'In a mirror, dimly, then face to face'

Reflecting on bodily sin and spiritual purity in the central female figures of Hugo van der Goes' *Vienna Diptych*

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‘IN A MIRROR, DIMLY, THEN FACE TO FACE’: REFLECTING ON BODILY SIN AND SPIRITUAL PURITY IN THE CENTRAL FEMALE FIGURES OF HUGO VAN DER GOES’ *VIENNA DIPTYCH*

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: "'IN A MIRROR, DIMLY, THEN FACE TO FACE': REFLECTING ON BODILY SIN AND SPIRITUAL PURITY IN THE CENTRAL FEMALE FIGURES OF HUGO VAN DER GOES' *VIENNA DIPTYCH"*

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This thesis seeks to examine the so-called *Vienna Diptych* (1478/1479) by Hugo van der Goes. The two panels of the diptych have been displayed together since the 19th century, yet difficulties in provenance and the dating of the artist's oeuvre have resulted in the continued questioning of its intended creation as a single campaign. This research seeks to assert the diptych's thematic unity through a concentrated analysis of its leading female figures, a vantage point that has not yet been fully addressed in the literature. This paper will therefore examine the iconographic precedents for the unique imagery of the panels and analyze their iterations in the *Vienna Diptych.* The results will demonstrate how the female figures of the panels are related through the moralizing idiom of mirroring, a uniquely medieval concept that was, itself, highly gendered. By examining the *Vienna Diptych* as a single work unified through gendered themes of sin and salvation as exemplified by its female figures, this research hopes to contribute to the small but growing body of research on Hugo van der Goes as well as feminist and postmodern discussions in medieval art history. Finally, the results hope to provide avenues for further research into the role of works like the *Vienna Diptych* in the formation of witch-hunting iconography in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Keywords: Hugo van der Goes, early Flemish painting, feminist medieval studies, animal hybrids, women in early modern art

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Hugo van der Goes' *Vienna Diptych* (figure 1, c. 1477/1479) is one of the most enigmatic and contested works of early Netherlandish painting. Comprising two visually striking panels—*The Fall of Man* and *The Lamentation of Christ*—the *Vienna Diptych* has long been the subject of scholarly debate concerning its unity.[1] The first recorded mention of any part of the work is of the *Lamentation* in the personal household inventory of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in 1659,[2] leading to its long-term association with the Habsburgs and Vienna. The panels arrived separately to Vienna's Gemäldegalerie almost a century later, with the *Lamentation* first displayed in 1780 and the *Fall of Man* exhibited in a different part of the museum approximately twenty years later.[3] The first modern record of its display as a diptych occurred in 1884 when it was in the collection of Vienna's Burgring museum. Even after the panels' reunification and subsequent exhibit as a diptych, its acceptance as a unified work continues to be controversial, in large part because of the observable stylistic differences in the panels as well as conflicting dendrochronology.[4]

The left panel depicting the *Fall* (figure 2) is rendered in fastidious Northern detail, with a rich surface texture and dense symbolism. Eden is lush, green, even decorative, its flowers and foliage recalling a tapestry.[5] The tree of knowledge is laden with fruit and divides the composition in half, a temporal marker of pre-and-post-lapsarian humanity. The languorous

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[1] Erik Eising, "The *Vienna Diptych*," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stefan Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers 2023), 174.

[2] Stefan Kemperdick, "A Painter in the Burgundian Netherlands: Hugo Van Der Goes and his Connections," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stefan Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers 2023), 32.

[3] Kemperdick, "Painter in the Burgundian Netherlands," 32.

[4] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 174.

figure of Eve occupies the center of the composition, flanked by Adam to her right and the Serpent to her left. The First Couple's nudity is obscured, Adam's by his hand and Eve's by flowers carrying symbolic allusions to Christ and the Virgin. The Fall is underway: Eve has already tasted the fruit in her right hand. She twists away from Adam toward the Serpent, reaching up to pluck another fruit for her husband, who absent-mindedly strokes her shining red hair. The sinuous twist of her swelling, idealized figure leading to the reach of her arm forms a sensuous line echoed in the dragon-like body of her tempter. The compressed plane of the composition feels claustrophobic, with the three figures of Adam, Eve, and the curious Serpent forming a down sloping diagonal that mimics the physical fall of the ambiguous landscape behind them and their ideological fall from grace. The action seems frozen, and the faces of the figures are disconnected from one another. The Serpent's physiognomy is perhaps the most striking detail of the *Fall.* Its colorful body, with four clawed feet and curling tail, is topped incongruously with the head of a young woman wearing a quizzical expression and an endearing set of braided "horns."

The *Lamentation* (figure 3), conversely, is nearly alive with psychological drama, its mound of active figures echoing the rise of the hill site of the crucifixion. The gray, brutalized body of Christ has been taken down from the cross and is supported on the lap of the awkwardly squatting figure of Nicodemus, depicted in contemporary burgher's garb and gazing distractedly at the crown of thorns by his feet, which is oddly placed atop Nicodemus' own hat. At Christ's shoulders is the elderly Joseph of Arimathea, and the dolorous blue-clad and veiled Virgin prays over her son to his right. She in turn is supported in her swoon by the youthful John the Evangelist, conventionally beardless and dressed in red, and forming the apex of a sharp diagonal composed of the four central figures. Behind the central group are shown three female

figures. Two among them, the weeping Marys on the left, grasp and kiss the nails of the crucifixion, while a third unknown woman in green throws her hands up in despair. They surround another male figure caught up in the chaos, perhaps a soldier, brow furrowed in frustration or effort. Strikingly separate from the interactive group participating in the drama of the *Lamentation* is the lonely figure of Mary Magdalene. She sits at the left corner of the composition, below Christ's feet as is traditional, yet she is decidedly isolated. Hair covered in a contemporary turban and wearing a white late medieval-style gown with golden embroidered sleeves, she holds her hands demurely in her lap and looks out askance toward the viewer, tears running gently down her pale cheeks. Her quiet grief contrasts with the overt despair of the Virgin and other Marys, further distancing her from the unfolding spectacle. The landscape of the *Lamentation,* like its figures, departs from the careful verisimilitude of the *Fall.* The planar compression is even more pronounced in the *Lamentation,* and the smudgy green of the location is delineated only by the lone tau cross atop the hill, thrusting before an ominously darkening sky, and the faint yellow flowers that seem to spring up around Christ's body.

Even after nearly two centuries of joint display, scholarship on the diptych has tended to focus on what distinguishes the panels rather than what unifies them.[6] Research has predominantly cited the stylistic differences of the compositions as formal evidence of their separate execution, with many finding an earlier Eyckian influence in the *Fall* that coincides with van der Goes' time in Ghent and proximity to works by Jan and Hubert van Eyck, and the later influence of Rogier van der Weyden in the *Lamentation,* when the artist was living and working closer to van der Weyden's hometown of Brussels.[7] The *Fall* is the only Old Testament

[6] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 174.

[7] Stefan Kemperdick, "The Loss and Rediscovery of an Extraordinary Artist," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss*, eds. Erik Eising and Stephen Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers, 2023), 12.

subject known to be painted by van der Goes, and the typological pairing of the panels' subjects--that of the *Fall* next to the *Lamentation*--is also unusual, and perhaps unique to van der Goes.[8] Dendrochronology and x-ray examinations of the panels' underdrawings have also been conducted to argue for their posthumous joining, though interpretations of these results have been conflicting.[9]

Details of the panels' commissions, provenance, and history of display are as spotty as the artist's biography. Many scholars, including Erik Eising and Bernhardt Ridderboos, believe it was created for the intimate devotions of a private patron,[10] citing its relatively small-scale (each panel a slight 32 x 30 cm compared to the monumental proportions of many of van der Goes' other works) and the emotive drama of the piece (the *Lamentation* in particular draws on the tradition of affective devotional objects in the region designed to incite the empathy of the viewer and provoke an emotional response). The uncertainties surrounding the creation of the diptych are compounded by the frustrating scarcity of surviving documentation related to van der Goes' life and artistic commissions, despite his significant success during his lifetime.[11] The gaps in both biographical detail and provenance have limited broader research into the intellectual and theological contexts that shaped his work, and particularly this diptych, which remains relatively underexplored in terms of its thematic coherence and typological innovation.

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[8] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 166.

[9] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 174.

[10] Bernard Ridderboos, "Mental Illness, the Devotio Moderna, and the Vienna Diptych," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stephen Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers, 2023), 45-46.

[11] Jan Dumolyn and Erik Verroken, with the collaboration of Till-Holger Borchert, "Hugo Van Der Goes in Archival Perspective," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stephen Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers, 2023), 23.

By the 19th century Hugo van der Goes was still known largely through literary sources rather than his own work,[12] and paintings thought to be by the artist were often misattributed.[13] Despite these misattributions, Romantic-era interest in Hugo van der Goes surged thanks in large part to the 1863 publication by Alphonse Wauters of the *Ofhuys Chronicle,* the private reflections of Gaspard Ofhuys. Ofhuys was a brother at the Roode Klooster, a monastery south of Brussels to which van der Goes retreated as a lay brother in the later years of his life. The chronicle details van der Goes' struggle with mental illness, which, as Kemperdick observes, "accorded perfectly with contemporary notions of the cursed genius."[14] Despite the misplaced emphasis on his mental illness resulting from the popularity of Ofhuys' chronicle, the fact that van der Goes existence is corroborated mainly in written sources rather than his own visual legacy supports researching contemporary literary works, both historical and popular/religious, to better interpret his oeuvre.

Stephan Kemperdick notes that, of the ten paintings comfortably attributed to the artist since after 1897, the only one actually documented to be by Hugo van der Goes is the *Portinari Altarpiece* (c. 1475)*,* thanks to better genealogical records in Italy.[15] This single verifiable work has led to most of his attributions being based on "stylistic criteria proceeding from the *Portinari Altarpiece,"*[16] as well as the painting forming a kind of central lynchpin for determining the dates of the remaining works; however dating the artist's oeuvre has remained complicated. Discussion of the artist's works as stylistically derivative of predecessors like van Eyck and van der Weyden persisted to the modern period, as did the Romantic-era obsession with his mental

[12] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist," 11.
[13] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist," 11.
[14] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist,"12.
[15] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist,"12.
[16] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist,"12.

illness. Erwin Panofsky searched for insanity as support for a later date for certain works that, per the art historian, demonstrated " 'that mixture of elation and horror which always accompanies the experience of the sublime.'"[17] As scholars like Shira Brisman have noted, the work of Hugo van der Goes is susceptible to anachronistic interpretations, perhaps especially in the face of his difficult attributions and patchy biography. The desire for a definitive timeline of his works in the face of scant documentation has, therefore, led to a more-or-less two-pronged approach in which works are interpreted stylistically as "Eyckian" (pre-Portinari) or "Rogieresque" (after Portinari) and iconographically as pre-or-post mental breakdown. The controversy surrounding the dating of his oeuvre has also no doubt contributed to the seeming reluctance within the literature to discuss Hugo van der Goes on his own terms and within his own historical milieu.

The research surrounding the *Vienna Diptych* encapsulates the difficulties unique to studying Hugo van der Goes. The panels are stylistically different (though this assertion itself is contested by recent scholarship)[18] and dendrochronologically diverse. Earlier efforts to make the diptych "fit" within proposed timelines resulted in Jochen Sander's decision to "divide it, too, assigning the *Fall of Man* to the early period and the *Lamentation* to the late one."[19] The panels of the diptych had been displayed together since 1884, with few questioning their belonging together before Sander somewhat prematurely proposed the separation based on an erroneous formal analysis that determined the horizon line in the *Lamentation* was added later in order to produce the continuous horizon line seen in the diptych and better coordinate the disparate

[17] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist,"12.
[18] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 176.
[19] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist,"12.

panels.[20] Despite the current timeline being mostly accepted within the academic community,[21] the theoretical division of the *Vienna Diptych* proposed by Sander has persisted as a possibility alongside continued anomalies in the oeuvre. The results of dendrochronology and examinations of the underdrawings have done little to clarify the question of the diptych's unity, and the lack of historical documentation and provenance leaves only formal and iconological methods of establishing its intended exhibition.

This project builds on the foundational scholarship of figures such as Bernard Ridderboos, who has worked to reconstruct van der Goes' visual and intellectual milieu; the archival and formal research in favor of the diptych's unity by Erik Eising and Mark Kemperdick; and Mark Trowbridge, who has argued convincingly for the thematic unity of the *Vienna Diptych* based on corresponding imagery of the Magdalene in contemporaneous religious dramas. This paper hopes to contribute to their work in establishing the *Vienna Diptych's* thematic unity through a close examination of its central female and female-gendered figures: *The Fall's* Eve and the Serpent and the *Lamentation's* Mary Magdalene and Virgin.

Despite recent scholarly attempts to assert the *Vienna Diptych*'s unity, the treatment of its central female figures in the context of the medieval theological and moral symbology of mirroring reveals a deliberate conceptual and ideological coherence that has yet to be fully theorized. A focus on the iconographies of the hybrid serpent with a woman's head in *The Fall of Man* and its relationship to Eve, and the figure of Mary Magdalene in *The Lamentation* alongside her reflective counterpart in the Virgin will suggest that these figures are linked through the medieval concept of mirroring (amid a broader fascination with specular and optical imagery)

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[20] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174.
[21] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist,"14.

and are reflective of a complicated relationship to the idea of femininity and its potential for transmutation. Physical transmutation, as seen in van der Goes' Serpent, represented transgression to medieval audiences while spiritual multiplicity, a hallmark of Christ, the Virgin, and the Magdalene, was lauded as transcendent. The concept of hybridity, furthermore, carried for the medieval mind a wide range of implications that reflected the tenuous ethnic, social, and geopolitical distinctions in constant flux during the early modern period and was very often linked to structures seeking to perpetuate patristic systems of power. [22]

Both physical and spiritual hybridity derived from the broader framework of specularity, a wide-reaching ideology that used mirror symbolism as a moral allegory with both positive and negative connotations. Mirror symbolism in the 15th century was not, by and large, represented by a physical mirror object (although specular, reflective objects were common with the advancement of both optical technology and the oil painting medium). More often, the mirror was a metaphor for a person or doctrine worthy of emulation, as evidenced by the proliferation of *speculum* (mirror) titles in this period that relied on the metaphor to interpret, among other themes, physiognomy, typology, and morality. The openness to spiritual transmogrification exemplified the Magdalene and the Virgin, for example, is reflective of moral and spiritual perfection, aspirational if not achievable. Therefore, these figures were considered as ideal models for women in particular and frequently described as mirrors of exemplary female behavior. Conversely, the mirror's power to distort or invert images was also employed in negatively connoted mirror symbols, most powerfully visualized in hybrids, whose biform physiognomy was thought to reflect the duplicity of their character. These are only two examples

[22] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: On Difficult Middles.* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

of how the mirror discourse could be visualized in painted works like the *Vienna Diptych;* the concept was pervasive, complex, and took many forms, as will be discussed in this paper.

The physical and spiritual pluralism embodied by the key female figures of the *Vienna Diptych* indicates a potent symbolic link between the panels that supports its acceptance as a diptych and establishes a shared visual vocabulary of misogyny rooted firmly in medieval theological exegesis that relied on the mirror as a spiritual and moral metaphor. These liturgical traditions, widely disseminated in provocatively illustrated copies, emphasize the duplicity of Eve, the consequences of her pride, and the spiritual blindness indicated by her trust of the Serpent, all while submitting her failure as evidence for the inferiority of women. Her moral transgression is reflected in the composite figure of the female-gendered serpent. Mary Magdalene as she was revered by Hugo van der Goes' time was likewise a liturgical construction, bearing almost no resemblance to her brief appearance in the Bible. Her attributes became an amalgam of Biblical figures that produced a relatable Saint who could mimic the exalted Virgin but never attain her spotless status, thereby embodying a much more appropriate intercessor for penitents and, especially, acting as a moral mirror for female spirituality that did not threaten the patriarchal Church or prevailing gender norms.

There are four other female figures contained within the diptych: the three Marys in the *Lamentation* and, cryptically, a *grisaille* of Saint Genevieve on the *Fall's* verso. Scholars have observed that the prevalence of figures and the unusual inclusion of the Saint demonstrate the "central role of female figures"[23] in the diptych and possibly point to its creation for a wealthy

[23] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*," 174.

woman for whom Genevieve was the patron saint.[24] This suggestion certainly aligns well with the positioning of the Magdelene as a mirror for aspirational female spirituality. However, as the circumstances of the diptych's commission and subsequent provenance remain contested,[25] this research will concern itself with the foregrounded female players on the *recto* of the panels firmly attributed to van der Goes as a means of establishing the diptych's unity. It is the relationships between Eve, the Serpent, the Virgin, and Mary Magdalene that best express the complicated theological and ideological cross-referencing that informed Hugo van der Goes' unique visual vocabulary. Specifically, the mirror imagery observable in a formal analysis of the diptych is echoed by the relationships between these female figures across the panels. The mirror analogy carries multiple meanings and can extend from a clear reflection of mortal faults to a deliberate obfuscation of spiritual reality as a means of expressing the inability of mortals to fully comprehend the divine, and the foolishness of those who attempt to do so.[26] The use of optical and mirror imagery as spiritual metaphor is pervasive throughout the diptych and exemplified by the relationships between its central female figures.

While his figures are not iconographically innovative in and of themselves, as the iconographic examination below will demonstrate, van der Goes' renditions of earlier prototypes

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[24] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174. Saint Genevieve was associated with Paris rather than the Burgundian Netherlands, and no historical figure has been suggested as a patron. There is an alternate *vita* of a Saint Genovefa of Brabant detailed in Voragine's *Golden Legend.* The inscription on the *Vienna Diptych*'s *grisaille* reads "Sancta Genovefa," but she holds Genevieve's attributes of a book and candle, so it is unclear whether this Saint was conflated with the patron saint of Paris.

[25] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*"174. Eising notes that this *grisaille* is only one of two potentially done by van der Goes, and this is the only example of Saint Genevieve in Netherlandish art. Even so, *Saint Genevieve*'s attribution to van der Goes is considered secure, with only Bernard Ridderboos (according to Eising) remaining unconvinced.

[26] The title of this paper makes referenced to I Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." The first part is often translated as "For now we see through a glass, darkly," in which "glass" and "mirror" are interchangeable but can carry very different meanings. This verse, attributed to Saint Paul, was pivotal in advancing the mirror as a spiritual metaphor.

are unusually vivid and distinctive, as are his compositions. His influence on later generations of artists is well documented[27] and, because of the distinctive quality of his works, can be relatively easily traced, as can van der Goes' own sources. His depictions of the Serpent, Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin in *The Vienna Diptych* participated in, and possibly contributed to, a longstanding visual and theological tradition that draws from diverse textual sources including the rabbinical midrash of Lilith, extra-Biblical descriptions of the Serpent, Christian texts emphasizing woman's moral weakness and capacity for deceit, and theological exegesis that saw the enigmatic figure of Mary Magdalene rebranded to suit the patriarchal views on women in the Church.

