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Religious Experiences with Pagan Gods: The Mythological Paintings of Velazquez

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Abstract

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By Kelsey Harper

This paper explains Velazquez's mythological paintings within the context of Catholic Spain. The perceived role of art in salvation is defined through the examination of contemporaneous texts, including the edicts of the Council of Trent and Francisco Pacheco's *El Arte de La Pintura*. The role of Velazquez's mythological paintings in mediating the experience of salvation is explored through a phenomenological approach in which the painting demands that the viewer actively experience the work of art. A comparison between Velazquez's paintings of *Mars* (1640) and *The Crucifixion* (1632) illuminates similarities and relations between the two on these grounds. I argue that Velazquez' *Mars* can function in a similar way to his *Crucifixion*, offering the viewer a path to salvation if he or she identifies with Mars' humiliation and feels compassion. The access that *Mars* offers to the possibility of salvation does not have to do with admonishing viewers as a purely allegorical reading in the Christian sense might suggest. Rather, it has to do with the viewer forging an emotional connection with Mars. The responsibility for the interaction is given to the viewer, who is presented by Velazquez with the handle of Mars' discarded sword. Insofar as the viewer accepts the responsibility represented in Velazquez's gesture, the encounter with Velazquez's defeated Mars can function as a "good work" in the Tridentine sense of the word, providing the viewer, as well as the painter, an opportunity to demonstrate their will to do good and their desire to be Christ-like in their actions. While the gripping vulnerability of Velazquez's *Mars* serves to attract and intrigue, enticing the viewer to search for meaning, and potentially inspiring either pity or scorn, the proffered sword indicates the viewer's power to choose both whether or not to pick up the weapon and whether to wound or have mercy.

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Since the sun was always the first to see what happened
He was the first to find that Mars and Venus
Took pleasure with each other…
Amazed at what he saw, he spoke to Vulcan…
And told him where he caught them in the act.
Then Vulcan's mind went dark; he dropped his work
And turned at once to subtle craftsmanship,
To make a net so light, so delicate,
So thinly woven of fine-tempered bronze
The casual glancing eye would never see it…
Then draped it as a sheet on his wife's bed.
So shrewdly was it made that when the goddess
Took to her bed within her lover's arms,
Both were caught up and held within the net.
Then Vulcan, fisherman, threw wide his doors…
And called the other gods to see his catch,
To see how lovers act within their chains.
One god remarked that he half envied Mars,
While Vulcan's bedroom shook with godly laughter:
For many years this tale was told in heaven.

-Ovid's Metamorphoses, translated by Horace Gregory

The painting *Mars*, by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez, circa 1640, currently hangs in the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain (Figure 1). In this painting, we see the god of war slumped on the edge of a bed, glinting armor piled carelessly at his feet. The shine of the armor is made with visible streaks of white. His supporting hand is not in a fist, but loosely curled under his chin. No specific fingernails are painted, and the smooth curve of the brushstrokes of his hand eliminates almost all traces of knuckle and bone. Upon this slack hand his head is propped. In fact, his whole body looks in need of propping up – his elbow rests on his knee and his foot rests on the bed frame. The posture appears simultaneously distracted and pensive. Mars's slouched body creates prominent wrinkles in his midsection and slight wrinkles on his left pectoral. Still, even in his inert pose, his limbs are well defined – undulating lines delineate the muscular bulges of his arms, and overt, loose brushstrokes have been used to define a prominent calf muscle. Slightly hazy, loose, brushstrokes outline the general shape of his body

against the dark background, producing a blurry haze around him (Figure 2). His face, also painted with loose brush strokes, is vaguely visible under the shadow of his helmet. There is an almost comic, childlike aspect to his face, barely emerging from under the large helmet, with only the tip of his nose and chin protruding enough to catch the light. His large, bushy, curling moustache also adds a note of comic ridiculousness. His expression, though difficult to read in the painterly darkness, suggests befuddlement.

The scene depicted by Velazquez is widely identified as a moment of reflection on the part of Mars, the Roman god of war, regarding the humiliation that he experienced at the hands of Vulcan, god of the forge. The story to which this moment corresponds is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a source with which Velazquez and his contemporaries were familiar. According to Ovid, Mars was having an affair with Venus, wife of Vulcan. Having been informed by Jupiter of the affair, Vulcan, in an act of revenge, creates a special metal net and, with it, catches the lovers in the act. Before letting them go, he calls all the other gods to observe and laugh at the spectacle of the mighty god of war rendered helpless like a fish in a net.[1] Mars's humiliation at the hand of Vulcan became a popular theme for erotic prints and drawings in the sixteenth century.[2] For example, a drawing by Hendrick Goltzius entitled *Venus and Mars Surprised by Vulcan* (1585) offers an erotic interpretation of the event (Figure 3). All of the figures are nearly or completely nude. Venus, stretched out on the bed, faces the viewer, and Mars has already slipped a leg underneath her, but his intentions have been impeded by Vulcan and the observing gods above. The drawing offers an erotic portrayal in a mythological guise.

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[1] Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. Horace Gregory (New York City: The Viking Press, Inc., 1958), 96-97.
[2] Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), Chapter Seven. 125-160.

