rick hissed. 'What did I do?'

'You aren't *listening* to me. You take the metaphor and mangle it. You just won't listen to what I'm trying to say.' (*The Virgin Blue* 283)

Rick seems confused, and unable to grasp the possibility that a separate perspective exists, apart from his own. Ella's entreaties that he consider her point of view simply result in a dismissive, egocentric reframing of the situation ("I see a woman who's lost, directionless, doesn't know what she wants ... And she's bored with her husband, so she fucks the first offer she gets.") that fails to empathize with Ella's alienation from him, or take her voice seriously (283).

Ella's subsequent reclamation of voice and power parallels that of her ancestress, whose final appeal to the Virgin Mary affirms what everyone around her has attempted to deny or suppress: Her independent subjectivity as a woman, and her ability to choose her own path. By employing historic Caravaggesque representations of the Virgin in her fiction—and then amplifying them with her additional appropriation of Caravaggesque *technique*—Chevalier is accomplishing what she later echoed with the use of Pre-Raphaelite iconography in *Falling Angels*: the artful reconfiguration of a static (and stagnant) set of expectations concerning women and their social roles. As with *Falling Angels*, her efforts here "indicate that the past must not merely be read but also seen if it is to be restructured, re-visioned, and understood," in Andres' words ("From Camelot to Hyde Park" 32). Moreover, they invite the reader to question not just previous societal constructs concerning gender and class, but by layering past stories with that of a late twentieth-century heroine, they

invite the reader to question present ones as well. Chevalier's literary revision of Caravaggesque female religious iconography—and the simultaneous reclamation of its power—is a dynamic, challenging act, one which celebrates historic resistance to patriarchal and social oppression while at the same time encouraging *new* acts of defiance, transcendence, and growth.

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