Popular secular traditions that drew upon the Genesis narrative and furthered the iconography of the woman-headed serpent included the *Roman de Mélusine,* a courtly romance often accompanied by lurid illustrations. These texts found visual expression in a range of media available to van der Goes, including illuminated manuscripts, bestiaries, and popular mystery plays. These latter performances, which often dramatized Biblical episodes with heightened emotional and moral didacticism, exerted an as-yet underexamined influence on how van der Goes depicted Biblical women including the female-gendered Serpent, Eve, and the Magdalene. While acknowledgments have been made in the literature regarding the importance of theater to van der Goes, the depth of its influence on his work has been under-explored and provides an important medium through which to examine the pervasiveness of mirroring as a moral and theological concept, as theater itself is an act of mimesis and therefore functions within the mirror framework.

[27] Dumolyn, Verroken, and Borchert, "Archival Perspective," 23.

These theological, literary, and visual lineages not only demonstrate the specific influences that shaped van der Goes' diptych but also argue for a broader interpretive framework: that the *Vienna Diptych* offers a concentrated articulation of how medieval Christian art cast women as a moral and ontological Other through hybridized imagery that linked the female body existing outside of patriarchal control with the bestial and the demonic, and the acceptable female model as submissive and receptive. This gendered association played a crucial role in shaping the cultural imagination of the late Middle Ages and laid the groundwork for the gendered violence of the early modern witch hunts, during which women were frequently accused of consorting with animal familiars or assuming beastly forms. This worldly state of sinfulness was contrasted with the spiritual perfection achieved through humility and submission, as exemplified by the reformed Magdalene. These moralizing motifs fit within the prevalent cultural metaphor of the mirror, in which physiognomy reflected the soul and humanity was the flawed image of God.

Though the impact of van der Goes' *Vienna Diptych* on subsequent artistic or social developments is impossible to quantify precisely, (especially given his limited oeuvre and incomplete biography), scholars still agree on his wide-reaching influence. His skill and proliferation as a draftsman have been noted as particularly conducive to engraved copies, a medium facilitating widespread dissemination. [28] The *Vienna Diptych,* therefore, stands as a powerful visual index of the escalating misogynist anxieties that would come to dominate early modern European culture. As such, this study positions the diptych not only as an aesthetic object but also as a document of the ideological transitions that exemplified the turn of the 16th

[28] Stephanie Buck, "Hugo van der Goes as a Draftsman," in *Hugo van der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stephan Kemperdick (Hirmer: 2023), 67.

century, and potentially one with an underestimated influence on this ideology. Through a formal, iconographic, and sociohistorical analyses of Eve, the Serpent, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin within late-medieval mirror discourse, this study demonstrates that this uniquely medieval doctrine furnishes the most economical explanation for the diptych's unity and reception.

Literature Review

The literature concerning the *Vienna Diptych* is relatively limited. Much of the research has focused on the panels individually, with studies on the *Fall of Man* focusing on the origins of its iconography and examinations of the *Lamentation* largely grounded in formal analyses that look to either distinguish it from, or relate it to, the *Fall.* The impact of religious theater has been briefly discussed as a source for the *Diptych's* iconography; however, as discussed, the extent of this influence remains under-theorized as a method for unifying the panels, and this research hopes to suggest it as significant to the *Diptych's* imagery not only as personally influential to the artist, but as an important manifestation of the pervading mirror ideology.

As previously observed, the body of scholarly literature devoted solely to the works and biography of Hugo van der Goes is surprisingly and frustratingly limited. The first monographic exhibit devoted to the artist was mounted in 2023 in Berlin, with the accompanying catalog containing important new scholarly contributions.[29] However, this catalog, like most research on van der Goes, is necessarily biased towards his more famous and better-documented works, and indeed a majority of the works exhibited are not attributed the van der Goes, but followers and contemporaries. The lack of historical documentation on the *Vienna Diptych* has resulted in a combination of formalist and historicist methodology in the bulk of literature on the work that focuses on the origins of its iconography and its stylistic similarities to contemporaries like Jan van Eyck, Dieric Bouts, and Rogier van der Weyden.[30]

[29] Erik Eising and Stephan Kemperdick, eds, *Hugo van der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss* (Hirmer Publishers, 2023).

[30] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist," 12.

Some of the earliest scholarship on the *Diptych* was more historiographic in nature, focusing on the influence of mystery plays on the iconography of the *Fall* in particular. John K. Bonnell, for example, argues that mystery plays were the artist's primary source for his human-headed serpent. Others have superficially acknowledged the impact of religious drama on van der Goes' work while proposing a more reflexive interpretation that encompasses a unique intersection of sources that cannot necessarily be traced in order of influence. Again, there is very little recent research specifically linking imagery in the *Vienna Diptych* with religious dramas, with Mark Trowbridge forming an important exception.

There is a wealth of research on the history of the female-serpent hybrid in art and culture that encompasses a wide range of methodologies, the more contemporary of these observing the iconography through feminist and post colonialist lenses. Hybridity as a sociopolitical concept as well as a theological one has likewise been well discussed in the literature, and its prevalence as both an ideological concept and a physical phenomenon is examined by scholars who study bestiaries and physiologs that affirm the theological teachings of the period. Van der Goes' Serpent, however, has been discussed infrequently outside of its inclusion in comprehensive discussions on 15th century Flemish iconography.

Others like Bernard Ridderboos have sought to interpret the *Vienna Diptych* from the perspective of the artists' biography. These scholars emphasize his documented mental health struggles and role as a lay brother within the Roode Klooster where he lived the last years of his life. Based on the limited breadth of the extant scholarship presented above, the following literature review will synthesize the formal, iconographic, and historiographic research concerning the *Vienna Diptych.*

Formal Studies

The most recent scholarship by Erik Eising, Stefan Kemperdick, and Bernhard Ridderboos on the *Vienna Diptych* was conducted in anticipation of the 2023 exhibit and is partially devoted to addressing the dating of the individual panels and new attempts to determine their relatedness. In his catalog entry on the diptych, Erik Eising addresses the continued controversy surrounding the dating of the panels but contests the use of dendrochronological results as evidence in support of a separate interpretation.[31] Eising also emphasizes the centrality of female figures, extending the discussion to include the enigmatic *grisaille* of *Saint Genevieve* on the verso of the *Fall of Man* panel. Eising suggests the possibility of a female patron for the work as possibility for the unusual prominence of female figures in the *Vienna Diptych,* but does not expand on the roles of the figures within an iconological context as a means of linking the panels.[32]

Peter Klein and Monika Strolz agree with Eising on the problem of using the dates of the wood panels as evidence for their separateness, with Eising noting that the 6-year age difference between the panels "has only limited relevance, as much greater differences can often be observed between the boards of a single 15th century panel."[33] Furthermore, as mentioned above, Jochen Sanders had, in defense of separate dates for the panels, asserted that the mountain ridge in the *Fall of Man* was a later addition incorporated to match the horizon line of the *Lamentation,* but this was disproven by Strolz, who, per Eising, "was able to demonstrate that the ridge in the *Fall of Man* was part of the original painting campaign."[34]

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[31] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*," 174.
[32] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*,"174.
[33] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174.
[34] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174.

Arguments for a single painted campaign as synthesized by Erik Eising, aside from the aforementioned dendrochronology results and confirmation of the existence of the ridgeline in the original painting, also include the consistent use of the *sgraffito* technique in both panels[35] (used to achieve the detail in Eve's hair and the bite marks of the apple), and new research demonstrating the extent of Rogier van der Weyden's influence on both panels through close formal comparisons and examinations of the underdrawings.[36] Although Eising leans in favor of a unified campaign, he concedes that the "the issue of the different reception of the two Biblical scenes remains unresolved."[37] He attributes this to the fact that, while numerous copies of the *Lamentation* survive, only a few of the *Fall* exist, and these deviate significantly from the original.[38] Eising says this discrepancy could be used to argue for the individuality of the paintings, but "could also be due to the fact that the depiction of the *Fall of Man* deviates significantly from iconographic tradition."[39] He notes further that the *Fall of Man* was not a common subject in 15th century Netherlandish panel painting, especially as depicted by Hugo van der Goes, and its typological pairing with the *Lamentation* was almost unheard of.

Stephan Kemperdick observes the stylistic differences that separate Hugo van der Goes' early work from his later work as well as how they distinguish him from Rogier van der Weyden: "The faces of women and angels become rounder and softer in Hugo's later works, such as the Berlin *Nativity* (1480) and the *Vienna Diptych."*[40] Kemperdick distinguishes van der Goes from other artists, especially van der Weyden, by emphasizing the oft-observed theatricality of van der

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[35] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174.

[36] Erik Eising, "Hugo van der Goes and the Followers of Rogier van der Weyden," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stephen Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers, 2023), 37.

[37] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 174.

[38] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174.

[39] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*", 174.

[40] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist," 16.

Goes' works, especially those considered later period: "Hugo's figures are more closely connected with their surrounding space than those of Rogier and Dieric Bouts. They operate as if on a stage. It is no coincidence that his large panels have often been discussed in relation to religious plays, although the validity of this comparison remains debatable. The personages in Hugo's works call to mind flesh-and-blood actors not simply because of their physical presence but also because they no longer fit the story of salvation as obviously as do Rogier's more abstract, planar figures."[41] Kemperdick contests the extent of religious theater's influence on van der Goes' imagery but nonetheless finds analogies between Hugo's compositions and dramatic productions.

Historiography

A historiographic approach has enabled other scholars, like John K. Bonnell and Mark Trowbridge, to suggest a more direct connection between van der Goes and religious theater and political pageantry during his time in Ghent, and the discussion of his works within the context of religious drama has extended to the *Vienna Diptych* as well, not only to his larger panels as suggested by Kemperdick. Specific to Hugo van der Goes' Magdalene, Mark Trowbridge analyzes the figure in the *Lamentation* and proposes a saint play as the primary inspiration for this version.[42] The author begins with dendrochronology on the wood panels of the *Vienna Diptych* as evidence that van der Goes painted *The Fall of Man* while in Ghent.[43] The location of the painting in Ghent is important for the established links between van der Goes and the theater guilds of the city, also useful therefore in linking the panels thematically, at least in their shared

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[41] Kemperdick, "Extraordinary Artist," 16.

[42] Mark Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption in Late-Medieval Art and Theater: The Magdalen as Role Model in Hugo van der Goes's Vienna Diptych," in *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative, Emotional, Physical, and Spatial Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

[43] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 415.

influence of religious drama. Trowbridge believes van der Goes used Mary Magdalene, depicted in an analogous way to her presentation in contemporary mystery plays, to unite the dialectic themes of the *Fall* and *Lamentation*. Most significantly, the article offers detailed research into van der Goes' role in the Ghent drama societies, whose members were very often visual artists. In fact, much of the extant historical documentation on the artist relates to his participation in these performances. This information is noteworthy in light of the scant biographical information available on van der Goes, as well as the fact that very few dramas survive in text form. Importantly, Trowbridge echoes the scholarship that holds that international productions were often drawn from a common set of sources regardless of the local vernacular.[44] Traveling troops using carts were central to the widespread dissemination of these productions and, as Trowbridge helpfully points out, van der Goes had access to an annual staging of the *Fall of Man* in Aalst, to which Ghent sent a contingency of artists each year.[45] Ultimately Trowbridge's chapter gives vital insight into late medieval theater and van der Goes' association with this world. Crucially, this allows Trowbridge to connect the panels of the *Vienna Diptych* through the shared influence of religious drama.

Trowbridge builds on a small but impactful body of work discussing the importance of religious drama to the work of Hugo van der Goes. John K. Bonnell is one of the earliest scholars to suggest that mystery plays provide a template for the artist's unique depictions in the *Vienna Diptych.* Writing in 1917, this old but seminal work on the human-headed serpent's iconographic origins importantly points to the "close relationship between religious drama and Christian art"

[44] Jan Bloemendal, "Biblical Stories on the Medieval and Early Modern Stage: A Transnational Approach," *Journal of the Bible & Its Reception* 11, no. 2 (November 2024): 147–72.

[45] Staging should connote the performance and not the actual environment—most of these productions were performed from carts, in town squares, or even on the steps of churches.

as exemplified by the "correspondence between pictured and dramatic representations of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden."[46] The author is dismissive of previous scholarship linking the Serpent to Lilith, asserting that the iconography first appears in the 13th or 14th century, making a near-eastern or Hebraic influence unlikely.[47] While more contemporary scholarship has argued convincingly for Lilith's influence and against Bonnell's insistence that artists could only have been influenced by other visual sources, the article is significant in its examination of extra-visual sources, especially literary and dramatic, as well as visual examples in manuscripts and sculpture and its particular focus on van der Goes' *Fall of Man.* Notably, Bonnell discusses the panel in isolation, a not insignificant example of how, despite their joint exhibition since the 19th century, the panels *Vienna Diptych* have continued to be subject to separate research.

Stijn Bussels has focused on the form of secular performance peculiar to the Burgundian Netherlands known as *Tableaux Vivants,* or, Joyous Entries. Trowbridge notes van der Goes' involvement with these productions, and Bussels offers a broader analysis of their staging and significance to the region. Bussels notes that the *tableaux* provide an important link between the visual and performing arts, examining how the *tableaux vivants* that were created as parts of welcome ceremonies for dignitaries to lower Netherlandish cities in the 15th century can be considered as a combination of "'theatrical' and 'pictorial.'"[48] He notes the similarity to contemporary stage productions like passion plays and discusses the involvement of visual artists in the production of these *tableaux* as well as evidence of their assimilation in the artists' painted works. In an example highly relevant to van der Goes, Bussels highlights the *tableaux vivants*

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[46] John K. Bonnell, "The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play," *American Journal of Archaeology* 21, no. 3 (1917): 255.

[47] Bonnell, "Serpent with a Human Head," 255.

[48] Stijn Bussels, "Making the Most of Theatre and Painting: The Power of Tableaux Vivants in Joyous Entries from the Southern Netherlands (1458–1635)," *Art History* 33, no. 2 (April 2010): 237.

devices incorporated by the van Eyck brothers in the *Ghent Altarpiece,* such as the banderols coming from the prophet figures on the rearedos.[49]

Regarding Hugo van der Goes' use of *tableaux vivants* imagery in his paintings, Bussels does not refer to the *Vienna Diptych* but does discuss elements of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (figure 14, author dates this to 1470, but recent scholarship in Berlin prefers 1480) as evidence for its incorporation by the artist. Specifically, Bussels cites the prophets holding back a theatrical green curtain, and notes that this is how the *tableaux* were revealed to passersby as they approached. Further documentation also includes references to the figures assuming the same poses and guises as van der Goes' prophets. Bussels says, "the use of the prophets shows that it is hard to separate theatrical and pictorial elements from each other in the Ghent entry. Theater, painting, and *tableaux vivants* used features which were so similar that it is impossible to tell to which medium they originally belonged."[50] Bussels' discussion on *Tableaux Vivants* establishes not only an important bridge between theater and painting, but also their direct influence on works by local artists including van der Goes.

Iconography

A central visual motif in Hugo van der Goes' *The Fall of Man* panel is the woman-headed serpent. His particularly striking version has likely contributed to the tendency for scholarship to focus on this panel more than its companion, yet there is surprisingly little research devoted specifically to van der Goes' serpent. The iconography itself has been thoroughly investigated, with foundational scholarship tracing the origins of this imagery in

[49] Bussels, "Tableaux Vivants," 239.
[50] Bussels, "Tableaux Vivants," 240.

western art to Peter Comestor's highly influential *Historia Scholastica* (c. 1173) and its dissemination through illustrated works like the anonymous (but no less impactful) *Speculum humanae salvationis* (c. early 14th century) and medieval bestiaries. Nona C. Flores[51], Peggy McCracken[52], Angela Giallongo[53], and Sharon Khalifa-Gueta[54] have written monographs on the history of the serpent-woman in western art and culture. Their research emphasizes the female-headed Serpent as a marker of both moral duplicity and feminine transgression, noting how the feminine hybrid was used in medieval religious art to visually encode sin and deceit. The scholarship is in agreement on a confluence of sources producing the imagery that first arose in western art in the 12th century but differs on the depths of their respective influences. Research has tended to focus on a handful of avenues that link the Serpent's relationship to the midrash of Lilith, attribute the iconography to theological and popular literary traditions like Peter Comestor and the *Roman de Mélusine,* visual iterations found in bestiaries and physiologs that echo the literary descriptions, and extant religious dramas depicting the Fall*,* including the *Jeu d'Adam* (12th century).

One of the only works dedicated specifically to van der Goes' serpent was written in 1965 by Robert Koch, who asserted that the creature in Hugo Van Der Goes' *Fall of Man* must be a salamander because of its webbed hands and feet and smooth multi-colored skin.[55] Koch is alone in his identification of the serpent as a salamander, with most other scholars agreeing on its

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[51] Nona C. Flores," 'Effigies amicitiae...veritas inimicitiae': Antifeminism in the Iconography of the Woman-Headed Serpent in Medieval and Renaissance Art and Literature," in *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996).

[52] Peggy McCracken*, In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[53] Angela Giallongo, *The Historical Enigma of the Snake Woman from Antiquity to the 21st Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

[54] Sharon Khalifa-Gueta, *The Woman and the Dragon in Premodern Art*, Amsterdam (Amsterdam University Press, 2023).

[55] Robert A. Koch, "The Salamander in Van Der Goes' Garden of Eden," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28 (1965): 324.

physiological equation with the draconcopedes (at least from the point of visual influences found in bestiaries). Though current scholarship disagrees with Koch's categorization of van der Goes' hybrid, the article is important nonetheless in its discussion of likely textual and visual sources, especially in its introduction of bestiaries as an important influence to artists like van der Goes. Furthermore, Koch's short article is among the only scholarship that directly addresses van der Goes' Serpent as distinct, rather than as an example of prevailing iconography within a broad art historical context. Koch points to a specific natural treatise that that van der Goes likely had access to, the *Tractatus de proprietatibus rerum* (Bartholomaeus Anglicus, 13th century). He notes its local popularity and the fact that documents show a copy was being produced in the Roode Kloster while van der Goes lived there as a lay brother, pointing to the availability of works like these to the artist.[56]

As discussed, numerous scholars have situated the iconography of the woman-headed serpent within the context of the rabbinic tradition concerning Lilith, with much of this research applying contemporary feminist methodology. In chapter 5 of her book *The Woman and the Dragon in Pre-modern Art,* Sharon Khalifa-Gueta identifies Lilith as the source for the imagery that departs from the Biblical narrative.[57] She asserts that Christianity took the legacy of anguiped/serpent goddesses from the Near East and antiquity and inverted its connotations through the Eve myth, "transforming it into an allegory of all women and into a fundamental aspect of Catholic theology.…"[58] Her research suggests the iconography may not have arisen

[56] Koch, "Salamander," 323.
[57] Khalifa-Gueta, *Woman and the Dragon,* 193.
[58] Khalifa-Gueta, *Woman and the Dragon,* 194.

spontaneously in the 12th century but was likely resurrected from a long-standing visual tradition that coincided with renewed interest in Greco-Roman antiquity.