While it is keyed to the same moment of post-capture humiliation (and in this case possibly post-coital exhaustion), Velazquez's *Mars* does not belong to the erotic tradition. Unlike the figures displayed in the sixteenth-century prints, his Mars can hardly be described as a medium for erotic delectation. Velazquez' Mars is dejected – sheets trailing on the floor, ruling scepter held limply askew, and helmet unhooked. In short, the god of war seems defeated and pitiable. This eliminates Velazquez's Mars not only from the erotic tradition, but also from the tradition of Mars as a powerful victor. The battle attributes surrounding him only heighten the sense that he is not at all the triumphant young Mars so common in the paintings of Velazquez's contemporaries, including Peter Paul Rubens. Rubens' treatment of the war god in *Mars Crowned by the Goddess of Victory* of 1615 stands in vivid contrast to Velazquez's depiction of the defeated god (Figure 4). In Rubens's painting Mars stands as conqueror, with one foot on a prostrate victim, and wearing a red velvet cape over shining black armor. One hand grips his scepter, and the other hand is rather possessively hooked around the waist of the beautiful goddess of victory. His full, hairy face, with dark beard and mustache, shows no emotion. He is dominant and aloof. This painting only highlights, by comparison, the special character of Velazquez's abject *Mars*.

The subject matter of Velazquez' painting draws attention in and of itself, given the contentious status of ancient mythologies in the context of Counter Reformation Spain. Velazquez's singular *Mars* demands consideration in light of a larger discussion of the place of mythological figures in post-Tridentine art, not only because Counter Reformation Spain is a relevant historical context for the painting, but also, as I will argue, because this is the context within which the painting acquires a fullness of

meaning. Before looking at the uses of mythology in the art of Catholic Spain, however, it is necessary to look at how art in general was affected by and responded to the Counter Reformation.

Protestant criticism of the use of religious art forced the Catholic Church to reconsider exactly what role art had to play. Facing disapproval both within and outside of the Church, The Council of Trent, the ecumenical council convened by the Catholic Church between 1545 and 1563, had, as one of its tasks in the overall reformation process, the job of redefining and thereby justifying religious art. The cardinals of the Council of Trent issued decrees that clearly stated art's purposes, its inherent dangers, and how to avoid those dangers. Reaffirming a principle that had been with the Church since the sixth century, the time of Gregory the Great, they emphasized that one of the legitimate purposes of art was to teach.[3] Art could teach both through divulging information and through providing examples. An excerpt from a decree of the Council instructs bishops to utilize art in this way, explaining the benefits:

> Bishops should diligently teach that through the recounting of the mysteries of our redemption, expressed in pictures and other representations, the people are educated and confirmed in the articles of faith that should be remembered and assiduously called to mind; moreover, that sacred images are very fruitful, not only because they recall to the people the benefits and gifts that have been granted them by Christ, but also because they bring before the eyes of the faithful the miracles

[3] Herbert Kessler, "Gregory the Great and Image Theory in Northern Europe during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,"*A Companion to Mediaeval Art*, ed. Conrad Rudolph (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 151 - 172.

> performed by God through the saints, and their example which is helpful to salvation; so that the faithful may give thanks to god for them, and may pattern their lives and habits according to the examples of the saints, and be encouraged to adore and love god and practice piety."[4]

The ultimate purpose of art, as stated here, is to be "helpful to salvation."

Besides teaching, art could lead to salvation through arousing emotions, especially sorrow and compassion which would then lead to gratitude and motivation to do God's will. These are among the primary issues that Richard Viladesau examines in his book *The Triumph of the Cross*. He notes that many religious orders founded in the fervor of the Counter Reformation, especially the Jesuits, believed that pondering the crucifixion was a way to build a profound, personal connection with Christ, inspiring contrition and an improved, more Christ-like, lifestyle.[5] In short, Viladesau demonstrates that meditation on Christ's Passion and Crucifixion was a key part of the Counter Reformation goal of renewed personal spirituality and devotion.

The Catechism of The Council of Trent gave great significance to the teaching of Christ's Passion, focusing especially on Christ's pain.[6] In one of her famous spiritual writings entitled *Pianto sopra la Passione di Christo,* Vittoria Colonna, an Italian noblewoman and poet, praises this practice and instructs that priests "should teach how great was the bitterness of the passion," explaining that Christ's suffering was exceptionally painful because, " formed by the power of the Holy Spirit, it [his body] was more perfect and better organized than the bodies of others can be, and was therefore

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[4] *"De invocatione, veneratione, et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus," Canones et Decreta Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concili Tridentini* (Turin: Marietti, 1913), Session XXV, as cited by Richard Viladesau, *The Triumph of the Cross* (Oxford: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008), 205.
[5] Viladesau, *Triumph*, 191-196.
[6] Viladesau, *Triumph*, 196.

endowed with a superior susceptibility and a keener sense of all the torments which it endured…He permitted his human nature to feel as acutely every species of torment as if He were only human, and not also God."[7] Meditation on Christ's physical pain served to make the crucifixion a reality for the meditator, bringing him or her closer to God. The Jesuits, in particular, practiced elaborate meditation exercises on the subject of the crucifixion, visualizing the specifics of the scene and imagining sensory details. Ignatius of Loyola gave detailed instructions on how to execute the meditation exercises. According to Viladesau, "Ignatius recommends the use of all senses in 'composing' a scene for meditation, and gives specific suggestions for imagining not only seeing, but also hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching the scene"[8].

The goal to create a vicarious experience had a significant impact in the style of art, favoring realism.[9] Since the value of art was in its ability to lead viewers to pious meditation, art was measured according to how well it served the pastoral purposes of the Church, not according to its aesthetic appeal. As Viladesau explains: "The preferred Catholic art of the period generally tended to be affectively charged, but also naturalistic." Works of art had to be strong enough to evoke emotion, but not so over the top as to be unrealistic.[10] Both of these qualities—realism and emotional charge—reflect the Church's ideal goal for art, which was to create a realistic and moving experience. The deeper the contrition a painting could inspire, the stronger the motivation to reform one's life.

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[7] Vittoria Colonna, *Pianto sopra la Pasione di Christo*, as cited by Viladesau, *Triumph,* 198-199.
[8] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 211.
[9] Viladesau, *Triumph*, 263. Viladesau summarizes the overall sentiment: "By portraying Christ's suffering realistically, art can lead us to see his extreme humility and love." He notes that although there was some objection to the accompanying lack of decorum, the general consensus was that realism was more useful than it was offensive.
[10] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 263.