Biography

As noted previously, the fact of Hugo van der Goes' mental illness has made his biography an intriguing avenue of research for scholars, the lack of documentation notwithstanding. Apart from the account by Gaspar Ofhuys, there is not much in the way of archival evidence of the artist's life and commissions. Biographical research into the provenance of the *Vienna Diptych,* as a challenging work existing within a notoriously difficult oeuvre, has therefore not been prioritized. The catalog that accompanied the artist's first solo exhibition—titled *Hugo van der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss* in 2023 in Berlin—is presented by the contributors as an updated monograph,[59] containing numerous scholarly essays drawing on the most up to date research on the artist and his works as well as detailed catalog entries on the exhibit pieces. Still, biographical information on the artist is difficult to find and even more difficult to ascertain, even despite the artist's fame and success while alive. This catalog, therefore, is one of only a handful of works dedicated solely to van der Goes and does a thorough job of analyzing the paintings confidently attributed to him as well as synthesizing the available documentary accounts of what is known about his life before his move to Ghent and following his self-isolation as a lay brother at the Roode Klooster in Louvain.

The entries in the Berlin catalog on the *Vienna Diptych*, like most discussions of Hugo van der Goes, make at least a passing mention of his so-called madness. Bernhard Ridderboos,

[59] Dagmar Hirschfelder, "Foreword and Acknowledgments," in *Hugo Van Der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss*, eds. Erik Eising and Stephen Kemperdick (Hirmer Publishers, 2023), 7.

like others before him, looks to relate the imagery to the artist's well-known mental illness and presents the diptych as a reflection of van der Goes' own spiritual turmoil and his association with the lay movement of the Devotio Moderna.[60] The asceticism of this sect, per Ridderboos, could account for the intimacy of the panels as well as the sharp self-admonition the author reads in the *Fall of Man* as reflecting the artist's own struggles with the sin of pride. Ridderboos notes, for example, that the artist received special treatment while at the monastery because of his fame and relationship to the Burgundian court, which perhaps contributed to artist's anxiety about pride and sin. As mentioned, Gaspar Ofhuys, a fellow brother, first reported the artist's mental break and suicidal thoughts, and is quoted as having helpfully said van der Goes' mental illness was a gift from God to show him humility. After the episode, per Ridderboos, the artist further isolated and no longer enjoyed special privileges.[61]

Ridderboos believes, like Erik Eising, that a circa 1479 date should be preferred for the *Fall of Man,* not only because it should be viewed as contemporary with the *Lamentation,* but because he believes the smaller scale, subject matter, and intimacy of the painting suggests it was made for a follower of the Devotio Moderna.[62] Ridderboos asserts that the subject matter of both panels confirms this when viewed in light of van der Goes' struggle with pride as related by Ofhuys, saying, "the relation between the two panels becomes evident as soon as it is understood that the *Fall of Man* represents human pride and the *Lamentation* the humility of Christ."[63] Most importantly, Ridderboos asserts that the *Fall of Man* and *Lamentation* form a thematic unity, though he bases his conclusion on the ideology linking the panels to the artist's experience rather

[60] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 45.
[61] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 45-46.
[62] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 46.
[63] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 46.

than a shared iconographic vocabulary. Per Ridderboos, the oft-observed stylistic differences in the panels commonly cited as evidence for their individual production can be explained by their respective subjects. The "virtuosic wealth of detail of *Fall of Man* and the simplicity and emotionality of the *Lamentation"*[64] reflect the artist's pride in the artistic skill of the *Fall* and, perhaps, the artist's hope for redemption in the looser, more "humble" execution of the *Lamentation.*[65] Ridderboos believes the diptych functions as a mirror of the artist's spiritual struggles and is less a reflection of his madness than of his environment, suggesting another more personal dimension to the mirroring analogy without acknowledging its wider importance as an ideological concept in the late Middle Ages.

In another example of scholarship on both Hugo van der Goes' life and the *Vienna Diptych,* Shira Brisman has likewise commented on the artist's so-called madness and the tendency for scholars to search for signs of its manifestation in his work. In agreement with Ridderboos and Trowbridge regarding its contemporaneity with the *Lamentation,* the author calls theories that suggest the *Fall of Man* was van der Goes' first work a "historian's fiction."[66] She notes that anachronistic concepts like that of the tortured genius complicate attempts to order his works chronologically when scholars seek to define the work as either pre-or-post breakdown. But Brisman believes nonetheless that, though formally indebted to van Eyck, "by virtue of its subject matter...the painting might be the harbinger of its maker's torment, his future fixation on the idea of descent into sin."[67] Brisman essentially presents *The Fall of Man* as evidence for early mental turmoil but concludes that van der Goes's mental illness should not necessarily

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[64] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 47.
[65] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 47.
[66] Shira Brisman, "The Madness of Hugo van der Goes: The Troubled Search for Origins in Early Netherlandish Painting," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 51, no. 2 (2021): 321.
[67] Brisman, "Madness of Hugo van der Goes," 321.

color our interpretations of his work because the connection between genius and psychological distress is a modern one. Brisman is also critical of prevailing methodology and suggests that the tendency to discuss van der Goes in terms of his mental illness is, in part, due to the art historian's discomfort with the inherent elitism of most artistic objects and methods.[68]

Brisman's formal analysis of details unique to van der Goes' *Fall* contributes to her argument that the panels of the *Vienna Diptych* show a "sense of coordination,"[69] both compositionally and ideologically. However, she concludes that the stylistic differences between them and the changes made by the artist evidenced by the underdrawings indicate that they were created at separate times.[70] Though Brisman does not believe the works are chronologically related, her formally oriented research nonetheless makes a case for their thematic relation as well as shared iconographic sources.

Conclusion

There is overwhelming research on the iconography of the serpent with the woman's head, and the literature is in agreement (with some notable exceptions by the likes of Bonnell and Koch) on the origins of van der Goes' Serpent hybrid in the *Fall of Man*. Feminist methodology concerning the gendering of hybrids is thorough and corresponds well with historiographic research that confirms the feminist discussions on gender theory in the medieval period. However, research devoted specifically to van der Goes' Serpent and its influences is limited.

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[68] Brisman, "Madness of Hugo van der Goes," 354.
[69] Brisman, "Madness of Hugo van der Goes," 329.
[70] Brisman, "Madness of Hugo van der Goes," 332.

There is abundant research discussing the popularity of Mary Magdalene to early modern audiences as well as the association of Mary Magdalene, Eve, and the Virgin with specular imagery, though not within the context of the *Vienna Diptych*. Importantly, within the few cursory discussions proposing the thematic unity of the diptych, there has been very little research on the probable link between the panels based on the conceptualization of its central female figures, especially within the context of mirror symbolism. The prominence of the role of women in the panels has been noted by Eising, but he does not expand on this observation as evidence for a unified work or as a visualization of prevailing mirror ideology.

The literature discussing mutability, hybridity, and the physical and symbolic mirroring of Eve and the Serpent in works like van der Goes' *Fall of Man* parallels the research on the early modern conception of Mary Magdalene. The typological and visual mirroring between Eve, the Virgin and Mary Magdalene is a concept well-supported by medieval theology and drama, and numerous scholars have explored the concept from both historical and feminist perspectives, including Penny Howell Jolly[71] and Theresa Coletti.[72] However, the literature examining the mirroring of the Virgin and the Magdalene in visual and literary traditions has not been applied to research on the *Vienna Diptych.*

Scholarship examining the significance of theater and other performance arts like the *Tableaux Vivants* establishes a link between van der Goes and these productions for both panels of the *Vienna Diptych* but has not fully been developed as a methodological means of unifying the panels. Mark Trowbridge suggests the possibility of a theatrical link with the Magdalene and

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[71] Penny Howell Jolly, Picturing the "Pregnant" Magdalene in Northern Art, 1430-1550: Addressing and Undressing the Sinner-Saint (Routledge, 2014).

[72] Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

others have observed the influence of religious performances in *The Fall of Man,* but what this shared influence implies of the panels' relationship has not been fully considered, and never within the mirror framework.

The significance of optical and specular symbolism to the visual vocabulary of the *Vienna Diptych* has, in fact, been only obliquely suggested in the literature. Douglas Brine discusses the importance of reflections in an earlier work by Jan van Eyck, citing contemporary printings of religious literature like Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* (13th century)*,* the apocryphal *Book of Wisdom,* and the widely copied *Speculum humanae salvationis* (anonymous, early 14th century) as literary inspirations.[73] As a mirror-titled work devoted to the concept as it pertains to biblical typology, the influence of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* is a critical yet unexamined link to examining mirror symbolism in a work like the *Vienna Diptych,* the unusual typology of which demands investigation.

Bret L. Rothstein has written a monograph on the importance of sight in medieval theology and discussed how the sense was conceptualized as a spiritual process within Northern art, including van der Goes' *Portinari Altarpiece* (c. 1477-1480) and *Nativity* (1480).[74] He, like Brine, cites contemporary religious mysticism as inspirational to the imagery, especially Thomas à Kempis' highly influential *Imitatio christi* that advocated for man's spiritual mirroring of Christ.[75] Although he does not apply his research to the *Vienna Diptych,* his discussion of other works in the artist's oeuvre is an important step in establishing van der Goes' incorporation of medieval concepts of optical imagery that included metaphorical treatments of mirrors, glass, and even tears.

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[73] Douglas Brine, "Reflection and Remembrance in Jan van Eyck's Van Der Paele Virgin" *Art History* 41, vol. 4 (2018): 600–623.

[74] Bret L. Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, 2005).

[75] Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality*, 197.

Trowbridge is perhaps the only scholar to directly address reflective imagery in the *Vienna Diptych* in his observation of the similarity between the faces of Eve and the Magdalene.[76] His analysis, however, examines the similarity as evidence for the positioning of Mary Magdalene as a bridge between the panels rather than as an example of mirror symbolism. The importance of optical and specular symbolism in medieval Flemish art therefore, has been examined broadly and even applied to works by Hugo van der Goes, but never to the panels of the *Vienna Diptych.* The prevalence of this symbolism in art and theology of the period and its existence in the vocabulary of van der Goes suggests this is a significant aspect of the diptych's unity that has been overlooked. Ridderboos, for example, has remarked on the panels as spiritually complementary, but has not fully examined why van der Goes chose to pair the Fall with the Lamentation when conventional typology usually had the Fall prefiguring the Annunciation.[77] Further research into the mirror symbolism shared by the panels could offer more insight into this unusual grouping, as typological pairings themselves share an analogous function to mirroring, the common perception of which is demonstrated by works like the *Speculum humanae salvationis*.

In sum, the research specific to van der Goes is scant and his attributed works few, making formal comparisons with known works complicated. The artist's oeuvre has proven difficult to date, and his biography has been dominated by the anachronistic fascination with a mad genius. The usual methods of attribution have been either inconclusive or unavailable; therefore, establishing the diptych's unity will require further investigations into the theological and ideological themes shared by the panels supported by the formal characteristics of the works.

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[76] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 432.

[77] As it is presented in the outside panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, often cited as the inspiration for van der Goes' Adam and Eve in *The Fall of Man.* Erik Eising believes this connection is erroneous and that van der Goes most likely relied on Rogier van der Weyden or his followers for his imagery and composition.

The gaps in research that have contributed to the persistent controversy surrounding the unity of the *Vienna Diptych* will benefit greatly from a focused discussion on the diptych's central female figures, a methodological vantage point that has not been the subject of in-depth scholarship. A comprehensive examination of the confluence of theological, literary, and visual sources will enable an analysis of how these figures relate to one another and are positioned within the medieval ideological concept of mirroring, thereby contributing to the field a further means of linking the panels and perhaps assisting in a less speculative discussion surrounding the circumstances of their commission. A thorough examination of the literature indicates that there is room for discussion on particular use of female figures by van der Goes as they function within the mirror framework, thus allowing for a meaningful assessment of how the *Vienna Diptych* affirmed gender roles and contributed to the dissemination of misogynist imagery in which sin and redemption, interpreted through the mirror analogy, are gendered concepts.

Methodology

This thesis will take a qualitative approach to research and will rely on an interdisciplinary methodology grounded in art historical analysis, with particular emphasis on formal considerations, iconographic study, and social history to compare the differing ways in which the two panels of the *Vienna Diptych*—the *Fall of Man* and the *Lamentation*—make strategic use of the mirror concept to emphasize different aspects of this diverse ideology. The central aim is to examine the *Vienna Diptych* by Hugo van der Goes as a thematically unified work through its visual construction of Woman as a bearer of sin, corruption, and exclusion from grace when she does not conform to gender expectations. I will proceed through three interrelated lines of inquiry: close visual analysis, contextual source tracing, and interpretive synthesis informed by feminist and theological scholarship.

The first step will involve a detailed formal and iconographic analysis of each panel of the diptych with a particular focus on female figures. This includes the serpent with a woman's head, Eve, Mary Magdalene, and the Virgin. Special attention will be paid to gesture, posture, gaze, and physiognomy, as well as setting and symbolic motifs to establish an iconological framework. Scientific studies involving under drawing analysis and dendrochronology will also be examined. The second step will center on tracing the theological, literary, and visual sources that shaped the iconographies present in the diptych. This includes research into medieval bestiaries, illuminated manuscripts, apocryphal texts, and dramatic literature such as mystery plays and the lay movement of the Devotio Moderna. These sources will help contextualize van der Goes' unique interpretations within a recognizable tradition of representing the Serpent as a hybrid being and the Magdalene as a penitent outcast. Rabbinical writings, including the legend of Lilith, will be

used to explore the implications of woman-serpent conflation, while Christian sermons, exegetical texts, and visual typologies will aid in interpreting the Magdalene's persona as a patristic construction. Through comparative analysis of these source materials, I aim to reconstruct the visual and intellectual climate in which van der Goes was working to demonstrate how this painting drew upon and reconfigured these traditions.

Finally, this study, though largely historicist, will incorporate gender-critical and feminist research methodologies to assess how the diptych participates in the broader cultural process of "othering" women through visual rhetoric. I will examine how the fusion of female and animal bodies functioned as a representational strategy for reinforcing patriarchal religious ideology. This analysis will also examine early written and illustrated treatises on witchcraft contemporary to van der Goes and suggest how the *Vienna Diptych* reflects growing anxieties about women as morally and spiritually threatening. These methods will hopefully allow for a more layered reading of the *Vienna Diptych* that situates it not merely as a fascinating product of an enigmatic artist, but as a visual exemplar of specularity, a prevailing yet under-examined ideology in late medieval Europe.

Analysis

The following analysis will attempt to contextualize the *Vienna Diptych* and its central female figures within the pervasive medieval ideology concerning mirroring. The mirror, to the medieval mind, had a multivalent function that corresponded to its plural use as a social, theological, and moral metaphor. As Nancy Frelick observes, "The mirror's multiple uses as an object translate into highly diversified symbolic functions in the Middle Ages and early modern period."[78] The title of this thesis references a well-known line from the Bible attributed to Saint Paul from I Corinthians 13:12: "*Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate: tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum.* (For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.)" The dim mirror is a metaphor for the imperfection of worldly sight: mortal men and women can only ever hope to glimpse spiritual perfection obliquely, as if in a dim mirror. Meanwhile our earthly senses should be in constant question. This pursuit itself is a matter of "self-reflection," as if in a mirror.

The recognition of one's own spiritual shortcomings while seeking perfection via a sense that is not to be trusted seems like a contradiction, but for medieval audiences the mirror was simply a metaphorical conduit and could represent good or evil depending on its context. Citing Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Nancy Frelick writes, "in a postlapsarian world, 'both vision and language are imperfect mediators, open to deception. Yet, paradoxically, as pseudo-Dionysius recognized, they represent the only possible approaches to knowledge.' This has important implications for medieval mirrors, which can represent truth or falsehood, virtue or vice,

[78] Nancy Frelick, "Introduction," in *The Mirror in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Brepols, 2016), 1.

revelation or deception."[79] Frelick explains that, because of its diversity as an object, its symbolic functions varied equally and could represent simultaneously self-reflection as a means of spiritual betterment, worldly vanity, or even scientific advancement as an avenue for contemplation. Its association with the flawed sight that was a consequence of Original Sin, furthermore, makes the mirror discourse particularly relevant to Hugo van der Goes' *Fall* panel and perhaps contributes to understanding the psychology behind his selection of this relatively rare subject.

To explain how the mirror functions as both a positive and a negative metaphor in the *Vienna Diptych,* it is necessary to discuss the various ways in which it employs the mirror idiom. Therefore, the following analysis will examine the diptych using a three-fold method that discusses the mirror imagery within formal, iconographic, and sociohistorical sub contexts while integrating more current feminist and gender studies to help clarify medieval gender constructions. The formal analysis will examine the observable characteristics that are grounded in the mirror analogy and incorporate recent scientific findings. The iconographic study will discuss the ways in which Hugo van der Goes' figures draw from a wide variety of religious and popular sources, visual and literary, that are themselves reflective of mirror ideology. The final section on what is known of the social history surrounding the *Diptych's* creation will examine the contemporary movements including religious theater and lay ascetic organizations like the Devotio Moderna that contributed to van der Goes' unique depictions of a long-standing iconography. These movements themselves were, as will be discussed, fundamentally linked to the mirror concept.

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[79] Frelick, "Introduction" in *Mirrors*, 6.

Formal Analysis

What follows is an examination of the formal characteristics of the *Vienna Diptych* that link its depiction of female figures through the mirroring analogy. I will begin by examining the panels individually and then discuss how they interact with one another.

The panels of the *Vienna Diptych* are relatively small (about 34 x 23 cm), but they are no less lavishly painted than Hugo van der Goes' larger works. *The Fall* (figure 2) is especially striking in its fine, jewel-like details, with special attention given to the luminous skin and hair, achieved through a signature *sgraffito* technique. Eve is made the focal point both by her position at the center of the composition and by the pearlescent glow of her white skin. Her sinuous (serpentine?) figure is emphasized by her forward-facing torso twisting into a sensuous *contrapposto.* Eve's body is further elongated by her arm reaching up to grab another fruit, presumably for Adam, though she does not offer it to him, nor does she even acknowledge him directly. Instead, she looks confidently out toward the viewer, gaze somewhat unfixed, perhaps lost in thought as she considers what the Serpent has promised her.

Eve has already taken a bite from the fruit held in her right hand; the fingers of both of her hands are tinged with green, and both fruits seem to ripen in her grasp. Her nudity is obscured not by fig leaves, but by a distractingly blue iris flower, a shade echoed in the vibrant skin of the Serpent to her left. Unusually, the Serpent is not coiled around the tree above Adam and Eve, but stands beside it, below Eve's outstretched arm. In another striking departure from convention, the Serpent does not offer the fruit to Eve, but instead observes Eve's action from the sidelines, holding the trunk between webbed claws, white belly repeating the curve of Eve's swelling form, the position of her legs and tail almost identical to the pose of Eve's lower body.