Even with all the benefits that art's practices could offer the post-Tridentine Church in its mission to invigorate its members, its products still had to be regarded with caution. Worshipping of objects, rather than worshipping God *through* objects, was strictly forbidden. One of the edicts of the Council of Trent clarifies this point:

> …the images of Christ, of the Virgin mother of God, and of other saints, should be kept and preserved especially in churches, and should be given due honor and veneration; not because it is believed that there is in them any divinity or power that makes them worthy or worship, nor because one should pray to them for anything, nor because one should have trust in images, as the pagans formerly did who placed their hope in idols; but because the honor that is given to them is referred to the originals that they represent: so that through the images we kiss and take our hats off to and kneel before, we adore Christ, and we venerate the saints whom they picture.[11]

This passage also gives evidence of the Catholic Church's disapproval of other pagan practices, bringing up another danger that art poses: the presentation of non-Catholic and therefore false religions. If paintings can lead, they can also mislead. This concern is specifically addressed later in the same passage: "But if any abuses have been introduced into these holy and salvific practices, this Synod forcefully desires that they be totally abolished; hence no images should be permitted that represent false dogmas, nor any that

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[11] *"De invocatione, veneratione, et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus," Canones et Decreta Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concili Tridentini* (Turin: Marietti, 1913), Session XXV as cited by Viladesau, *Triumph,* 205.

give occasion to the uneducated for dangerous errors."[12] Consequently, the use of figures from Greek and Roman mythology became a point of great contention in religious art. Mythological figures were allowed *outside* the realm of religious art for the explicit purpose of representing ideal bodies. As Viladesau notes, "it was tacitly agreed that pagan fable would be a legitimate artistic domain for the portrayal of the adult nude, but that religious art should be free of this genre."[13] Of course, the mission to rid religious art of all mythological traces was difficult, certainly not instantaneous, and met with resistance in many cases.

Perhaps the most famous battle arena for this conflict was the Sistine Chapel.[14] As Charles Dempsey explains, the reform-minded cardinals feared that viewers of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* would confuse "pure history"—that is, biblical occurrences which are supposed to be true—with "pure poetry"—that is, pagan mythology. Dempsey explains this concept by examining the attacks on Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*: "Virgil's introduction of the fabulous incident of Aeneas crossing the Styx in Charon's bark may be praiseworthy, but Michelangelo's representation of the damned in Charon's bark in the *Last Judgment* is to be censured as an unwarranted intrusion of the fabulous into the realm of scared history…"[15] Such confusions were regarded as very dangerous because their outcome could be recognition of false gods.

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[12] *"De invocatione, veneratione, et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus," Canones et Decreta Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concili Tridentini* (Turin: Marietti, 1913), Session XXV, as cited by Viladesau, *Triumph ,* 206.
[13] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 208.
[14] See Charles Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions in Counter-Reformation Painting," in *Rome in the Renaissance: The City and the Myth*, ed. P.A. Ramsey (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1982), 55-75 In this article Dempsey addresses the tension between the poetic, mythological tradition and the historical, religious tradition.
[15] Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions," 65.

As noted earlier, the solutions were not immediately forthcoming; nor were they all the same. Dempsey points to one possible resolution in Annibale Carracci's use of mythological figures towards overtly Christian ends in the context of the praise of an exemplary man. He points to the frescoes of the Camerino Farnese as his example. These frescoes, which date to 1595, about fifty years after Michelangelo finished the Sistine *Last Judgment* use completely allegorized mythological figures to represent the virtues of Cardinal Oduardo Farnese. As Dempsey notes, "…the frescoes are dedicated to a particular man, and yet the man himself is physically absent in the paintings, referred to only in the two *imprese* that appear in the room's decoration."[16] Instead of painting the man himself, Annibale uses the story of Hercules and other mythological figures to describe the virtues of Cardinal Farnese (Figure 5). In this example, Annibale has relegated the ancient gods to the service of the representation of Christian virtue. In this case, as Dempsey puts it: "The tension between historical truth and poetic ornament…has been resolved by enhancing the role of poetry, which no longer adorns the truth but becomes itself the medium of truth."[17]

Turning the pagan gods into idealized figures with strictly allegorical meanings was not the only possible solution to the problem of how to use pagan gods and poetic invention to Christian ends.[18] Velazquez chose a very different path, using humble, remarkably human figures for gods instead of the idealized bodies used by Annibale

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[16] Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions," 72.
[17] Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions," 72.
[18] Jean Leclerc deals with this issue in his book *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*. Chapter Seven, entitled "Liberal Studies," explores the contradiction of how medieval monks studied and used Classical literature, but at the same time spoke disapprovingly of it. Leclerc explains that the monks had mentally "converted" the pagan authors through optimism (toward a Christian content) and the practice of allegorical interpretation. Jean Leclerc, *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. by Catharine Misrahi (New York City: Fordham University Press, 1982), 112-150.

Carracci in the Camerino Farnese, or by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. Velazquez's flawed, human gods are unlikely representatives either of an ideal or a clear moral. This raises the question of how the human quality of Velazquez's gods might respond to the conflict between pagan poetics and Catholic doctrine, as well as the more general question of how Velazquez's poetic painting practices fit into the context of Counter Reformation Spain. In the remainder of this paper, I will examine these questions and thereby gain a deeper understanding of how Velazquez's mythological paintings functioned for his viewers and himself within the very Catholic atmosphere of Spain.