The Serpent's head is that of a young woman, a girl; her expression is quizzical, perhaps even concerned, with furrowed brow and coarse features. Her gender is undoubtedly female, her red curls recalling Eve's and arranged in two braids high atop her head in a curious, horn-like configuration. In the right lower foreground below the Serpent's curved tail and diabolical clawed dragon's feet, are a shell and coral, talismans against demonic forces.[80] They are shown in a dry riverbed below a little blue bird that finds nothing to drink, running parallel to the Serpent's tail and the curve of Eve's leg in a narrative detail of the loss of Paradise to come from Eve's transgression. Eve is central to the composition and to the instigation of the Fall. She and the Serpent mirror one another, in colors, posture, and crucially, gender, as Eve turns away from her husband toward her feminized co-conspirator.

Scholars have remarked on the unusual composition of a subject already rare in Northern art of the period.[81] In a large majority of visual precedents it is the Serpent in the tree that forms the center of the composition (see figures 7 and 9), dividing the first couple along a symmetrical vertical axis. Van der Goes has placed Eve at the center of the composition, and therefore at the center of the tragedy. The Serpent does not interact with Adam, who is shielded from her by Eve's body. The implications of this arrangement are two-fold: first, Adam is seemingly unaware of the Serpent and therefore led astray only by Eve. Second, Eve is also seemingly unaware of the Serpent, who stands strangely below and beside her, almost like a loyal pet. Erik Eising believes this arrangement could simply be a product of aesthetic necessity; that is, the composition would not have been balanced if the Serpent took on a more conventional form and

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[80] Francesca Balzan and Alan Deidun, "The Significance of Coral: Apotropaic, Medical, Symbolic, Precious" (University of Malta, 2010), 1. Balzan and Deidun interestingly note that the apotropaic power attributed to coral by Christians was derived from the Ancient Greek belief that it had been stained with Medusa's blood, an infamous hybrid serpentine woman.

[81] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 166.

location, given Eve's centrality.[82] But the fact of her centrality is the formal anomaly that demands a more thorough iconographic analysis. Adam's physical separation from the Serpent implies his culpability is lessened, but Eve's psychological separation from the serpent is more complicated and can be explained via the mirror analogy. Eve does not acknowledge the Serpent because they are iterations of one another, the hybrid a manifestation of Eve's inner nature. This relationship is supported by the formal aspects that unite Eve and the Serpent in color, form, pose, and, most especially, gender. With Eve at the center and flanked by her husband and the Serpent, the narrative becomes one of Eve choosing between Adam and the Serpent, reflective of the divergent paths of gender conformity and gender transgression.

Because repetition (of facial features, colors, gender, etc.) is a significant formal manifestation of the mirror idiom, it is important here to note that most artists of this period did not draw from live models, and therefore relied on "types," often originating with earlier artists, and van der Goes is no exception.[83] This can easily explain the similarity between faces within a single work such as the faces of Eve and the Magdalene in the *Vienna Diptych.* However, as Ainsworth points out, Hugo van der Goes' faces are so individuated that they are considered portrait-like rather than simple "types:" "…he introduced portraiture to conflate Biblical narratives and contemporary life, thereby enhancing the participation of the viewer in a devotional 'reality.'"[84] Although van der Goes likely did not rely on specific models for his paintings, he certainly incorporated the faces he saw around him in his paintings in order to generate an unprecedented level of devotional empathy from his viewers.

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[82] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych,*" 166.

[83] Maryann W. Ainsworth, "Hugo van der Goes' Approach to Portraiture," in *Hugo van der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stephan Kemperdick (Hirmer: 2023), 56.

[84] Ainsworth, "Portraiture," 55.

There are a great many precedents, particularly in manuscript illuminations, that more explicitly relate Eve to the Serpent by showing them with identical faces. Particularly alluring versions are found in the *Fall of Man* illumination found in the *Hours of the Virgin* section of the wildly popular *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (figure 8, c. 1411-1416). The lustrous hair and swelling forms of the Serpent and Eve suggest likely influences for van der Goes, either directly or indirectly,[85] as do the figures in Willem Vrelant's 1460s illumination (figure 9). In Vrelant's version the faces of Eve and the Serpent are the same, their hair the same golden yellow, but the Serpent is distinguished by her reptilian body and her courtly hairstyle.

Instead of visual copies, van der Goes' Eve and Serpent can be interpreted as ideological reflections of one another, perhaps an indication of how sophisticated and ingrained the mirroring concept had become by the late 15th century. The research by Ainsworth that examines van der Goes' use of portrait-like figures to enhance the naturalism of his works goes a long way in explaining why the artist gave Eve and the Serpent individual faces while still understanding how these two participate in an ideological and iconographic lineage that equates Eve's inner nature with the Serpent's outer form. The section of this paper dedicated to iconography will expand on this concept, but the shared characteristics of Eve and the Serpent are enough to link them formalistically within the mirror framework.

Van der Goes' *Lamentation* is, like its counterpart, a unique interpretation, albeit of a subject much more common in 15th century Netherlandish art. Eising et al have conducted

[85] Van der Goes had connections to manuscript illuminators throughout his life, having vouched for Sanders Bening in Ghent when he was entering the Guild of Saint Luke as a master. The Roode Klooster, furthermore, was well known for its manuscript library. For more on van der Goes and manuscript illuminations, see Eising, "Rogier van der Weyden," 35, and Katrin Dyballa's essay, "Painter-Monks and Artists in the Monastery," in *Hugo van der Goes: Between Pain and Bliss,* eds. Erik Eising and Stephan Kemperdick (Hirmer: 2023), 49-52.

exhaustive research into van der Goes' probable influences, with Rogier van der Weyden the most often cited.[86] With the *Lamentation* long considered to be the more "Rogieresque" of the panels, it is worth discussing how it diverges from van der Weyden's composition in his *Descent From the Cross* (figure 4, c. 1435), the painting to which it is most often compared. The underdrawings suggest that van der Goes made considerable changes to the figures before arriving at the final composition, especially relative to a similar analysis conducted on *The Fall*.[87] Though variations in the underdrawings have been suggested as evidence for the panels' separateness, van der Goes' departure from conventional arrangements may also be interpreted as an intentional device to link the panels via the mirror analogy.

Unlike van der Weyden's *Descent,* the deposition of Christ's body is not the central activity of the *Lamentation;* rather, the focus is on the grief of the mourners over his lifeless body. In another instance of repetition, a female figure occupies the center of van der Goes' composition, but this time it is the stricken Virgin. She does not swoon in an echo of her son's body, but leans over Christ, her pale face and hands stark against the blue of her dress, the color repeating the blue of Eve's flowers and the Serpent's skin. Her fingers press together in prayer or maybe a plea. Surrounding the Virgin is a mound of active and emoting figures. The figures that rise behind her seem to follow her downward in her fall towards the body of her son. Saint John supporting her beneath her arms seems not to be lifting her up, but on the verge of collapsing over the body with her. The central anguish of the Virgin is amplified by the exaggerated gestures and expressions of the women in the background. Nicodemus is more stoic, at least outwardly, but seemingly no less affected, as he stares pointedly at the crown of thorns

[86] Eising, "Rogier van der Weyden," 37.
[87] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*," 174.

surmounting his own hat, brow furrowed in effort and contemplation. Van der Weyden's *Descent* makes use of devotional empathy in his weeping figures, yet their location within a compressed, un-delineated frame maintains their separation from the viewer. Van der Goes' figures, conversely, are in a space that is compressed but recognizable, both as a Northern landscape and as the place of the crucifixion, increasing the intensity of affective responses. The bodies seem to tumble forward and out toward the viewer while the landscape rises sharply to the hill of the Crucifixion, the tau cross jutting up to a sky that continues the ominous darkening found in the *Fall*. As has been observed by Ridderboos and others, the meticulously rendered surface detail found in van der Weyden's *Descent* and repeated in van der Goes' *Fall* is not found to the same degree in the *Lamentation,* yet the flowers surrounding Christ's body are the same flowers below Eve's feet in the *Fall.*

The most striking divergence from the van der Weyden prototype is the location and expression of Mary Magdalene. In the *Descent* she is very much included in the action, hands clasped desperately and elbow projecting awkwardly back in the plane, almost manneristic in the angularity of her pose. She stands by Christ's bleeding feet, her face rendered in profile as she gazes at his body. Van der Goes' Magdalene, like van der Weyden's, wears more contemporary clothes as a nod to her worldliness, her hair covered in a similar white chaperon and the pale lavender of her cloak reminiscent of the rich purple silk skirt of van der Weyden's Magdalene. However, van der Goes' Magdalene is shown on the opposite side of the composition, seated, with her hands clasped demurely in her lap. She is, like van der Weyden's Magdalene, positioned before Christ's feet, her body angled towards him, but she looks away from the body and out towards the audience, tears streaming gently from her reddened eyes. Van der Goes' Magdalene is the only figure that makes contact with the viewer this way (Eve gazes out, but past us). Her

silent appeal demonstrates van der Goes' mastery of psychological entreaty but also invites comparison not to the Virgin, but to Eve: as has been remarked by scholars like Mark Trowbridge, Eve and Mary Magdalene have remarkably similar faces. Conventional typology casts the Virgin as the Redemptive Eve alongside Christ as the Redemptive Adam, and indeed, the Christ and Adam of the *Vienna Diptych* do share similar facial features. But van der Goes' Eve is repeated in Mary Magdalene, another departure from visual tradition that must be read as deliberate. Repetition, as discussed, is important evidence for mirror symbolism in the formal characteristics of the *Diptych,* but it is equally, if not more important, to note what the artist has chosen to repeat: the selection of companions and counterparts in the *Vienna Diptych* is vital to understanding mirror symbolism as an inherently gendered concept.

Through the above examinations into the unique composition of the *Vienna Diptych,* it can be shown that the *Fall* and the *Lamentation* are both reflections and inversions of one another and form ideological mirrors visualized in their formal characteristics. The arrangements of the figures diverge considerably, both from van der Goes' recognized influences and visual traditions, strongly indicating that these departures were purposeful. The formal idiosyncrasies of the panels, viewed individually and as a diptych, can be reconciled through their relationship to the mirror analogy. As discussed, the Serpent is a physical mirror of Eve, echoing her shape, coloring, and gender. Her location next to Eve rather than between Eve and Adam serves to emphasize her role as Eve's double. Eve's centrality when compared to other versions that put the Serpent at the center of the scene not only underscores her culpability but suggests that the connection with the *Lamentation* could be considered as an alternative midpoint to a unified composition. The *Fall* is connected to the *Lamentation* through the continuity of the deep blue horizon line, the darkening sky, the flowering landscape, the strategic deployment of color, and

the repetition of Eve's face in the Magdalene. The downward sloping of Paradise in the *Fall*, in another example of physical reflection, is also reversed in the upward rise of the hill supporting the cross in the *Lamentation.*

The stylistic differences, when interpreted within the mirror framework, serve to connect the panels rather than distinguish them. The fastidious detail of the *Fall* stands in contrast to the more loosely rendered *Lamentation,* which functions not as a mirror of reality, but of spiritual devotion. Eve's transgressive position at the center of the *Fall,* furthermore, has been corrected by Mary Magdalene's removal to the periphery of the lower register, gazing imploringly at rather than beguilingly out past the viewer. Her atonement for Eve's (and therefore all women's) sin is emphasized by their shared facial features. The tumbling landscape of the *Fall* has also been corrected in the upward slope of the hill of the crucifixion in the *Lamentation,* and conveys in rather explicit visual terms that humanity's salvation is predicated on women's subjugation.

In addition to the mirror details specific to the *Vienna Diptych,* it is important to recognize that paintings themselves also functioned more broadly within the mirror analogy in several ways, most obviously as objects of mimesis. Because the Latin *speculum* also "connotes representation,"[88] art and literature were both considered mirrors. As Laurie Schneider observes, "'Metaphorically speaking, art is a mirror, a reflection of society with all its customs, beliefs, folklore, superstition, religion, even of the artist himself.'"[89] But as Schneider points out, the relationship of paintings and painters with mirrors was not only a philosophical allusion to neo-Platonic thought (in which the world is but a shadowy imitation of the Real) but also a more

[88] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors*, 10.
[89] Frelick, citing Laurie Schneider, "Introduction," in *Mirrors*, 10.

direct reference to an increasingly popular and more widely available technology used by artists to facilitate their work, especially in self-portraits.[90]

The significance of mirrors to both the formal and theological aspects of paintings is discussed by Stephen Hanley in his examinations of optical imagery in the works of Jan van Eyck. The frame of *The Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele* (1434) contains a quote from the first-century apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*: "For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the orders of stars; being compared with the light, she is found before it. She is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God."[91] The passage refers to the Virgin Mary and explicitly compares her to an "unspotted mirror." Hanley agrees with Schneider on the metaphor of the work of art as a mirror, observing: "This optical metaphor, however, also refers, more ambiguously, to the panel -- which is itself a kind of spotless mirror -- or, more specifically, to the optical mode of description it employs."[92] Frelick also asserts that specular imagery accompanied the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as well as images of sin: "depending on whether they accompanied personifications of Prudence or Pride, Wisdom or Idleness, Lust and the enticements of Venus (one of whose attributes is the mirror), or whether they represented the immaculate Virgin Mary -- the *speculum sine macula* -- or the repentant sinner Mary Magdalene."[93] As Frelick notes, mirrors as a visual device were especially popular in allegory.

Optical and specular imagery were common in religious works of the 15th century not only because of apocryphal texts and theological treatises making use of the metaphor, but more

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[90] Frelick, "Introduction" in *Mirrors*, 1.

[91] Wisdom 7:26, translated by Stephen Hanley, "Optical Symbolism as Optical Description: A Case Study of Canon van Der Paele's Spectacles" *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2009).

[92] Hanley, "Optical Symbolism."

[93] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors*, 2.

broadly because of the medieval perception of sight. As Frelick explains, "The importance accorded to mirrors and optical phenomena in natural philosophy and science seems to stem from the fact that knowledge was primarily viewed or explained in visual terms."[94] That is, knowledge within the mind was considered a visual phenomenon. Similarly to spiritual perfection, it was considered impossible to render perfect knowledge in a visual imitation such as a painting, and the self-awareness required of this conundrum is equally representative of the mirror analogy.

Bernhard Ridderboos asserts that the subject matter of both panels of the *Vienna Diptych* confirms its relationship to the Devotio Moderna as well as its thematic unity when viewed in light of Hugo van der Goes's personal struggle with the sin of pride: "the relation between the two panels becomes evident as soon as it is understood that the Fall of Man represents human pride and the Lamentation the humility of Christ."[95] Ridderboos is relating the artist's pride to the sin that caused the loss of paradise, rendered in masterful detail in *The Fall of Man*, and perhaps the artist's redemption in the contrasting humility portrayed in the *Lamentation*, both in subject and in artistic execution. [96] Ridderboos suggests that the panels serve as a mirror of the artist's personal spiritual turmoil but does not go so far as to discuss the panels as mirrors themselves. As discussed, the observable stylistic differences between the panels are often cited as evidence for their separateness. Ridderboos reconciles these apparent differences from a theological standpoint, the loss of detail in the *Lamentation* a reflection of the loss of paradise in the *Fall.* But it is equally plausible to interpret the stylistic discrepancies as purposeful visualizations of the dual mirror analogy. The worldly mirror of the *Fall* is vivid, and seems to

[94] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors*, 3.
[95] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 46.
[96] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 46.

show us reality, while the spiritual mirror of the *Lamentation* is dim, its divine subject only indirectly visible.

Perhaps the most important formal evidence of mirroring in the panels is found in the structure of the diptych itself. As Nancy Frelick observes, "Specularity has served not only to inspire titles, themes, and ways of seeing, along with enduring analogies, allegories, and…but also the very form or structure of certain works in art, architecture, literature, and music, through the use of mirroring, symmetry, inversion… or other forms of recursiveness."[97] The dual symbolic function of a mirror is physically manifested in the dual structure of the diptych. "In medieval literature, the double nature of vision is often figured in the two opposing properties of mirrors, the good mirror which makes visible what could otherwise never be perceived, and the bad mirror which inverts the true image before it."[98] There is every reason to assume this analogy of the dual mirror extended to the visual arts, and a diptych composed of two panels would be the perfect format to visualize the "two opposing properties of mirrors," with the *Fall* being the "bad mirror" and the *Lamentation* forming the "good mirror."

The above formal considerations—the repetition of faces and forms, consistent use of the *sgraffito* technique, the continuity of the horizon line, and under drawing and dendrochronology results—demonstrate a technical unity. Because these technical convergences cut across panels that differ in surface handling, they are best explained not by separate campaigns but by a unified specular program whose 'bad' and 'good' mirrors demand distinct pictorial registers.

Iconographic Lineage

[97] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors,* 14.
[98] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors,*" 7.

The panels of the *Vienna Diptych* comprise iconographic conventions that both draw on and deviate from established traditions in visual and literary cultures. However, an overview of the literature concerning the *Vienna Diptych* shows an overwhelming preference for the *Fall of Man.* Its prioritization as a research object no doubt relates to its more startling iconography in the form of the Serpent. There has been extensive research devoted to the history of the serpent with the woman's head, the most significant iconographic convention in the *Fall.* The following will describe the sources relevant to van der Goes and how they can be shown to have influenced the artist's version. The purpose of examining these sources is to demonstrate how they are linked through the popular medieval study of physiognomy, a pseudo-science that employs the mirror analogy's potential for inversion. A much shorter discussion of the *Lamentation*'s departure from iconographic precedents relating to the Magdalene and Virgin will follow the examination of the *Fall'*s hybrid in order to demonstrate how the iconography of both panels can be interpreted via medieval mirror discourse.

Outside of the common attributes of a woman's head and animal body, there is incredible diversity in depictions of the Serpent in art of the period. Authors addressing the variability of these hybrids often cite medieval illustrated volumes of bestiaries and physiologs, but the creatures found within these treatises themselves derive from older traditions, including the Jewish legend concerning Lilith. Adam Cohen, for example, discusses the hybrid as found in the Rothschild Pentateuch (figure 5), probably made in the Lorraine region of Northern France in the 11th century. His article finds Jewish antecedents for woman-serpent hybrids that indicate the cross-referencing between Jewish and Christian theological texts and manuscripts. Though non-specific to Hugo van der Goes or the Eden Serpent, Cohen's research importantly demonstrates

the open dialogue between Jewish and Christian traditions as well as the continuity of the iconography.