Given the functions of religious paintings as articulated by the decrees of the Council of Trent, and the tradition of blending pagan motif and Christian message since before the Renaissance[19], it is likely that Velazquez considered his mythological paintings, at least on some level, in a religious way. However, the questions of to what extent and in what specific ways they might have answered Christian motives remain unanswered. As noted above, in his conclusion of "Mythic Inventions in Counter Reformation Painting," Dempsey offers one example of how an artist might fit pagan gods into the Christian world after the Council of Trent, namely by assigning them a symbolic role. Intuitively, this idea of pagan gods as vehicles for Christian messages makes sense in the climate of Counter Reformation Spain, and seems like a possible interpretation for Velazquez's representations of ancient gods. However, an alternative interpretation of these paintings, which rejects this possibility, is offered by Jonathan Brown in his book *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting*. In this book, Brown focuses on Velazquez's humanist background.

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[19] Leclerc, *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God* , 112-150.

Velazquez's gods emerge from Brown's analysis primarily as expressions of humanism.[20] According to Brown, Velazquez was attempting to incorporate the antique gods into modernity without putting them to Christian use. Brown praises this as a very noble goal and bemoans the practice of using mythological deities to convey Christian messages. For example, in reference to two ceiling frescoes by Pacheco in Seville he says:

> In both ensembles, the ancient gods and heroes are used symbolically to express moral ideas. They are consequently more intelligible as examples of Renaissance emblematic mythography than as vital expressions of a classical past… Before entering Seville, the antique gods had to pass through the customhouse of Catholic orthodoxy where their paganism was confiscated.[21]

Brown cannot abide this fate for the mythological portraits of Velazquez. He insists that under Velazquez's brush, the pagan gods remained intact: "Only in the case of one artist did the academy's interest in antiquity find a unified expression, and that was Diego de Velazquez."[22] Brown does not accept a resolution that relegates pagan poetry to a role of servitude for the Christian message. Instead, he resolves the tension that Dempsey located in sixteenth-century debates about mythological fiction by viewing the mythological portraits of Velazquez as strictly humanist and modern expressions without religious inflection.

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[20] Jonathan Brown, *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), Part One: Theory and Art in The Academy of Francisco Pacheco.
[21] Brown, *Images and Ideas,* 80-81.
[22] Brown, *Images and Ideas*, 81.

Brown regards secular humanistic knowledge both as the principal contributor to Velazquez's exceptional mythological paintings *and* as the primary facilitator in Velazquez's ability to make his work personal and pertinent. He claims specifically that "In his union of art and learning, Velazquez was able to capture in pictures what the Sevillian humorists and poets had put into words – a sense of the continuing relevance of antique heritage and a deep feeling of attachment to that tradition that was made of the very stuff of mankind."[23] In this quote, "learning" refers to the humanist education Velazquez received as part of Pacheco's academy. Velazquez's humanist education receives all the credit for the connective sense of humanity in his paintings. Brown seems to have resolved the tension between pagan mythologies and Christian goals by eradicating the Christian. He argues that the power of Velazquez's mythological paintings comes from Velazquez's ability to "synthesize erudition and art."[24] Yet Brown acknowledges that he is missing something, noting that: "The process through which Velazquez arrived at his personal understanding of classical mythology still awaits recreation."[25] Brown thus hints at an imperative that he either cannot or will not approach.

I believe that in overlooking the influence of religion on Velazquez's mythological portraits, Brown overlooks an important path to answering the question of how Velazquez arrived at his personal understanding of mythology. Spain was a fervently Catholic country, and the reforms of the Council of Trent emphasized the functional role of a painting as a teacher, a stimulus for contemplation and adoration, and a connector to God. Furthermore, the tradition of blending pagan gods and Christian

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[23] Brown. *Images and Ideas,* 82.
[24] Brown, *Images and Ideas,* 81.
[25] Brown, *Images and Ideas* 82.

themes was well established since the Renaissance.[26] Velazquez's paintings cannot be entirely separated from the dominant Catholicism that surrounded them. But exactly where on the spectrum between Christian allegorization and humanist interpretations do Velazquez's mythological paintings actually lie? Certainly, their Christian-ness is not immediately clear. As John Moffit has explained, one way of approaching a painting like Velazquez's *Mars* is through a euhemeristic lens.[27] Although the use of pagan figures in Christian art was censured, the philosophy of euhemerism supplied a legitimate way for art to explore pagan themes. Euhemerism is the belief that pagan gods were simply humans who achieved great things and were subsequently immortalized by poets. Moffitt employs Cicero's definition in his exploration of Velazquez's mythologies, outlining the four-part definition as follows:

1. Myths are based upon "historical" fact, however much the original facts may have become subsequently distorted.
2. Given this, the gods were originally mere mortals, later elevated to the ranks of the immortals.
3. As gods, they are cosmic symbols, expressive of either the concord or the discord of elementary universal conflicts.
4. Therefore the gods and their myths are merely the expression of certain *fabulae* embodying sweeping moral and philosophical concepts.[28]

The euhemeristic understanding of the pagan gods fell in line with the Catholic Church's belief that they were creations of man and therefore false.[29] Euhemerism made pagan

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[26] Dempsey, "Mythic Inventions," 55-75.
[27] John T Moffitt, "The 'Euhemeristic' Mythologies of Velzaquez," *Artibus et Historiae* 10, no. 19 (1989), 157-175.
[28] Moffitt, "The 'Euhemeristic' Mythologies," 160.

gods safe to approach since their legitimacy as deities was thoroughly disproved by their mortal origins. As Moffitt argues, this allowed for the use of mythological gods as teaching tools.[30] According to Moffitt, in order contextualize Velazquez properly, we must place him within this tradition, in effect, realizing Brown's worst fears of translating pagan gods into Christian moralists.

Moffitt builds his interpretation of Velazquez's mythologies on what he calls "the most thoroughly euhemeristic text in Velazquez's library," Juan Perez de Moya's *Filosofia Secreta*, dating to 1585. The book provides a Christian exegesis for Ovid's tales, finding Christian lessons in even the most unlikely places. Taking my lead from Moffitt, I would like to highlight a line within an excerpt of *La Filosofia Secreta* that Moffit also cites, which I believe can be applied usefully in an examination of Velazquez's *Mars*: "Vulcan caught Mars with a crafty net: Vulcan denotes an understanding of libidinous heat; with such awareness a net of thoughts is made by which every cowardly and vice-ridden man is entrapped."[31] Perez de Moya's overt religious interpretation of the story of Mars contrasts with the story of Mars as told by Ovid at the beginning of this paper. Instead of being represented as the butt of the gods' laughter, Perez de Moya's Mars is the subject of reflection. In the light of the reading offered by *La Filosofia Secreta*, Velazquez's Mars takes on new meaning for the viewer: he has committed the sin of adultery and, after his deserved punishment, sulks on his bed, wondering how he let this happen. According to Juan Perez de Moya, Mars provides a clear example of what happens to those who let lust override their moral judgment.

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[29] Viladesau, *Triumph*, 205-206.
[30] Moffitt ("The 'Euhemeristic' Mythologies," 60) explains that "…the euhemeristic doctrine developed in the Middle Ages states that mythological heroes and scriptural personages have tangible historical status, being equally the guides and teachers of humanity…."
[31] Moffitt, "The'Euhemersitic' Mythologies," 167.

Approached in these terms, Velazquez's Mars should create a sense of guilt and repentance in the viewer. In his analysis of this passage, Moffitt emphasizes that this conclusion would, in fact, have been very common at the time. He notes: "Velazquez's contemporaries—in this case, meaning his somewhat socially restricted but obviously well-educated audience, attached for the most part to the Spanish court—must have by choice elected to read all such painted mythologies (regardless of their authorship) according to this well-established 'euhemeristic' fashion."[32] Here, Moffitt reminds us that the instilled values of any given culture must be considered in order to understand how a painting functioned. It was expected that viewers would bring certain knowledge with them upon looking at a painting, in this case, the knowledge that pagan gods were not true deities, and that these non-gods held Christian lessons.

The idea that a viewer must actively bring knowledge to a painting corresponds well to the ambiguity of Velazquez's *Mars*. His dark, receding face forces the viewers to define the face for themselves, and to bring their knowledge and experience to bear on their speculation. The use of the painted surface as a prompt to speculation has been explored by Mary Pardo in her article "The Subject of Savoldo's Magadalene." Specifically, Pardo examines the use of shadows and special treatment of the Magdalene's shawl in a series of paintings by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo dating to circa 1530 (Figure 6).[33] Pardo states that "…it is the viewer's task to supply the text and its exegesis, so to speak, writing these into the Magdalene's withdrawn and shadowy face."[34] Her description of the beholder's job in deciphering the painting applies itself readily to the interpretation of Velazquez's *Mars*. By casting Mars's face into the

[32] Moffitt, "The 'Euhemeristic' Mythologies," 173.
[33] Mary Pardo, "The Subject of Savoldo's Magdalene," *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 1 (1989), 67-91.
[34] Pardo, "Savoldo's Magdalene," 74.

shadow of his helmet, Velazquez, like Savoldo, invites the viewer to use his or her knowledge, including the knowledge of Christian lessons, to fill in the blanks. As Pardo notes, the tactic of beseeching the viewer to seek meaning is known in rhetorical theory as aposiopesis. She explains with reference to Savoldo's painting that, in addition to the "withdrawn and shadowy face," the brightly reflective shawl enveloping most of the Magdalene also triggers aposiopesis, since it serves as a visual barrier, impeding full penetration of the image.

The technique employed by Velazquez to trigger aposiopesis is distinct from Savoldo's. Rather than a represented shawl, it is Velazquez's painterly brushstroke that envelops Mars, both attracting and deflecting the viewer's gaze.[35] In other words, the thick, loose brushstrokes both draw attention to the act of painting and act as a sort of opaque surface. They both prevent *Mars* from fully emerging and prevent the viewer from fully entering. Since the details of his face are concealed from us, we are left to wonder exactly what emotions are flitting across his features. The ambiguity allows aposiopesis to take center stage. As Pardo notes of Savoldo's *Magdalene*, the painting "presents itself as neither more nor less than a sensuously compelling fictive veil, enticing the viewer to seek the hidden truth…"[36] In such a system, the agency is given to the viewer, who must take the step toward the hidden knowledge. The importance of this interactive process, the importance of the *experience*, comes to the surface.

The rhetorical technique of aposiopesis was not foreign to Velazquez, who, as Jonathan Brown argues, was thoroughly steeped in humanistic learning. Furthermore, the use of aposiopesis to elicit understanding fits neatly into the ideas of Catholic reformers

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[35] Pardo ("Savoldo's Magdalene," 81-84) discusses the ability of the metallic-like shawl to attract and deflect the viewer at length.
[36] Pardo, "Savoldo's Magdalene," 87.

such as the Jesuits, who stressed that meditation should require the mediator to actively engage the subject of their meditation, and who advocated the idea of meditation as an experience that would bring them closer to God.[37] Aposiopesis was explicitly advocated by the Church. For example, in Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti's comments on painting, he councils: "Let us recall that there is a kind of, so to speak, perfect imperfection... aposiopesis, which through suppression signifies greater things. Thus, in the art of painting things may, and often, should be depicted in such a manner that, by one's leaving something out and only alluding to it deftly, the viewer will, of his own, imagine greater things"[38] Accordingly, the painter has the task of making something which triggers the viewer's curiosity, resulting in contemplation. The intentional ambiguity and mystery involved in aposiopesis serve as a useful tool in this sense. Having to seek out the truth instead of being directly presented with it leads to a more powerful and effective revelation, and in most cases the "truth" cannot be displayed directly anyway. It is often an abstract concept or goal, such as salvation.