Wojciech Kosior also connects the hybrid's origins to the legend of Lilith. He has based his discussion of Lilith within the framework of her relationship to Eve, originating Lilith as the evil older sister of Eve that was, ironically, created after the Genesis story to explain a textual redundancy around the creation of Woman as well as transfer some of Eve's more supernatural and gender-transgressive qualities to a demonic counterpart. As Kosior summarizes, Lilith is described in the earliest written traditions as the first wife of Adam, created from the dust rather than Adam's rib. Rather than submit to her husband sexually, Lilith spoke the forbidden name of God and flew into the air, relocating to the primordial sea and was subsequently recast as a theriomorphic demon who consorted with the Devil, preyed on children, and seduced men in their sleep. Kosior specifically discusses the influence of Eve on the depiction of Lilith in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (*ABS,* anonymous, c. 700-1000). He outlines early Jewish traditions concerning Lilith to compare how she is presented in the *ABS*, concluding that, although the *ABS* is the earliest and most explicit description of Lilith, this depiction is only loosely indebted to the Lilith tradition in Hebrew sources and is more closely based on earlier rabbinic descriptions of Eve. Although physical descriptions of Lilith as serpentine are not explicit in Hebrew literature, the author notes that "appearances of the snake in Yahveh's close entourage have led some academics to suppose that this might be the deity's theriomorphic manifestation..."[99] implying a "solid reason to assume that the serpentine connections of Eve go even further than what is found

[99] Wojciech Kosior, "A Tale of Two Sisters: The Image of Eve in Early Rabbinic Literature and Its Influence on the Portrayal of Lilith in the Alphabet of Ben Sira," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 32 (Spring 2018): 120.

in the rabbinic retellings."[100] The author's assertion describes an important connection between Lilith and Eve that likely contributed to visual traditions of the serpent with a female head through earlier theriomorphic associations. It is also an exegetical device that relates to the depiction of Eve and the Serpent with the same face, as Lilith, per Kosior, was invented as a counterpart to strip Eve of her supernatural abilities.

Similarly to Kosior, Sharon Khalifa-Gueta points out not only Lilith's similarities to the earliest descriptions of Eve, but also the lesser-known exegesis that presents Eve and the Serpent as one entity. The author notes the etymology of the name Eve as pronounced in the Hebrew *Hava,* or *Hawwah,* comes from the Aramaic word for serpent. The conception of Eve and the Serpent as one and the same is given widespread visualization in versions of the hybrid serpent whose heads closely resemble Eve's, as discussed in the formal analysis section. Several authors discuss the serpent hybrid in these terms, and most often return to Peter Comestor and the extant text of the 12th century mystery play, the *Jeu d'Adam,* whose text drew heavily from Comestor.

Virginia Tuttle[101] offers a reading of Lilith in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1510) by Hieronymous Bosch, a contemporaneous artist in the same region as van der Goes that demonstrates the shared sociopolitical and religious anxieties of the era that likely contributed to these artists' notably vivid interpretations. Furthermore, the possibility of Lilith in a work by Hieronymus Bosch is indicative of a perpetuating iconography and speaks to van der Goes' influence on other artists. Tuttle believes the left panel of the open *Garden of Earthly Delights* shows the creation of Lilith, not Eve. This appropriation of a rabbinical demon as a visualization

[100] Kosior, "Two Sisters," 120.
[101] Virginia Tuttle, "Lilith in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* (1985).

of women's sinful nature is an important indication of the xenophobic psychology of van der Goes' time.[102] Regarding van der Goes' familiarity with the legend, Tuttle points out that Christian humanists that were interested in antique esoteric philosophies were especially fascinated with the *Zohar* and Cabala. Tuttle writes that northern artists in the 15-16th centuries "occasionally employed pictorial motifs derived from Jewish legends and midrashim,"[103] but also finds an important textual connection between Lilith and serpents, noting that the Zohar describes Lilith as "the Devil Queen of Samael, or Satan, and associates her with both harlotry and the serpent."[104]

What is significant about Lilith in the context of the mirror symbolism inherent to the hybrid iconography (and therefore to her relationship to van der Goes' Serpent) is the construction of Lilith as a foil for Eve. Lilith is not just a reflection, but an inversion of a godly woman. Lilith is a distortion of Eve just as the hybrid Serpent is a distortion of a human woman, and both are considered unnatural creatures not only in their appearance, but in the unfeminine qualities they embody. As the mother of all women, Eve must be culpable yet powerless. Like much mirror symbolism there is a duality in this representation of Eve that seems contradictory to the modern understanding but was very much dogma by the late Middle Ages.[105] Lilith and the Serpent were analogous externalizations of Eve's most dangerous aspects, those that gave her the desire for more than her gender should merit and, especially, the possibility for power over men. Whether the Serpent in *The Fall of Man* is a conscious allusion to the Hebrew midrash is difficult to ascertain, but the scholarship has shown it is improbable that they sprang from

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[102] Tuttle, "Lilith in Bosch," 125.
[103] Tuttle, "Lilith in Bosch," 125.
[104] Tuttle, "Lilith in Bosch," 124.
[105] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors,* 1.

separate traditions. These iconographic studies by Khalifa-Gueta, Kosior, Cohen, and Tuttle that relate Lilith to the Edenic Serpent with the woman's head also relate Lilith to Eve as a kind of demonic counterpart, an inversion that fits well within the mirror analogy.

It is important to note that artistic depiction of serpents as woman-hybrid creatures is not confined to theological interpretations but extends to the medieval understanding of the natural world as an inspiration for moral allegory. Bestiaries, natural treatises, and encyclopedias were vital in the establishment of bestial iconographies, especially those with a moralizing role. Paramount to the discussion of the woman-headed serpent's origins in western iconographic traditions is the medieval definition of the serpent. "Serpent" was, for the medieval audience, a physiological category that encompassed a much more diverse catalog of traits than the modern biological description of a snake. Sharon Khalifa-Gueta makes an important point in support for the visual tradition of the serpent as bi/quadrupedal outside of scripture that allows not only for its extra-Biblical origins but also its wide variety of iterations: "ancient conceptualizations did not distinguish between snakes and dragons, and this fluidity persisted in later visual representations."[106]

Serpents, therefore, could be depicted in myriad ways, with or without legs, wings, claws, feathers, or scales. R.K. Wilkowski notes that depictions of Eden serpents often drew from multiple iconographies, with bestiary descriptions of footed serpents likely contributing more to visual interpretations than Genesis.[107] Furthermore, in medieval natural encyclopedias, "Serpent" was often a heading under which innumerable subspecies fell. Lizards, adders, vipers, dragons,

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[106] Khalifa-Gueta, *Woman and the Dragon*, 199.

[107] R.K. Wilkowski, . "Snakes on a Page: Visual Receptions of the Eden Serpent through the History of Western Art and Their Survivals in Modern Children's Bibles," *Journal of the Bible & Its Reception* 11, no. 1 (May 2024): 18.

bird-like basilisks, and sea-snakes could all appear under the serpent heading. As mentioned, *draconcopedes* (alternately *dracontopedes*) were one such subspecies of serpent. Translated as "dragon foot," the *draconcopede* was a traditional entry in early medieval bestiaries whose image even found its way into illustrated Hebrew Bibles (figure 5).

Nona C. Flores provides significant feminist and historicist scholarship on the sources of the woman-headed serpent in European medieval tradition. Flores, like others, identifies Peter Comestor, writing in the last half of 12th century, as the first to synthesize diverse sources for the iconography, including Jewish antecedents. She writes that "Comestor incorporates Jewish legends, describing a serpent erect like a reed, but also adds a new attribute whose origin he ascribes to Bede: '[Lucifer] also chose a certain kind of serpent, as Bede says, which had the countenance of a virgin, because like favors like, and he moved its tongue to speak...just as he speaks through the frenzied and possessed.'"[108] She agrees that Comestor's commentary influenced many subsequent works, including the widely-copied *Speculum humanae salvationis* (figure 6) and images of the *draconcopede*. In contrast to others like Bonnell and Trowbridge, Flores suggests that artists were directly influenced by literary sources rather than through other visual sources or dramas. Comestor's description is widely credited by scholars as the Western European source for the iconography that arose in the 13th century, though Comestor himself erroneously credits Bede, likely as a legitimizing tactic. In Comestor's writing, Eve is gullible, weak, vain, and foolish. She trusts the serpent because it has a face like her own while seeming

[108] Nona C. Flores," 'Effigies amicitiae...veritas inimicitiae': Antifeminism in the Iconography of the Woman-Headed Serpent in Medieval and Renaissance Art and Literature," in *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays,* ed. Nona C. Flores (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 168.

to ignore or not see the monstrous lower body. This makes use of mirror symbolism that cautions the fallibility of human sight and uses the mirror as an instrument of inversion.

Flores finds analogies between the *draconcopede* and other biform creatures subject to antifeminist moralizations, including the siren, viper, and scorpion.[109] She notes that earlier descriptions of the siren have avian features but by the 8th century *Liber Monstorum* sirens were shown with a fish's tail in a conflation with the mermaid and, "on some representations, the scaly fishtail looks suspiciously like a scaly serpent's tail."[110] Her analysis is important in establishing the fluidity of animal categorizations in the Middle Ages and that the identification of a creature as a serpent had more to do with ideological agendas than physiognomic consistency. Crucially, Flores asserts that while early imagery of the woman-headed serpent likely corresponded to the above literary descriptions (i.e., illustrations of these works), religious art was critical to the wider dissemination of this iconography. [111]

Peggy McCracken believes that mirror symbolism that makes use of the repeated faces of the Serpent and Eve leads to the interpretation that Eve's primary transgression was pride.[112] She has discussed numerous examples of the crowned serpent hybrid and suggests it is the visualization of Eve's desire for sovereignty over herself and others. The medieval concept of sovereignty provides a more historically nuanced examination of Eve's sin. McCracken analyzes medieval exegetical interpretations of *Genesis* and notes, like much of the scholarship, that the incredible popularity of both Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* and the *Speculum humanae salvationis* resulted in widespread translation of the text and dissemination of the iconography in

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[109] Flores, "'Effigies,'" 171.
[110] Flores, "'Effigies,'" 173.
[111] Flores, "'Effigies,'" 175.
[112] Peggy McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast: Sovereignty and Animality in Medieval France* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

the form of accompanying illustrations. The Serpent as a reflection of Eve and her unnatural desire for self-sovereignty forms the basis of McCracken's exploration. She expands beyond theological sources to include late medieval romances, which she identifies as secular versions of the Genesis narrative, including the 13th century *Le Roman de Mélusine* and the early 14th century *Le Bel Inconnu.* Both are French in origin and center around a knight who chooses to confront a woman-snake hybrid to effectively steal her sovereignty. Though McCracken believes the stories derive primarily from folk traditions and Celtic mythology and were not directly inspired by the Genesis narrative, she concedes that there is an obvious overlap in the depiction of encounters with snake women as representing gender transgression in both secular and religious narratives of the 12th-14th centuries. [113]

Mélusine as a regional iteration of the woman-headed Serpent has been given much attention in the literature, especially in the research tracing the iconography's origins and subsequent influence. Gillian Alban has summarized the scholarship, which largely agrees that a serpent-tailed woman like Mélusine or the Edenic serpent in *The Fall* would have been interpreted by 15th century audiences as duplicitous, hypersexual, and transgressive.[114] Alban and the scholars she presents also agree with Kosior's suggestion of a theriomorphic serpent deity in his analysis of the Lilith myth.

Frederika Bain discusses hybridity in the context of Mélusine and similar monsters found in medieval bestiaries in order to highlight the misogyny of female-gendered beings whose monstrous bi-forms were understood to indicate a duplicitous, mutable, and bestial character

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[113] McCracken, *Skin of a Beast,* 113.

[114] Gillian M. E. Alban, "Maternal, Snake-Tailed Foundress Melusine: A Transformative, Monstrously Transgressive Serpent Woman under the Gaze," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion (Indiana University Press)* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 5–24.

inherent to all women while also making them sexually accessible to the male viewer: "A wide variety of male and female monsters appears in the Middle Ages, yet the specific category of the monstrous as predicated upon hybridity is primarily the realm of the female."[115] Regarding the origins of depicting Mélusine as serpentine, the author says the only common examples were those hybrid serpent/lizard women represented in depictions of the Fall, a clear connection between Mélusine and the Eden serpent.

Lydia Zeldenrust provides a crucial link between Hugo van der Goes and the Mélusine folktale in her essay on Meluzine, the figure's local iteration in Ghent, the city where van der Goes was made a master painter and spent much of his life. A figure of Meluzine, per Zeldenrust, was used as a weathervane atop Het Toreken, the historic Tanner's Guild building in Ghent. The original figure is thought to have been brought back from the Holy Land by Flemish crusaders and gifted to the guild for their role in protecting the city during the Hundred Years' War. Important for how this figure/story could have influenced van der Goes, the author notes that: "Meluzine's appearance on top of a guild house in the center of one of the most important cities of the southern Low Countries is a fitting testament to how, in the second half of the fifteenth century, her story was already transforming from its original incarnation as a local French legend into what would eventually become an early European bestseller."[116] Vernacular translations of the *Roman de Mélusine* coupled with the local myth surrounding this figure make it highly likely

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[115] Frederika Bain, "The Tail of Melusine: Hybridity, Mutability, and the Accessible Other," in *Melusine's Footprint; Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth,* ed. Misty Urban, Deva Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 17.

[116] Lydia Zeldenrust, "'The Lady with the Serpent's Tail: Hybridity and the Dutch *Meluzine*," in *Melusine's Footprint; Tracing the Legacy of a Medieval Myth,* ed. Misty Urban, Deva Kemmis, and Melissa Ridley Elmes (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 17.

that van der Goes was familiar with this legend and the accompanying imagery that showed her as serpentine (see figures 12 and 13).

E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken have written extensively on Mélusine in a collection of essays specific to the idea of monstrous bodies as related to gender within the medieval period. Significantly, the authors emphasize that certain animal permutations are gendered specifically, regardless of physical sexual characteristics. The authors observe that gender and sexuality studies of the Middle Ages have tended to view species and gender separately, although they were in fact linked in complicated ways in the medieval mind--the plethora of imagery and texts attest to this connection. The authors further note that medieval artists, authors, and audiences relied on animal permutations to "think about the human, about sovereignty, and about social and political relations."[117] Both authors assert Mélusine's connection to the woman-headed serpent in the Garden of Eden, but Burns offers a further comparison between Mélusine and Eve. By suggesting that Mélusine is a more sympathetic and empowered character, especially in her role as a devoted wife and legendary founder of the powerful Lusignan dynasty, Burns proposes a complicated reception of Mélusine as both physically transgressive and morally virtuous and provides an interesting link to the discussion of Mary Magdalene as she relates to both Eve and the Virgin, and how these figures represent the dual mirrors of virtue and sin.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has examined the significance of hybridity as a sociopolitical concept in medieval Britain, and, similarly to McCracken and Burns, equates the conditions of hybridity to those of ethnic bifurcation resulting from conquest and intermarriage. He notes

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[117] E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken, *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 7.

hybridity was common to the medieval identity shaped by constant conquest. Hybridity, per Cohen, is characterized by both assimilation and separation, and the hybrid identity's stabilization requires "some powerful architecture to circumscribe their volatility, some narrative frame to contain their dispersive vectors."[118] Cohen points out that the forced assimilation of new identities through conquest and marriage often resulted ironically in the reaffirmation of differences, including gender as well as ethnographic distinctions. Cohen's examination of hybridity as implicit to the medieval experience is highly relevant to the pervasiveness of mirror symbolism.

Tracing the above influences leads us to Hugo van der Goes' Serpent which, as described, followed a long tradition of linking female hybridity to transgression. To understand how van der Goes' Serpent encapsulates the medieval social and religious philosophy concerning mirrors, it is necessary to link iconography to the medieval study of physiognomy. By Hugo van der Goes' time, scholars had begun to reacquaint themselves with the Classics, especially Aristotle and Plato.[119] The Neo-Platonic way of thinking, a product of interpreting Classical teachings through a Christian lens, held that the external was a direct reflection of the internal. As Lisa Devries asserts, "Physiognomy is a discipline that reveals character traits based on the outward appearance of a person: the body is a mirror of the soul"[120] This pseudo-scientific worldview was so entrenched that it informed all aspects of medieval life, from medicine to religion, and its scholars produced treatises that found widespread popularity through multiple printings and translations.[121]

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[118] Cohen, introduction.

[119] Lisa Devriese, "Physiognomy from Antiquity to the Renaissance: An Introduction," *The Body As a Mirror of the Soul : Physiognomy From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Leuven University Press, 2021), 1.

[120] Devriese, "Physiognomy," 2-3.

[121] Devriese, "Physiognomy," 2-3.

Additionally, sections on physiognomy found their way into countless other natural treatises, including Thomas de Cantimpré's *De natura rerum* (ca. 1230) and Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum Naturale* (13th century).[122] In fact, within his section devote to physiognomy, Thomas de Cantimpré explicitly links the *draconcopede* with the Eden serpent: "Dragon-footed serpents [*draconcopedes*] are, as the Greeks say, referring to the philosopher Andelmus, great and powerful; these have faces similar to maiden human faces, but end in the body of dragons. Of this kind of serpent it may be believed to have been the serpent by which our first mother Eve was deceived to her own harm and ours: for Bede says that that serpent, which the devil used in the deception of the first parents, had the face of a maiden."[123] This description was not only accompanied with vivid illustrations (figure 10) but was incorporated into numerous subsequent natural encyclopedias in the vernacular, including Jacob van Maerlant's Flemish translation, *Der Naturen Bloeme* (figure 11). The similarity of these illustrations to van der Goes' Serpent, both in physiognomy and coloration, is undeniable. The *draconcopedes* therefore provides a strong visual precedent for van der Goes' serpent and follows the medieval view of nature as moral allegory, with hybrid figures nearly always gendered as female and most often connoted as dangerous.

The prevalence of mirror-titled works (*speculum*) with sections dedicated to physiognomy is important evidence in how the medieval mind viewed physical characteristics as reflections of their internal properties. Mirror-titles in medieval literature were "related to the mediation and presentation of knowledge, the world, and the self in informative or normative ways in works with mirror-titles that use images and/or words to instruct readers about the

[122] Devriese, "Physiognomy," 3.
[123] *Liber de natura rerum*, Serpents, 8:16, translation from the Latin by Badke.

physical or moral universe."[124] The popularity and widespread availability of these manuscripts, most of them illustrated, by the time of Hugo van der Goes has already been discussed and it is safe to conclude that, even without his direct contact with these works, the concept was intrinsic to the medieval way of thinking. As Stephen J. Williams observes, "physiognomy's analogical way of thinking was near instinctual for the medieval mind."[125] Although Williams notes the almost universal acceptance of physiognomic doctrines, this subconscious understanding did not preclude its more deliberate use as a didactic tool in literature and art. On the contrary, physiognomy's universal idiom made its use in the visual arts especially meaningful. Physiognomy, as a manifestation of mirror ideology, would therefore lead medieval viewers of the *Fall* to interpret the Serpent not as a separate entity, but as a reflection of Eve's flawed character.

As discussed, the conflation of Eve with the Serpent is not without precedent; there is an etymological link between them in the Hebrew, as discussed by Khalifa-Gueta, as well as any number of visual examples within the woman-headed serpent iconography that render the heads of Eve and the Serpent as similar or identical. Certainly, artists of this time worked from prototypes rather than models (see Ainsworth), but individuation of types was still common enough that the direct repetition of faces, or at the very least gender, must be read as purposeful. The duality of the hybrid (as symbolic of Eve's duplicity) is a manifestation of the mirror analogy and carries through to aesthetic theory of the period, wherein art was considered an imperfect reflection of the world, just as humans are the imperfect reflections of God.