In combination, the artist's use of aposiopesis and the interpreter's euhemeristic disposition potentially allowed art to fulfill its religious function, providing different ways to integrate pagan topics into Christianity. Consideration of these strategies offer insight into how Velazquez could have conceived of his pagan gods in a religious sense, how he understood them to function, and how his contemporaries understood them as well. Brown was wrong to ignore this vital ingredient in the creation and reception process. The religious value of the pagan gods was undoubtedly ingested by Velazquez, informing both his production and the subsequent reception of his paintings by viewers.

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[37] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 211.
[38] Barocchi, P., ed., *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento,* Bari, 1960, II 381-382, as cited by Pardo, "Savoldo's Magdalene," 87.

However, if these paintings are to be taken as truly religious in nature, they must be given a truly religious reading. That is, we must further seek to understand how they could have functioned as religious paintings did – through an experiential connection with the viewer, both pedagogical and emotive, as explicated by the Council of Trent.

Owing to its embedded sacred theme, Velazquez' *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* of circa 1618 provides an easier entry point into the question of how Velazquez understood his paintings to function as prompts to devotional experience (Figure 7). The painting has a complex lay out. In the foreground, two women, one old, one young, stand in a kitchen with a table of cooking ingredients before them. The old woman points to the unhappy girl beside her. Although the old woman does not look at the viewer, she has her eyebrows raised as though she is indicating something significant that is worth noting. The young girl does indeed look out at the viewer with her doleful eyes, the only one in the painting to do so. She grinds something with the mortar and pestle, which sits next to some broken egg shells, a dried red pepper, a plate of silver fish, a water pitcher, and a plate holding two eggs and a spoon. In the back of the room, a square is set into the wall, containing an image of Christ sitting in a chair and speaking to two women, presumably Mary and Martha, in an empty room, except for a low table with a white pitcher in a white bowl. A darkened doorframe inside the empty room (which is inside the mysterious square) leads the viewer even farther in, but reveals nothing.

In her article "Visualizing Devotion in Early Modern Seville: Velazquez's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,*" Tanya Tiffany studies this painting within its original religious environment to better understand its meaning, arguing that the painting responds to the Catholic belief, championed by the Jesuits and Ignatius de Loyola, that meditation

on something holy should induce a religious experience.[39] Keying her argument to the question of experience, Tiffany makes a case for a phenomenological approach to Counter Reformation painting. According to Tiffany, viewers must accept the invitation of the painting and be led through the foreground to the background by means of the visual cues provided by Velazquez in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, and thereby consider what is presented to them. In other words, the viewer is invited to undertake the work of experience (or engage a phenomenon) rather than simply observing an object.

Although Velazquez's *Mars* has no obvious indications that it offers a religious experience, the notion of approaching a work of art experientially in order to achieve the goal of bettering the soul is certainly applicable to this painting. As suggested above, his *Mars* requires not just simple viewing, but also interaction in order to be fully accessed. In a book that responds in broad terms to the iconographic readings of such paintings, Georges Didi-Huberman stresses the necessity of recognizing the experiential dimension of interpretation. In his book *Confronting Images* he encourages interpreters of paintings "…not to *think* a perimeter, a closure – as in Kant – but to *experience* a constitutive and central rift" [emphasis mine].[40] Experience, of course, is personal, varied, and impossible to examine objectively. In spite of these difficulties, Didi-Huberman insists that the individual experience is so critical to that it cannot be ignored "except by disincarnating the intrinsic power of images."[41] For Didi-Huberman, historical background, iconographic familiarity, and other types of knowledge are all useful pieces of

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[39] Tanya J. Tiffany, "Visualizing Devotion in Early Modern Seville: Velázquez's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 36, no. 2 (2005): 433 - 453 esp. 442.
[40] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, trans. John Goodman (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).
[41] Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, xxv.

information to bring to a painting, but they should be used in the service of the experience, which is present in, and must be activated in, all works of art.

This procedure seems particularly applicable in the case of a religious work where the viewer is asked to *respond* to an image in a way that should have an ameliorative effect on their soul. Significantly for the matter at hand, the idea of active contemplation of a painting was also advocated by Velazquez's teacher, Francisco Pacheco. As Carl Justi notes, besides being a painter, Pacheco was "variously a poet, a biographer, an archaeologist, and an art theorist."[42] He had his own painting academy in which he integrated the demands of the Council of Trent with a tempered humanism.[43] As his life's work he wrote a treatise on painting, *El Arte de La Pintura*, in which he provided the following council concerning human artifice: "…conociendo cuán inferiores son las cosas artificiales a las verdaderas no debían baxarse a ellas, mas levantarse a la contemplación del soberano artífice" […knowing how inferior artificial things are to true ones, (Christians) should not lower themselves to those lower things, but lift themselves up to the contemplation of the sovereign artifice][44]. In modern Spanish "artífice" means craftsmen, but it is unlikely that Pacheco, as a strong advocate of the status of painting, would have referred to an artist in this way.[45] Instead, he seems to be referring to the

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[42] Carl Justi, *Velazquez and His Times* (London: Parkstone Press International, 2006), 24.

[43] As Justi explains (*Velazquez* 24, 27) Pacheco was a respected intellectual and religious authority throughout Seville. His treatise includes substantial contributions from religious officials (including monks and cardinals) as well as sections on humanism, for which he turned to his circle of scholarly friends for help.

[44] Francisco Pacheco, *Arte De La Pintura*, vol. 1 (Madrid: 1638), 200. Translation mine.

[45] In support of this interpretation, I would like to include the following excerpt (*Arte De La Pintura* 199-200) which reflects Pacheco's understanding of painting as a noble task: "Y se podrá decir con verdad, que muncho más ilustre y altamente puede hoy un pintor cristiano hacer sus obras que Apéles ni Protógenes, ni otros famosos de la antigüedad. Mas, porque esta nobleza puede ser comun a todas las artes, juntarémos otra propia de ésta, la cual se descubre manifestamente del formar y representar ante los ojos personas dignas de merecimientos, que por su exemplar vida, llena de toda virtud, han sido agradables a Dios. Lo cual viene maravillosamente a ilustrar la fatiga y la industria desta profesión y todo el cuerpo de la obra…

concept of artifice ("artificio" in modern Spanish) and asking the viewer to contemplate the artifice, the skillful contrivance, of the artist. In a sense, his use of the word "artifice" safeguards art from associations with idolatry, because the word itself refers not to the real, original thing, but a cleverly created substitute.

Reflecting further on the proper uses of painting, Pacheco says that the highest purpose painting can serve is to unite men with God, and explains the necessary role of painting in bringing this unification: "…nuestra fragilidad, ordinariamente, no sufre que podamos subir a considerar las cosas altas sin el fundamento destas inferiores. Y esta arte es como medio e instrumento para volar más alto, y en esto consiste principalmente su dignidad…" […Our fragility, ordinarily, does not permit us to consider such high things without the foundation of inferior things. And this art (art used in this way) is like a means, an instrument, used in order to fly higher, and in this consists its principal dignity][46]. Here Pacheco extols the virtues of painting, explaining how the painter allows the viewer to reach a level of connection with God that is normally not possible, espousing the Church's view that paintings should offer a path of contemplation that leads to God, and ultimately salvation. A devout Catholic, he sees painting as a tool to help mortals reach communion with God. This explanation stands in stark contrast to Jonathan Brown's understanding of painting's real value. For Pacheco, the fact that painting serves the Catholic Church does not devalue it, as it does for Brown, but rather, gives it an honored place among the arts, and helps define it as a truly noble practice.

Like Pacheco, Velazquez sought to use art in its most noble role as divine mediator, but ventured boldly beyond Pacheco in choosing a pagan god as a path to the

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No pudiendo el ingenio humano ocuparse en cosa más honrada ni más digna que levantar (después de Dios) a los que son particpantes de la divina excelencia"

[46] Pacheco, *Arte*, 200-201. Translation mine

Christian God. Contemplation, through Velazquez's painting, of the alternately tragic or comic, and palpably guilty Mars might be just as salvific as contemplation on a painting of a saint, or a painting of Christ himself. In combination with the euhemeristic and allegorizing pre-disposition that Moffitt rightly acknowledged as a cultural condition of viewing in Velazquez's time, Pacheco's description of the instrumental role of painting in inspiring deep contemplation and subsequent spiritual arousal (which involves the phenomenological approach discussed by Tiffany and Didi-Huberman) is a key to unlocking the salvific power of such paintings.

Paradoxically, in looking at *Mars,* one finds no indication of an involved spiritual experience. There is nothing overtly religious, no clear call to contemplation. Of course, the Christian allegorizing reading that went along with a euhemeristic perspective would certainly come to mind for contemporary viewers, but this moralizing tale is not the exclusive point of meditation in *Mars.* The implicit, if more covert, inspiration for meditation comes from the depiction of vulnerability and the idea of being wounded. Velazquez's touching depiction of Mars's vulnerability encourages the viewer to identify with his humanity, to contemplate his suffering, and to have an experience of commiseration. Vicarious experiences of suffering were an established part of the Catholic notions of meditation and adoration. To reiterate, I argue that Velazquez's *Mars* serves as a medium for meditation not solely by provoking consideration of the punishment Mars received for sin, but also by provoking an empathetic, even vicarious, experience of his pain and humiliation, and thereby inspiring compassion and repentance for one's own sins. Understood in this way, Velazquez's painting of *Mars* defies the religious versus humanistic dichotomy that Brown set up. While Velazquez's *Mars* has a

potentially religious function, it is not automatically demoted to being a mere Christian symbol. Rather, in depicting Mars, Velazquez has taken to heart the Counter Reformation's command for painters to provide a medium for salvation. Through his paintings, he created a distinctly human expression of that command. His *Mars* offers a way to empathize with and understand the human condition, and even perhaps the humanity of God.

Velazquez's Mars offers an eloquent depiction of human vulnerability, as does his Prado *Crucifixion* of 1632 (Figure 8). In light of this link, Velazquez's treatment of the wounded body of Christ merits consideration. Velazquez's Prado *Crucifixion* of 1632 shows a slightly S-shaped Christ suffering quietly, almost patiently, on the cross, selflessly resigned to his fate. The blood flowing from his left hand begins to trickle down his arm, and, of course, he must let it trickle. He can do nothing. The viewer, paralyzed with him, waits for his resurrection, and implicitly, their own salvation, which is to be achieved not only through the risen Christ, but also through the work involved in their contemplation of his image. Compared to the *Mars,* the salvific purpose of this painting is much more explicit. Still, both paintings work in a similar way, offering a platform for salvific contemplation that is spurred by the empathy and compassion that these fictions provoke. A closer examination of the *Crucifixion* reveals that, in spite of obvious differences, the two paintings have much in common.

At first glance, it is clear that Velazquez's Christ is radically different from the crucified Christs of Pacheco, which were notoriously stiff and lifeless (Figure 9). In comparing Velazquez's *Crucifixion* with Pacheco's *Crucifixion* of 1614, one notes that Pacheco's painting includes almost the entire cross and an extensive, empty background,

while in Velazquez's, Christ's body dominates the canvas. In fact a large portion of the cross is omitted to obtain this close proximity. Furthermore, Pacheco's Christ maintains a more prominent musculature than Velazquez's, and has a metal halo over his head. These idealizing details make Pacheco's Christ less physically compelling than Velazquez's Christ. Comparing these two paintings it is easy to understand why a popular poem of the time made fun of Pacheco's dull crucified Christs:

Quien os puso asi señor
Tan desabrido y tan seco?
Vos me direis, que el amor,
Mas yo digo que Pacheco.