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[124] Devriese, "Physiognomy," 12.

[125] Stephen J. Williams, "Some Observations on the Scholarly Reception of Physiognomy in the Thirteenth and Early Fourtheenth Century: Success and the Limits of Success," in *The Body as a Mirror of the Soul : Physiognomy From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Leuven University Press, 2021), 58.

Compared to the *Fall*'s vivid imagery, the iconography of the *Lamentation* appears less charged and, as discussed, has been the subject of far less focused research; yet it is no less indebted to centuries of exegesis that relied on metaphors of mirroring and hybridity to promote gendered ideology. The panels of the *Vienna Diptych* rely on different aspects of mirror ideology to connote the contrasting moral and spiritual characteristics of the figures they represent. However, they share the same optical language to visualize complicated theological concepts.

To borrow from Akbari, if physical hybridity forms the basis for the "bad mirror (*The Fall of Man*)," then spiritual multiplicity is the specular concept behind the "good mirror (*The Lamentation*)." While Eve's duplicitous nature is visualized in the physical form of the hybrid, Mary Magdalene's penitence allows her to overcome her sinful past and take on a variety of spiritual roles. Penny Howell Jolly discusses Rogier van der Weyden's Mary Magdalene in his *Descent from the Cross* as "perhaps the best known and certainly the most often copied image of Mary Magdalene created in fifteenth-century Europe."[126] As discussed in the above section on formal evidence of specularity in the diptych, van der Goes was notably influenced by van der Weyden, evidenced by the similarity of his Magdalene in the *Lamentation* to van der Weyden's. The author specifically addresses the Magdalene's spreading laces, normally indicative of pregnancy, and offers the innovative suggestion that "Rogier van der Weyden here uses a rhetoric of dress to explore and popularize a new visual type...: the metaphorically pregnant Magdalene."[127] The laces "mark her body as both penetrable and protected...and express one of the most significant aspects of her cult: her fluctuating nature that embodies oppositions."[128] The

[126] Penny Howell Jolly, *Picturing the "Pregnant" Magdalene in Northern Art, 1430-1550: Addressing and Undressing the Sinner-Saint* (Routledge, 2014), 13.
[127] Howell Jolly, '*Pregnant' Magdalene*, 13.
[128] Howell Jolly, '*Pregnant' Magdalene*, 13.

Magdalene's spiritual pregnancy as a result of her penetrable impenetrability is analogous to medieval descriptions of the immaculate conception as light passing through a glass container, leaving it unbroken.[129] Although she does not discuss van der Goes' Magdalene, Jolly's analysis provides further support for the spiritual multiplicity of Mary Magdalene as a redemptive reflection of the Serpent's physical hybridity as well as a more imperfect mirror of the Virgin.

There is no reason to assume that the Magdalene in van der Goes' *Lamentation* or elsewhere is pregnant, and Jolly asserts that, although her spreading laces in van der Weyden's painting are indicative of physical pregnancy, the intention is to visualize a spiritual experience in a manner corresponding to the hybrid Serpent visualizing a moral reflection. Even so, the iconography of the Magdalene often relied on other conventions similar to spreading laces to express her submission to religious experience, a kind of availability analogous to a wife's expected sexual submission to her husband.[130] The Magdalene's place at the feet of Christ, as in the *Lamentation* and countless other examples, is not only an allusion to her famous introduction as the one who washed Christ's feet with her tears and anointed them with oil,[131] but as a behavioral mirror for the proper spiritual conduct expected of medieval women: submissive yet available, to both God and their husbands.

The consequence of submission in the manner of an animal to a master, furthermore, is a result of Eve's own base transgression, represented by her hybrid reflection in the Serpent and is the ultimate fate of the Serpent herself, destined to crawl on her belly as punishment for her role

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[129] For more on the history of this metaphor, see Maile Hutterer, "Illuminating the Sunbeam through Glass Motif," *Word & Image* 38 (4): 407–34.

[130] Giallongo, *Historical Enigma,* 117.

[131] The jar of oil is a common attribute of Mary Magdalene that is curiously left out of the *Lamentation.* This omission will be examined further in the subsequent sections.

in the Fall.[132] Angela Giallongo expands on this particularly insidious interpretation of female hybridity: "This mindset was rendered explicit through the crude but convenient idea of representing women as a different species—non-beings more at home in the animal kingdom. Thus, if expediency demanded, women could be transformed into bestial, alien creatures that could be subdued without repercussions."[133] By this extrapolation of the mirror metaphor, all women are seen as bestial hybrids in need of male command if they wish to atone for Eve's sin. Female submission is implied in modeling oneself after the penitent Magdalene and the accommodating Virgin, both open to spiritual pregnancy.

The above in-depth examination of iconographic sources reveals the *Vienna Diptych's* indebtedness to mirror symbolism, most especially as it relates to hybridity, multiplicity, and imitation. The *Fall's* sources are rooted in physiognomic doctrines that held that the physical form was a mirror for the soul, the Serpent's female gender serving as a reminder of Eve's primary responsibility for Original Sin and the serpentine body stemming from an established tradition of equating monstrous forms with duplicity and impurity. The *Lamentation,* conversely, relies on the aspects of mirror metaphor that put forward certain figures as moral and spiritual mirrors for emulation, encouraging self-reflection while, through its less precise execution, emphasizing the impossibility of attaining spiritual perfection while on Earth. Taken together, these precedents show that female hybridity in the *Fall* functioned as a "bad mirror" and, precisely, the foil that the Magdalene's penitential "good mirror" seeks to atone for through her proximity to the spotless Virgin and her submissive reception to spiritual and moral instruction.

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[132] Genesis 3:14: "So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and every beast of the field! On your belly will you go, and dust you will eat, all the days of your life."

[133] Giallongo, *Historical Enigma,* 117.

Social Contexts and Contemporary Religious Movements

The *Vienna Diptych's* imagery can be further interpreted through a regional framework that focuses on the social and religious movements of the Burgundian Netherlands in the 15th century. Much of the present-day Netherlands and Belgium were at this time occupied by the French-speaking dukes of Burgundy, and with this foreign rule came numerous upheavals but also the opportunity for royal patronage. Hugo van der Goes enjoyed numerous commissions from high-ranking officials,[134] and his adopted hometown of Ghent was a bustling cosmopolitan center for trade and art with its own confluence of international and regional traditions. This rather unique geopolitical environment produced an incredible diversity of material culture and social movements, including popular religious and political performances as well as lay devotional movements that anticipated the unrest leading to the Protestant Reformation. The following will be a discussion of how religious dramas, so-called Joyous Entries (*tableaux vivants*), and the Devotio Moderna, as iterations specific to van der Goes' homeland, contributed to the imagery of the *Vienna Diptych* and conformed to the same mirror framework found in the formal and iconographic analyses.

In his seminal work discussing the origins of the human-headed serpent in western European art, John K. Bonnell asserts that this iconography, as depicted in van der Goes and throughout European art from the 13th-16th centuries, was directly based on the staging of the Temptation and the Fall in mystery plays.[135] The author notes that the language of the plays usually has the character of Lucifer assume the disguise of a virgin-faced serpent, the better to

[134] Dumolyn, Verroken, and Borchert, "Archival Perspective," 20.
[135] Bonnell, "Serpent with the Human's Head," 255.

allay Eve's fears and, practically, to "facilitate the dialogue between Eve and the Serpent."[136] These dramas, the oldest of which whose text is available to us is the 12th century *Jeu d'Adam,* drew from the earlier works discussed above, especially Peter Comestor as well as the popular Christian allegory of Piers Plowman, a 15th century translation of which describes the serpent as "y-lik a lusard, with a lady visage."[137]

While conceding the mythological and literary influence of these texts on the dramas, Bonnell eschews the idea of their impact on visual traditions, stating that the extent of their popularity was not such as to "affect the traditions of artists."[138] Curiously, Bonnell refers to the serpent in the *Fall* as "human-headed" throughout this article. It is true that women were excluded from performing in religious dramas, which means the roles of Eve and the Serpent would have been played by men and boys. Lucifer was often double cast as the serpent, but the language of the dramas clearly indicates that, once serpentine, the creature is meant to be female, as, in the tradition of Comestor, like attracts like.

The influence of religious drama on van der Goes is not well-examined. Scholars like Kemperdick note the theatricality of the artist's figures while questioning the extent of a theatrical influence. Religious drama, including mystery and passion plays, were incredibly popular during van der Goes' time, as Mark Trowbridge notes in his chapter on the impact of theater on the *Fall of Man: "*religious theater during the fifteenth century...became an international phenomenon, with texts often drawn from a common set of sources, whether earlier Biblical dramas or popular devotional literature." [139] Koch, Bonnell, and Trowbridge all

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[136] Bonnell, "Serpent with the Human's Head," 255.
[137] Bonnell, "Serpent with the Human's Head,"260.
[138] Bonnell, "Serpent with the Human's Head,"264.
[139] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 426.

converge on the importance of religious drama to the artistic process of van der Goes, and this certainly agrees with choices that are unique to the *Vienna Diptych*. Bonnell notes the childlike visage and costume-like appearance of the serpent's body and theorizes that "The serpent in Hugo van der Goes' painting seems to have been painted from a model posed in the very costume of the play—as a four-footed poisonous serpent with a virgin's face. It is a child, most likely a boy, who essays the role....the strongest assurances that this serpent is painted directly from an actual performer in a mystery play of Adam."[140] Especially given that the unique braided hairstyle of van der Goes' serpent could easily be described as theatrical, there is a very strong probability that this serpent was given attributes observed by the artist in a particular staging of the Temptation. However, the gender of the performer is not indicative of the intended gender of the character, and whether van der Goes painted directly from models is, as discussed by Ainsworth, highly speculative.

A more provocative (and direct) link can be made between stagings of the Fall and van der Goes' depiction of Eve. The *Jeu d'Adam,* one of the only extant texts of these performances, has the Serpent tempt Eve by playing on her vanity: "With your beautiful body,/ with your figure,/ you deserve a chance to be queen of the world,/ Of heaven and of the earth beneath./ Knowing all that is to be,/Being mistress of it all."[141] This passage emphasizing Eve's beautiful body provides an interesting context in which to interpret the unusually centralized and sensualized figure of Eve in van der Goes' *Fall.* Not only does this passage offer a direct textual antecedent for van der Goes' imagery, but it also correlates to the mirror as a symbol of vanity. Van der Goes has Eve's body on full display, her shining hair clearly a source of distraction and

[140] Bonnell, "Serpent with the Human's Head," 290.
[141] Translated by Flores, "'Effigies,'" 181.

delight for her unsuspecting husband. Meanwhile Eve, conscious of her husband's attentions and the words of the Serpent, gazes outwards from the confines of her Paradise, no longer content within its borders, and considering the entitlement her beauty offers. The viewer is left uncertain if she is going to give the fruit she reaches for to Adam or keep it for herself.

Admittedly, a single, albeit intriguing, textual link from one extant play is hardly inscrutable evidence in support of the influence of religious performances on van der Goes' imagery. Mark Trowbridge's discussion on religious drama in the 15th century and its connection to visual artists provides a more in-depth investigation into how various performance formats may have impacted van der Goes' work. Trowbridge cites documentation that demonstrates the intersection between the visual and performing arts, with many of the region's *rederijkamers* (rhetoric troupes) composed of visual artists by trade.[142] Most importantly, Trowbridge examines a format unique to the Burgundian Netherlands, the *tableaux vivants* that were created for the so-called Joyous Entries of visiting dignitaries and very often the work of specially formed contingents of painters.

Per Trowbridge, the city of Ghent was especially influential on van der Goes because of the unique frequency of "collaboration between artists and dramatists."[143] Ghent's artists came together each year to create costumes and the tabernacle for Tournai's annual Procession of the Virgin, and Hugo van der Goes is known to have been included in this delegation following his acceptance to the painters' guild in 1467.[144] Further documentation shows he created *tableaux*

[142] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 418.
[143] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 418.
[144] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 423.

vivants pieces for Margret of York and Charles the Bold upon their respective arrivals to the city, as well as staging plays for their wedding in 1468.[145]

Stijn Bussels describes the presentation of these tableaux as being revealed to passersby on their approach, with two men pulling back a curtain to reveal the image and performers. He astutely notes the similarity of this staging to the prophets in van der Goes' *Nativity* (c. 1480, figure 14). Bussels cites other evidence of *tableaux* devices in contemporary art of the region, including the banderols emerging from the mouths of the prophets in the *Ghent Altarpiece.* Trowbridge likewise provides a crucial link between the *Ghent Altarpiece*, *tableaux vivants,* and van der Goes, noting that in 1458 the city of Ghent welcomed back Duke Philip the Good with a series of *tableaux vivants,* the centerpiece of which was a "three-tiered stage...with living persons enacting a mute version of the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece."*[146] Recognizing the intimate link between van der Goes and these *tableaux,* a uniquely Netherlandish marriage between painting and theater, is a vital step in interpreting his deviations from visual conventions, yet it is one that has remained overlooked.

Mark Trowbridge's purpose in examining the unique intersection between art and theater in 15th century Ghent is to contextualize his analysis of the *Lamentation.* He focuses on the unusual depiction of Mary Magdalene and suggests that a saint's play of her *vita* may have provided source material.[147] Of the artist's departures, Trowbridge writes, "whereas standard theology had the Virgin Mary as the new Eve, in Hugo's diptych a closer parallel to Eve is found in the figure of Mary Magdalene, whose salvation is realized through a denial of her sensuality. Indeed, Hugo placed his Magdalene in closest proximity to the left panel, as something of a

[145] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 425.
[146] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 424.
[147] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 423.

bridge between the first couple and the rest of Christ's mourners. Furthermore, he seems to have repeated the features of Eve on Mary Magdalene's face, suggesting an even closer link between these figures."[148] Trowbridge notes that the Digby manuscripts often presented the Magdalene alone and away from the other characters of the play in a manner analogous to her depiction in the *Lamentation,* "expressing her sorrow directly to the audience."[149] Although Trowbridge notes the similarity between the faces of Eve and Mary Magdalene, he stops short of describing this as evidence for mirror symbolism.

As Nancy Frelick has discussed, mirror symbolism is, by and large, not predicated upon the depiction of physical mirrors at this time. Stephen Hanley has noted that in most late medieval contexts it is the person that *is* the mirror. By this metaphor the saints, angels and Virgin are to be imitated in pursuit of spiritual betterment, while figures like Eve caution against worldly pride and sin. Suanne Akbar explains, "They are ideal mirrors proffered for self-knowledge and emulation, for they provide not only reflections of what one is (flaws and all), but of what one should be."[150] The Magdalene's flawed past makes her grace all the more inspirational, and yet she is still the mirror of "what one is" (albeit much improved from her foremother) while the Virgin is the mirror of "what one should be." That is why she shares Eve's face and not the Virgin's, and why she sits apart from the scene of the *Lamentation.*

The Magdalene's separation makes us question how she relates to the scene. Is she participating, or is she contemplating a memory? Could this be why she is shown in more detail than the other figures, and is the only one to interact with the viewer? And is this why she is missing the jar of oil, her most recognizable attribute—because she is remembering rather than

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[148] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 432.
[149] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 435.
[150] Frelick, "Introduction," in *Mirrors,* 7-8.

participating? Trowbridge writes that the Magdalene's most important role in medieval dramas like the Digby cycle was as an eyewitness to the miracles of the crucifixion and resurrection: "…the primary role played by Mary Magdalene in many plays was that of a witness, sharing her sorrow as she invites others, including the audience, to share in her experiences. She appears in this same guise in Hugo's panel, where she wrings her hands and looks straight at the viewer, a pose that repeats the sort of direct address that characterized her role on the late-medieval stage."[151] Mary Magdalene is uniquely positioned between the two worlds of the mortal and the divine, and her ability to not just bear witness, but reliably share what she has witnessed, relates to the mirror as a metaphor for sight and highlights Mary's positioning as a mirror for proper female domestic an spiritual behavior.

The medieval view of sight as a visual phenomenon, as discussed by Nancy Frelick and Douglas Brine, supports this interpretation and allows for a reading of the *Lamentation* as a visualization of an important aspect of the mirror analogy. Mary Magdalene is not just a mirror for the repentant sinner, a spiritual model with Eve's face, but she allows the viewer to envision with her, essentially reflecting her memories of the *Lamentation* onto the panel in one of the most esoteric extensions of mirror symbolism. The idea that religious visions could manifest before the most faithful as a kind of projection of the mind's eye has a long history in Northern art, showing figures with unfixed gazes seemingly unaware of the miraculous appearance occurring before them in an articulation of their more perfect spiritual Sight. [152] In van der Goes' case, he has been even more faithful to the Pauline description of the mirror of heaven by

[151] Trowbridge, "Sin and Redemption," 440.

[152] For more see Bret L. Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, 2005).

distinguishing not just between the earthly mirror of the *Fall* and the spiritual mirror of the *Lamentation,* but also between the Magdalene and the scene behind her.

Theresa Coletti also discusses the conceptual mirroring of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary in saint plays. She notes the common conflation of the Magdalene with the Virgin in the so-called Digby play (late 15th-early16th century) of East Anglia, and notes that this association "is evidenced in still other scriptural, allegorical, and liturgical allusions that associate the dramatic saint with the Virgin Mary."[153] Coletti's assertion further supports the idea of figural and ideological mirroring in the *Vienna Diptych*. She believes this conflation has strong implications for gender politics, saying that Mary's purported sexual sin—a sin always gendered as feminine, regardless of the sinner's sex—overshadows a more complicated character portrait of which this sin was only one aspect, creating a multifaceted sinner-saint that would have been understood and accepted by medieval audiences.[154] Coletti makes the interesting point that gender roles were asserted in the context of the profane, while identity was much more fluid in the spiritual realm.[155] Through her analysis of the Digby play and analogous literary and visual traditions, the author ultimately wishes to emphasize that the Magdalene's spiritual hybridity was perceived by medieval audiences as transcendent rather than transgressive, a phenomenon that was perhaps constructed to appeal to women chafing under the expectations of their gender. Interestingly, Maureen Fries has noted that the *Jeu d'Adam c*ontains the most nuanced and empowered version of Eve in the extant dramas.[156] Per Fries, subsequent versions see Eve lose both her complexity and her role in prophesying the birth of Jesus. Her observations suggest that

[153] Coletti, *Drama of Saints,* 152.
[154] Coletti, *Drama of Saints,* 152.
[155] Coletti, *Drama of Saints*, 155.
[156] Fries, "The Evolution of Eve," 1.

the rise of the Magdalene in drama during van der Goes' time coincided with the diminishment of Eve, yet another example of the inversion aspect of mirror symbolism.

The popularity of these plays was due in large part to the affective devotion these dramas were intended to inspire. The imitation of divine and sainted figures was rooted in the mirror doctrine of Saint Augustine and allowed players to embody these figures and viewers to feel closer to them. Devotional fervor, as Ainsworth points out, was at a fever pitch in the late 15th century, and the imitation of saints, angels, and, most especially, Christ, became doctrine in the treatises of lay brotherhoods like the Devotio Moderna.[157] The ascetic movements were bolstered by translations of popular theological texts, including the writings of Saint Brigid of Sweden and, more contemporaneously with van der Goes, *De imitatio Christi* (circa 1420s) by Thomas à Kempis, himself a follower of the Devotio Moderna.

Understanding van der Goes' use of portrait-like faces in the context of his relationship to the Devotio Moderna helps to negate the idea of the artist's repetition of faces as standard types. In fact, the Devotio's adherence to the mimesis encouraged by *De imitatio christi* supports the interpretation of Eve, the Virgin, and the Magdalene as reflections of one another in the same multiple ways that the medieval mind understood mirrors. There are other visual clues within the *Lamentation* that allude to this personal level of devotional, in which images of suffering provoke an empathetic response in viewers: the three women handling the nails, instruments of the Crucifixion and Christ's torture; the Virgin blanching and beginning to swoon in apparent imitation of Christ's death; and, perhaps most intriguingly, the placement of a crown of thorns on the hat of Nicodemus, thereby prompting him to imagine the feeling of the crown atop his own

[157] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," 47.

head. All of these intimate demonstrations of devotion, however, are ancillary to the suffering of the Magdalene. Her location and appeal to the viewer position her as a kind of narrator, herself reflecting on the scene behind her and encouraging the viewer to do the same. As an intercessor, she was there, and she is here, allowing the viewer to see themselves reflected in the Magdalene, and therefore relive the scene through her.

Hugo van der Goes' personal connection to the Devotio Moderna is unclear. Archival research suggests the surname of Goes originated from Zeeland or Holland in the Netherlands, rather than Ghent in modern-day Belgium.[158] The Devotio Moderna was associated with the Netherlands, and, per the authors, a figure by the name of Jan van der Goes was affiliated with a scholar of the movement, but that is the closest research has come to linking the artist directly with the movement.[159] Bernard Ridderboos names Geert Grote (1340-1384) as the founder of the Devotio Moderna.[160] Grote is quoted as having this to say about the ways in which God humbled himself: "'For it benefits us to believe and keep firmly and unshakably in our heart that humility with which God was born of a woman, and the fact that he was put to death by mortals under so many insults, is the supreme medicine to heal the swelling of our pride.'"[161] This casts the Virgin in a much more unfavorable light: though spotless, she is nonetheless a mortal woman, and therefore a source of humiliation to God. Even the Virgin is not immune to the stain of womanhood, and the theme of women's inferior moral and spiritual status in the *Vienna Diptych* becomes even starker in the context of Grote's statement.

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[158] Dumolyn, et al, "Archival Perspective," 19.
[159] Dumolyn et al, "Archival Perspective," 19.
[160] Ridderboos "Mental Illness," 46.
[161] Ridderboos, "Mental Illness," citing Grote as translated by Tolomio (1975), 46.

As with most aspects of Hugo van der Goes' life, connections between the artist and his likely influences are suggestions based in formal, iconographic, and sociohistorical analyses rather than direct documentary evidence. However, as Trowbridge and Bussels have demonstrated, there is significant documentary participation of the artist in *tableaux vivants* productions. There are also substantial links between van der Goes' imagery in the *Vienna Diptych* and specific plays, as well as intriguing connections between under drawing revisions that are compatible with staged blocking. The mimesis implicit to theater in conjunction with the popularity of affective devotional movements like the Devotio Moderna, with which van der Goes has been shown to be at least superficially affiliated, indicates a multimedia integration of mirror ideology across visual, literary, and performance arts. The evidentiary support presented in the above analysis is not only useful in testing the impact of religious theater and regional performance formats on the visual vocabulary of Hugo van der Goes but also demonstrates the importance of specularity in understanding the *Vienna Diptych.*

Conclusion

At the time Hugo van der Goes was working, Europe was in the grip of an apocalyptic fervor. Virginia Tuttle, in her article examining the presence of Lilith in early modern Netherlandish artwork, points to this psychology as demonstrable in Bosch and virtually all other artists working in 15th century Northern Europe, writing that these works were "created in an age obsessed with fear of demons and witches as well as the 'power of women' to corrupt men."[162] Van der Goes was no exception to this ideology, and his *Vienna Diptych* encapsulates this misogynist fear in an especially personal way that reflects the growing interest in affective devotion that was the founding tenet of movements like the Devotio Moderna.

What is significant about movements like the Devotio Moderna is not necessarily how they specifically affected van der Goes' imagery (the extent of his relationship with the movement remains uncertain), but rather what these movements indicate about the social climate in Northern Europe in the 15th century. The increasingly tenuous status of the Church that would culminate in the Reformation is exemplified by the rise in lay movements like the Devotio Moderna, confraternities that eschewed the elitism and pageantry of Catholicism. These movements proved very attractive to women who were otherwise excluded from active participation in religious affairs, and many were even founded by them.[163] However, this presented a problem for both the patriarchal Church as well as the accepted social constructions on gender. It is no surprise, therefore, that men in the Church and these brotherhoods would describe a godly woman as a devoted wife and mother by presenting the Magdalene as an alternative to the Virgin for women's spiritual aspirations. When women naturally cited the

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[162] Tuttles, "Lilith," 119.

[163] John van Engen, "Sisters of the Common Life," in *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and The World of the Later Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

example of the Virgin as a reason for desiring an ascetic life outside of the Church, it became increasingly important to present the penitent Magdalene as a more appropriate spiritual mirror for mortal women who, as the daughters of Eve, could not truly hope to imitate the spotless Virgin. Furthermore, the Church offered, through Mary Magdalene's modified hagiography, the promise of "spiritual" virginity, achievable, ironically, through marriage and childbirth.[164]

As Theresa Coletti observes, Mary Magdalene was a liturgical construction whose role in passion plays "represents gender as a crucial category through which forms of power may be differentiated in the earthly and sacred realms."[165] Coletti further theorizes that the Magdalene's association with the Virgin "fashions a saint whose gender attributes as a sexual woman and reconstituted virgin pose the possibility of symbolically mediating the differences between a sacred ideal of virginal maternity and the dangers and demands of gendered behaviors in the fallen, secular realm."[166] The figure of the Magdalene, therefore, allowed the Church to maintain the patriarchal tradition that excluded women from prominent liturgical roles, recapitulated the inherently sinful nature of women and their role in man's Fall, and ensured that married women would embrace their primary roles as child bearers. Coletti's interpretation of the Magdalene's *vita* as presented in the Digby cycle, taken with Mark Trowbridge's more formal correlation of van der Goes' Magdalene with her representation in religious drama, strengthens the evidence for the influence of these works (and their accompanying ideology) on van der Goes' *Vienna Diptych* while also underscoring the importance of the Magdalene as a mirror of penitential devotion, especially for medieval women.

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[164] Coletti, *Drama of the Saints,* 18.
[165] Coletti, *Drama of the Saints,* 18.
[166] Coletti, *Drama of the Saints,* 18.

A touchstone of Reformation doctrine is salvation through faith without the necessity of a clerical intercessor. The decline of the clergy meant the rise of a new equality in religious life. As women embraced the message of spiritual autonomy, there arose a redoubled effort to keep women out of religious affairs (and therefore out of positions of power). Where before this had been successfully accomplished by putting forward the Magdalene as a spiritual guide to married women, these new efforts were characterized by an overt misogyny that, through fiery rhetoric and lurid accompanying imagery facilitated by the print medium, spread like wildfire through Western Europe.

Demonstrating the role that mirroring plays in the formal, iconographic, and social historical context of the *Vienna Diptych* is useful in asserting its unity; however, it is crucial to recognize this discourse relates almost exclusively to the female characters of the diptych, which is why it is necessary to focus on their roles in the first place. By examining how medieval mirror symbolism relates most prominently to the women and female-gendered Serpent depicted in the panels, it becomes obvious how inherently gendered this ideology was from its inception, and therefore offers an important discussion point for how this symbolism may have contributed to the growing discourse surrounding witches, especially as it was visualized in works like the *Vienna Diptych.*

The growing dissatisfaction with Catholicism that would lead to the imminent Reformation in Northern Europe was accompanied by a distrust of religious imagery feared to be idolatrous.[167] The Reformation's iconoclastic prohibitions on religious imagery meant that Eve and her serpent were secularized, becoming the witch and her familiar, with the two sometimes

[167] Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (University of Chicago, 2008), 27.

blending seamlessly in the fevered imagination of the age into one demonic entity.[168] All the sins assigned to Eve by previous generations and so vividly articulated by artists like van der Goes—her pride, her lust, her greed, her bestiality and, most egregiously, her responsibility for leading man astray—became the hallmarks of the witch.

Van der Goes was so admired by contemporaries and followers that many of his works are only known through printed copies.[169] It is therefore likely that the panels of his *Vienna Diptych*-- paintings that explicitly detail the dangers of women and the lamentable consequences of their sins--found a very wide popular audience, both through copyists and the panels themselves on their journey to Austria. As previously discussed, the typological presentation of the Fall with the Lamentation is highly unusual. Typology as a theological concept is analogous to mirroring, in which an Old Testament scene prefigures a New Testament event, and the pairing choice is revealing: rather than an optimistic Annunciation, a pairing of the Fall with the Lamentation serves to highlight the suffering wrought by woman, with the Magdalene quietly accepting her place outside of the sphere of salvation brought by the Crucifixion. Together, the panels are charged, sensual, provocative, and deeply accusatory.

Erik Eising believes one of the reasons assertions of the panels' separateness persist is due to the fact that very few copies of *The Fall* exist, while copies of the *Lamentation* are far more common.[170] However, a look at the *Annunciation Triptych* by the Master of the Legend of Saint Barbara (Fig. 15, 1490s) shows the continued use of van der Goes' imagery from *The Fall.* The left panel of this triptych shows the *Temptation of Eve,* in which Eve is flanked by a serpent clearly indebted to van der Goes, as is the dry riverbed containing talismanic objects.

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[168] Giallongo, *Historical Enigma,* 120.
[169] Kemperdick, "Burgundian Netherlands," 25.
[170] Eising, "*Vienna Diptych*," 174.

Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, Eve is alone with the Serpent, and she is fully covered in a shabby white shift. Adam is not depicted. This evolution of van der Goes' *Fall* ups the bodily shame significantly in its covering of Eve while also removing Adam (and his responsibility) completely from the scene of Original Sin. There is a nefarious trajectory from van der Goes' paintings to its iteration by the Saint Barbara Master in which the culpability of women is increased and their hope for salvation lessened by the omission of Mary Magdalene.[171] What is left is the humiliated Eve and the physiognomic representation of her spiritual deformity.

Based on the findings presented in this paper, there is a clear link between the imagery of the *Vienna Diptych* and the propaganda that bolstered the witch hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries, and it centers on the mirror idiom. As has been discussed, specularity was deeply ingrained in medieval thinking not only because of its symbolic potency, but also because of its association with scientific innovation. As Miranda Anderson explains: "The closeness of the relationship between mirrors and texts is reflected by the fact that the [European] printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg, a man who previously made mirrors and came up with the idea, from the way that they invert images."[172] The very technology that facilitated the spread of images was derived from the medieval fascination with mirrors.

But it is the moralizing aspect of specularity that is the most sinister legacy of works like the *Vienna Diptych,* its gendered targeting merely bolstered by its technological counterpart. In tracing the possible trajectory between the *Vienna Diptych* and witch iconography, a brief case study can be made of the illustrations accompanying the earliest illustrated witch hunting manual, *De lamiis et pythonicis mulieribus (On female witches and soothsayers)* (Ulrich Molitor,

[171] However, the Master of the Legend of Saint Barbara pairs his *Temptation* scene with the more typical *Annunciation*, a further indication of how unusual the pairing in the *Vienna Diptych* is.

[172] Frelick, "Introduction, *Mirrors,*"14.

1489). This manual is structured as a conversation between three men, who "debate" whether witches have power. It is important to note that the existence of witches is not up for debate, but rather their supernatural ability. Natalie Kwan examines the discrepancy between images and text that permeates the book: Ulrich asserts, for example, that only God can produce hailstorms, and it is the witches' foolishness that lead them to only *think* they have such power. However, the accompanying woodcut, as Kwan explains, "depicts two sinister-looking women putting a snake and a cock into a fiery cauldron, clearly causing the hailstorm in the background."[173] The witches conjuring a hailstorm are only one example of image conflicting with text, and as Kwan discusses, this was a common occurrence in other illustrated texts as well.

The book was by no means intended as a defense of women or a denial of witchcraft, but a political response meant to contain the anxieties stoked by none other than Heinrich Institoris' *Malleus Maleficarum.*[174] This more well-known treatise, first published in 1487, was written shortly after Institoris had been dismissed from his position as an inquisitor in Innsbruck following a period of interrogations that could euphemistically be termed unorthodox. Institoris was determined to prove the power of witches and the necessity of hunting and burning them in the name of God. The Archduke of Austria feared a witch panic and quickly hired Ulrich Molitor, a Doctor of Law, to rebut Institoris in a follow-up treatise. Kwan writes of Molitor's methods: "While asserting the power of the Devil, he uses classical and Biblical sources to cast doubt on the powers of witches."[175] The Neo-platonic Humanism that took root during van der Goes' time shows the continuity between Ancient and contemporary sources and the persistent iconography

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[173] Natalie Kwan, "Woodcuts and Witches: Ulrich Molitor's *De Lamiis et Pythonicis Mulieribus*, 1489–1669," *German History* 30, no. 4 (December 1, 2012), 493.

[174] Institoris is the Latinized version of Kramer. Heinrich Kramer collaborated with Jacob Sprenger on subsequent editions of the *Malleus Maleficarum.*

[175] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 494.

of the snake woman and her earliest association with both transgression and mirrors. The very words used to describe witches and soothsayers—the Greek *lamii* and *pythonicus*—refer to serpents from Antiquity, and Medusa, the most infamous of the Classical snake hybrids, was understood to have been defeated by her own reflection.[176]

Molitor concludes, very moderately, that it is the Devil who is powerful, not witches: "…although they believed they were granted power from the Devil, they were in fact tricked by him into thinking they could harm people, transform or travel to the sabbat by supernatural means. Nevertheless, these women deserved to be burned because they renounced God and dedicated themselves to the Devil."[177] The treatise thus simultaneously asserts the existence of witches while rendering them powerless over men, a balancing act relying on a misogynist narrative of female gullibility and moral weakness. In other words, it is the story of Eve, who bears the guilt of Original Sin without ever having the power to have instigated it (that power goes to the Devil; Eve is merely tricked). But crucially, her powerlessness does not absolve her from punishment.

Significantly, Kwan, like Giallongo, asserts the importance of existing visual culture to the creation of witch iconography: "Both the treatise and its illustrations contributed to the discussion of what a witch was. As the first illustrated witchcraft treatise, Molitor's woodcuts synthesized themes from existing visual culture and contributed to the developing iconography

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[176] *Lamiis* in this case was mostly likely derived from Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* in the myth concerning the witch-sisters Meroe and Panthia, but the lamiae is also often described as a beautiful woman with a serpent's tail, and a night demon who seduces men and murders children. The similarity of this description to Lilith is not coincidental, as *Lilitu* was translated to *lamia* in early sources. Pythonicus, meanwhile, refers to the Oracle at Delphi, whose high priestess was referred to as the Pythia, etymologically referencing the battle between Apollo and Python, the giant snake that lives at the center of the world, slain by Apollo before he could establish his Oracle at Delphi. (See Giallongo).

[177] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 495.

of the witch."[178] Kwan notes the treatise's immediate and widespread popularity, with 39 printed editions (there were only thirty of the *Malleus Maleficarum*), 21 of which were illustrated.[179] Though originally printed in Latin, a vernacular edition was quickly produced after the first publication.

Kwan's focus in her article is examining the discrepancies between text and image in the first printing of *De lamiis* and subsequent editions. She theorizes that, "As the woodcuts drew from existing visual culture, the images and their connotations did not necessarily correspond with the dialogue."[180] Kwan believes, then, that established conventions were responsible for these discrepancies, but what is to be made of their inclusion in a treatise meant to refute the supernatural ability of witches? Kwan also says the woodcuts were likely produced in a different location than the text, a fact which could further explain their differences, as the first images "developed independently of the literary trope of the witch, drawing on a body of sources that differed from the dialogue's scholarly citations."[181] But as this paper has hopefully demonstrated, visual and literary traditions do not develop independently of one another, and certainly not by van der Goes' time. Furthermore, the author and patrons must have had a say in the illustrations, at least in the first printing, and the inclusion of woodcuts that are directly at odds with the text is revealing of an ulterior agenda. Perhaps (and this is of course speculative), they hoped to wash their hands of the situation by presenting the conclusions that were expected of men of learning and power while letting the populace, both literate and illiterate, draw their own conclusions from the illustrations.

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[178] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 495.
[179] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 496.
[180] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 496.
[181] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 496.

Kwan concedes that the more damning illustrations could have been intended to appeal to a more "credulous populace,"[182] but asserts that the discrepancy is less between "popular" and "elite" than between "visual" and "literary" cultures.[183] This may be, but according to Angela Giallongo, there was very likely a gendered component to disconnects between text and images. Giallongo notes, " we must bear in mind the fact that in many stages of history visual representations were, for women, the main vehicle for transmission of learning—as literacy and intellectual pursuits were often reserved exclusively for males."[184] Her assertion not only contributes a gender critical discussion to Kwan's observations on text-image discrepancies, but also supports the conclusion that the mirror theory was a fundamentally gendered concept, its didactic purpose intended largely for the moral edification (and intimidation) of women. Taken with Kwan's observations, Giallongo's discussion points to these images as intended to emphasize women as dangerous, if not powerful, and perhaps created to enlist the help of women in combating their own fallen natures.

The misogynist origins of this gendered association between women and mirrors is no more explicitly detailed than in the so-called "Bloody Mirror," a belief taken from Aristotle that a mirror could be stained red when simply looked at by a menstruating woman.[185] The Bloody Mirror encapsulates the importance of sight as not only a visual, but haptic, process and proposes the possibility of a woman's gaze having physical consequences as a result of her physical impurity. The belief in the malign power of the gaze is of course relevant to the discourse on witches but also is necessary to understand how fundamentally gendered the mirror analogy was,

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[182] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 496.
[183] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 497.
[184] Giallongo, *Historical Enigma*, 82.
[185] Berthold, "Aristotle's 'Bloody Mirror' and Natural Science in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," in *The Mirror in Medieval and Early Modern Culture,* ed. Nancy Frelick (Brepols, 2016), 31.

rooted in the concept of inherited female impurity understood by medieval audiences to be Eve's punishment for Original Sin. Given the proliferation of media constructed within a pervasive cultural metaphor founded on a doctrine that discussed women in terms of the spotless (i.e. virginal) or stained (impure), it is hardly surprising that the iconography was appropriated by witch hunters.

As discussed, Angela Giallongo has examined the continuity of the female-serpent hybrid in art and literature, and notes the conflation of Eve with the Serpent and its implications for witch iconography long before the first witch hunting manuals were produced: "…we can see that the Temptress' body is arched like the arm of Eve, and it is surely no coincidence that they both have matching golden locks. By the fourteenth century, these two female figures had become so interchangeable that Eve even took the place of the serpent in some paintings. Even the Devil himself was occasionally pictured sporting women's breasts, and, from the ninth century onwards, his hair had started to become suspiciously snake-like—an attribute that was directly inherited by the witches."[186]

Giallongo further surmises the evolution of the witch iconography out of folk traditions like Mèlusine as a kind of regional syncretism of Medieval and Classical mythology, writing "… the combination of a proto-historic and Classical inheritance also produced an unpredictable consequence in the Middle Ages: the invention of the Serpent-Fairy. In this figure, Laurence Harf-Lancner, scholar of Medieval mythology, discerned… the first ominous shadows projected by Christian philosophers onto the pagan fairies—which were eventually caught up in the yawning maelstrom of witchcraft."[187] Kwan also notes the similarity between the woodcuts in *De*

[186] Giallongo, *Historical Enigma,* 172.
[187] Giallongo, *Historical Enigma,* 123.

lamiis and popular folk figures like Mèlusine, pointing out that Molitor even references Mèlusine in his arguments.[188]

According to scholars like Giallongo and Harf-Lancner, then, the same confluence of Classical, Christian, and folk sources that informed the *Vienna Diptych* inspired the cultural construction of witches, providing testable support for the *Diptych's* role in the construction of witch iconography. Given Eising's assertion on the rarity of the Fall as a subject in Netherlandish painting prior to the *Vienna Diptych,* investigations could also easily test the *Lamiis* woodcuts against Netherlandish Fall types between 1470–1495 for evidence of the retention of serpent–female physiognomy and apotropaic motifs, as seen in the 1490 version by the Master of the Legend of Saint Barbara (figure 16). These "bridge" works could also be examined for specular imagery as a means of establishing continuity with the *Vienna Diptych,* most especially in works that replace Eve's hybrid "reflection" with a physical mirror to visualize women's foolishness and vanity (see figure 5).[189]

As Giallongo and Kwan observe, prototype images of the witch pre-dated *De lamiis et pythonicus*. But the treatise's relevance as a document of the existing medieval mindset cannot be overstated. Kwan, as discussed, emphasizes the importance of existing visual culture in constructing these images, and from the research presented it can be concluded that works by influential artists like Hugo van der Goes, whose work may have been in the Habsburg collection as early as the 16th century,[190] played a large role in their development.

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[188] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 498.

[189] Hans Baldung Grien's *The Three Ages of Women and Death* (1509/10) is striking in the maiden's visual similarities to van der Goes' Eve in the *Vienna Diptych,* and provocative in its depiction of the witch-like crone.

[190] Eising, *"Vienna Diptych,"* 175.

It is not difficult, given the visual parallels, to connect the image of Eve and her serpent with the witch and her demon cohort and therefore as the inversions that categorize "bad mirrors," but there is the other half to consider: that of the "good mirror." In the context of these early images, the *Lamentation* becomes a ward against the evil of the *Fall.* The *Lamentation* as a shield against the sin of the *Fall* seems especially likely if one considers the apparent futility of the apotropaic devices in the dry river bed, talismans that have done nothing to deter the Serpent who stands by unaffected. Per Kwan, the conclusion of *De lamiss* pontificates that "true religion, rather than civil punishment, was the ultimate defence."[191] The *Lamentation,* therefore, is the mirror that allows us to view and even neutralize the sin of the *Fall* indirectly and without harm in the manner of Perseus using his mirrored shield to kill Medusa with her own reflection.

The research into the formal, iconographic, and sociohistorical uses of the mirror analogy in the *Vienna Diptych* presented in this paper has, hopefully, demonstrated the importance of this philosophy to the medieval worldview and suggests it was intrinsic to all social structures by the time of van der Goes. Given these results, investigations into works contemporary with the diptych could further attest to the prevalence of mirror symbolism in the visual tradition. Additionally, given that the above results demonstrate its significance to one work by Hugo van der Goes, examining other works within his milieu for mirror symbolism could offer an innovative means of securing attributions. Era-specific doctrines adjacent to specularity, including physiognomy, could open many avenues of research, particularly from the feminist/gender critical and postmodern methodological perspectives. Considering Giallongo's assertion that images were intended as didactic tools for women in particular, reception theory with a focus on how women perceived these images would form an important line of inquiry into

[191] Kwan, "*De Lamiis,*" 495.

the wider investigation on the continuity of the woman-serpent hybrid from the medieval to the early modern period, as well as its function within mirror-titled works. There is also the underexamined link between medieval drama and the visual arts to consider within this framework. The above analysis has demonstrated a strong connection between performance media and van der Goes' own visual vocabulary, and these results, while preliminary, indicate that an in-depth investigation is warranted, especially as it contributes to the more nuanced understanding of its role in the construction of medieval visual conventions.

Most important to the investigation of the continuity of the *Vienna Diptych*'s iconography into the 16th century and beyond is its contextualization within the mirror framework, as this will enable greater analytical focus on appropriate precedents and help remove any remaining controversy surrounding the *Vienna Diptych*'s unity. If the mirror framework is foregrounded, then depictions that exchange Eve's central placement or dissolve Mary Magdalene's inclusion of the viewer should serve to cement the diptych's perceived unity. The discussion of Reformation-era art within the context of the witch hunts and as the legacy of 15th century efforts could also provide a new avenue of research for those looking to salvage the era's reputation as an artistic moratorium in Northern Europe, especially via examinations of image/text discrepancies. Finally, investigating the 15th century lineage of Reformation art and its indebtedness to specularity could contribute to discussions on the reciprocity of Reformation and Counter-Reformation imagery that, along with the Renaissance interest in Classical models, brought renewed interest in the long iconographic history of the serpent woman, whose power to transfix has persisted to the modern era.

Coda: Mirror, Mirror

If, as this study has argued, the *Vienna Diptych* helped crystallize a visual language that tethered gender expectations to a specular framework, then its legacy did not end with the waning of the witch hunts. The moralizing power of the mirror continues to shape how femininity and representation are constructed. In a manner that parallels the ideological spread facilitated by the printing press, technological advances have perpetuated the visual rhetoric that still encodes femininity as both spectacle and threat, often in unexpected ways. The mirror analogy became ever more explicit in art of the 16th and 17th centuries as scientific progress saw earlier systems of meaning like physiognomy go by the wayside. But increasing naturalism only lead to a false belief in the truth of what was being represented, a phenomenon surely familiar to modern audiences questioning whether something is "real," or might be the product of artificial intelligence.

The Counter-Reformation period incited a new theatricality in representations of Mary Magdalene in particular, and she was frequently depicted in states of ecstasy and/or undress. French artist Georges de la Tour created several paintings of Mary in contemplation, two of which show her seated before a dark mirror (*Magdalene at the Mirror*, c. 1635-40 and *Magdalen with Two Flames,* c. 1625-50). The Mary Magdalene of the 17th century grew ever more sensuous, with an observable conflation of her traits with those of Eve and Lilith. Not insignificantly, de la Tour's Magdalene, with her long hair, seated in the dark before a candle and cradling a skull, looks very much to modern eyes like a reformed witch. In other words, her tenuous association with the Virgin was ended, and fascination with her previously fallen state was re-emphasized, simultaneously objectifying and disenfranchising her.

In the late nineteenth century, Symbolist and Pre-Raphaelite medievalism brought renewed interest in the association of women with serpents and often relied on mirrors to convey the ambivalence of these erotically-charged depictions. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1867) shows the titular temptress combing her long red hair, mirror in hand, recast as an emblem of narcissistic self-regard and erotic danger. Images of femme-fatales like Rosetti's inherited both the compositional and ideological structure of van der Goes' Fall: the female figure trapped within her own reflection, the "bad mirror" moralized as vanity, whose power is rooted squarely in her ability to entice the male gaze.

Modern interpretations of children's stories have furthered the association between female hybrids, Eve, Lilith, and Mary Magdalene, with Disney's crimson-haired *Little Mermaid* (1989) pondering none other than Georges de la Tour's *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* (c. 1640) in her underwater cavern. The physical similarities between Ariel, the Magdalene, Lilith, and Eve recall the repetition used in the *Vienna Diptych* to equate figures within the mirror framework, and as discussed the hybrid form is one long associated with the dangerous female. In the Disney version and others, the mermaid must be stripped of her voice and her monstrous biform before she can be worthy of the human prince. In some versions of the story, and in many folk traditions, marriage to a human (and forfeit of her autonomy) is the only way a sea-maid can gain a soul.

The circumstances of animated versions of folk traditions like *The Little Mermaid* are eerily reminiscent of the *Vienna Diptych:* male creations that appeal to young women and offer subliminal gender instruction. One of the most jarring examples of how mirror symbolism has persisted as a gendered analogy occurs in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1939). The Evil Queen's most recognizable attribute is her mirror. She is both empowered and

entrapped by her magic mirror, becoming murderous when she is no longer the most beautiful in the land. And what happens? She transforms into a hideous old crone, an embodiment far more in line with her character and a direct descendant of Eve's Serpent as a reflection of the soul.

The mirror becomes the site of female fragmentation in films such as *Black Narcissus* (1947), *Repulsion* (1965), or *Black Swan* (2010), each staging the mirror as a threshold between purity and corruption. The spectacle of a woman confronting her reflection functions both as moral allegory and as voyeuristic invitation. The screen itself extends the medieval preoccupation with specularity into a modern apparatus that is itself a reflective form. Now with the ubiquity of smartphone technology it is easier than ever to view and share our reflections, yet with the concurrent rise of AI, we are once again questioning the veracity of what we are shown. Given the persistence of the mirror framework, especially as it relates to the fallibility of sight, the question should not be whether we can trust what we see, but whether we ever really could. That is why specular ideology must be viewed as a framework that is intended to corral perceived deviance, and it extends to any and all Otherized communities. If something is presented as a reflection, we are programmed to believe it as true, and there are countless ways to exploit such conditioning.

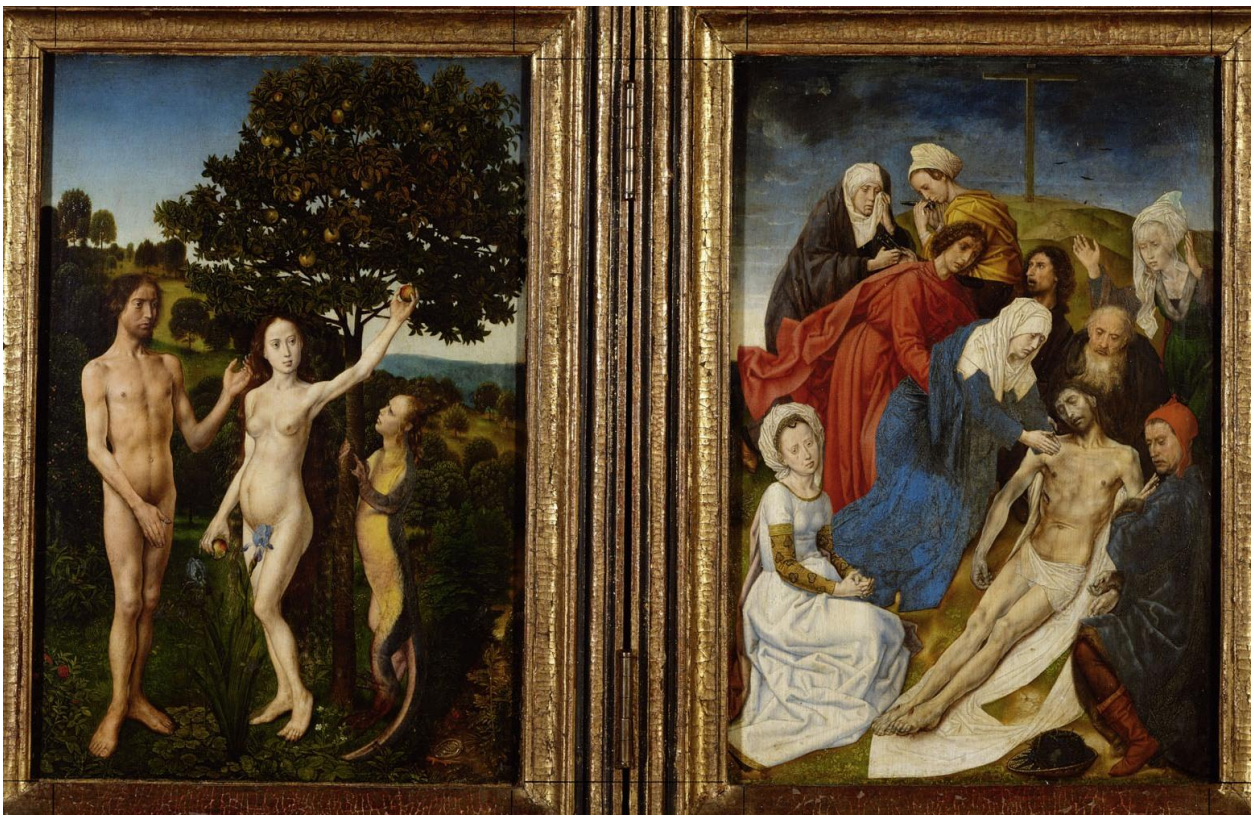
The modern fascination with "self-image" technologies--photography, film, social media--revives the medieval tension between reflection and judgment. The gendered critique of women's self-presentation online echoes the same moral discourse that once condemned the witch's gaze or the menstruating woman's "bloody mirror;" that is, the fear that the female act of looking (especially at herself) harbors contagion or corruption. Digital culture thus secularizes

the same theological structure van der Goes visualized: woman as mirror and mirrored, an object of distorted vision and agent of contamination, only now she stains the mirror with her lipstick.

The social limitations wrought by mirror symbolism invite rebellion. The dangerous allure of the snake woman and her transgressive gaze endures, with feminist artists like Cindy Sherman and Francesca Wodman seeking to reclaim the female gaze in reconfigurations of the Medusa, recapitulating the apotropaic function of the Gorgon's head without the necessity of killing her. Still, despite feminist reimagining, the connotation of a woman associated with snakes remains overwhelmingly negative, in need of a mirror (or a filter or a selfie) to render her less powerful.

The mirror, then, remains both instrument and battleground, a technology of guided seeing that continues to reproduce the gendered hierarchies codified in late medieval art. The persistence of the woman-serpent hybrid and the moralized mirror across centuries underscores not only the inherent duplicity of image traditions, but also the enduring difficulty of escaping them, most especially as structures of control. If van der Goes' *Vienna Diptych* allowed its viewers to confront sin and salvation through reflection, then the modern "mirror" (whether a film, selfie, digital avatar, or artwork) invites a similar confrontation, one that reveals the unbroken lineage between medieval theology and modern media. The medieval idiom of the mirror was a vernacular interpretation of Greco-Roman ideas seen through a Christian filter. Yet it is possible to see how such an esoteric ideology now frames the contemporary struggle for self-representation. The limitations of our visual understanding of reality are at the forefront of technological discussions on AI and representation, and it is more important than ever to recognize that we have only ever seen as if in a mirror, dimly.

Figures



1. Van der Goes, Hugo. *The Vienna Diptych*. 1478/1479. Oil on oak panel. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

2. Van der Goes, Hugo. *The Fall of Man*. 1478/1479. Oil on oak panel. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. https://jstor.org/stable/community.18113139.

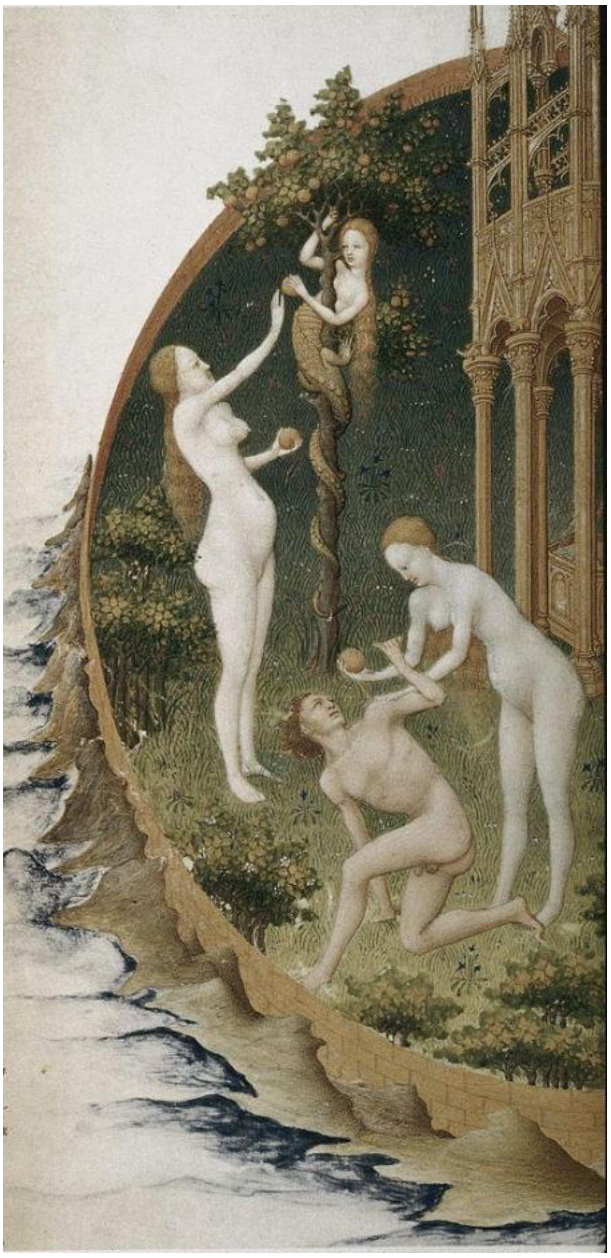
3. Van der Goes, Hugo. *Lamentation*. 1478/1479. Oil on oak panel. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. https://jstor.org/stable/community.18137318.

4. Van der Weyden, Rogier. *Descent from the Cross.* Circa 1435. Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

5. Unknown artist/maker (France or Germany). *Decorated Text Page* (detail)*, Ms. 116, fol. 119v, Rothschild Pentateuch.* Manuscript illumination. Circa 1296. The Getty Museum.

6. Anonymous, Germany. *MS M.140 fol. 4r., Speculum humanae salvationis*. Between 1350 and 1400. Manuscript painting. Morgan Library, New York.

7. Master of Francois. *The Fall of Man* (detail). 1316-1382. Manuscript illumination from *La Cité de Dieu*, French translation of Saint Augustine of Hippo by Raoul de Presles. Public domain, image courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits.



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11. Van Maerlant, Jacob. *Folio 124v c: Der Naturen Bloeme.* Circa 1350. Manuscript illumination. Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Hague, the Netherlands, KB, KA 16.

12. D'Arras, Jean. *Folio 19, Mélusine en son bain, Le Roman de Mélusine Français 24383.* 1450-1500. Manuscript illumination. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

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16. Baldung Grien, Hans. *The Three Ages of Woman and Death.* 1509/10. Oil on wood panel. Kunsthistorisches Museum,Vienna.

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