[Who put you like this Lord,
So bland and dry?
You tell me it was love,
But I say it was Pacheco.][47]

The crucified Christ of Velazquez is far from a static icon. Rather than being contained by the two fairly straight contour lines, as in Pacheco's Crucifixions, the body of Christ in Velazquez's painting is asymmetrical. A slightly raised right hip creates a soft curve in his side. Furthermore the body is painfully bare without the shield of heroic musculature that became popular in the High Renaissance, especially through

[47] Mary P. Merrifield, *The Art of Fresco Painting as Practised by the Old Italian and Spanish Masters*, ed. Arthur Wallis Charles Gilpin (Brighton, 1846), Translation Mine.

Michelangelo's art. Velazquez's Christ, like his Mars, has been de-heroized. His soft body reveals a vulnerable humanity instead of presenting an ideal. Most remarkably, the head of Velazquez's Christ hangs forward and his hair has fallen, covering half his face, where it must implicitly remain since he is completely incapacitated. Forward drooping heads were not, in any way, unheard of in representations of the dead Christ.[48] Michelangelo, for example, drew Christ with his head hanging down in a gift drawing of the *Pietà* he made for his friend Vittoria Colonna in 1540 (Figure 10).[49] However, considering the strict artistic guidelines of the Spanish bishops and the orthodoxy of Pacheco's counsel, Velazquez's choice to show the head thusly inclined can be considered innovative within its context.[50] In the Prado *Crucifixion* the half-covered face alludes to Christ's double-meaning: he is both a *memento mori* and a promise of new life.[51] The visible half of his face shows inevitable death, and the concealed half indicates, through aposiopesis, the resurrection yet to come and the inexhaustible possibility of salvation for all of humanity, invisible, but present**.** Since this promise has not yet been filled, but is imminent, and its full potential is unknowable—constantly being realized, but never completed—half of the face remains in a concealed, unknowable, state. It is not dying like the other half, but is withholding the thing that you, as the viewer, should desire, that which is hidden, but awaits you: salvation. It is important to note here that, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, paintings of the Crucifixion are not images of a past and now inconsequential event. On the contrary, the Crucifixion is understood as a present

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[48] John R. Martin, "The Dead Christ on the Cross in Byzantine Art," *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor Albert Mathias Friend Jr*, ed. Kurt Weitzman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 189-196.
[49] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 186.
[50] See Brown, *Images and Ideas,* pages 40-41, where he discusses Pacheco's "concern with orthodoxy in religious paintings."
[51] Conversation with Melody Fitzgerald. 11/20/2008.

and crucial event on which the viewer's salvation still depends.[52] According to Catholic doctrine, the salvation that Christ offers is atemporal, it saves everyone who died before him, and will save everyone who comes after him. It is a promise constantly being fulfilled. In a parallel way, human sin harms Christ without regard to time, a constant damaging action. Emphasizing this last point, the edicts of the Council of Trent explained: "For, since our sins moved Christ the Lord to undergo the death of the cross, most certainly those who wallow in sin and iniquity again crucify the Son of God within themselves, as far as in them lies, and make a mockery of Him…we, professing to know Him, yet denying him by our actions, seem in some way to lay violent hands on him."[53] It follows that images of the crucifixion are not mere representations of a mute point in Church history. Rather, they are proposed as eternal sources of salvation.

The edicts of the Council of Trent, speaking of Christ's crucifixion, say of humanity: "…we having first died with him to Sin and to this world, should rise also with him to a new manner and order"[54] The shared dying and rising demonstrates that human salvation is dependent on Christ's sacrifice, and implies that this salvation is a sort of vicarious re-living of Christ's death and resurrection. In other words, a person rejecting sin is re-enacting Christ's rejection of sin, and a person redeemed is redeemed through Christ's previous redemption. The soul re-lives Christ's experience, just as it might in the contemplation of a painting of the crucifixion.

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[52]See Viladesau (*Triumph*, 200) where he discusses the belief of The Council of Trent that all salvation is predicated on the crucifixion of Christ and would be impossible without his sacrifice**.** He summarizes their conception in the following terms: "Penitential acts of satisfaction depend entirely on our reconciliation with God through Christ; without this, no human actions can have any value before God."

[53] Viladesau, *Triumph*, 198.

[54] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 202.

Returning to Velazquez's *Mars* with these ideas in mind, I must first acknowledge that we are not dealing here directly with a painting of the *Crucifixion*. While Christ is both fully human and fully divine, Velazquez's Mars is fully human, but not at all divine. Velazquez does emphasize Christ's humanness, connecting his *Crucifixion to* his *Mars,* but he does not equate the two. Rather, in *Mars,* he makes human vulnerability the theme, enabling *Mars* to operate through an implied analogy to Christ and his vulnerability on the cross. Furthermore, while Christians are invited to relive Christ's experience on the cross, they are certainly not invited to relive or imitate Mars's adulterous actions. However, they *are* invited to relive *Mars'* experiences of suffering, shame, and humiliation, which can lead the viewer to compassion, repentance and renewed religious zeal, just as in the case of Velazquez's *Crucifixion*. The emphatic humanness of *Mars* plays an important role in inspiring this religious zeal. His depicted humanity makes him relatable and pitiable to the viewer, helping to elicit the necessary compassion. By pitying Mars and having compassion for him, even though he is a sinner, the viewer is put in the position of Christ, having mercy on the sins of humanity. Approaching Velazquez's *Mars* under these conditions makes the viewer more Christ-like, through imitation of Christ's forgiving actions. The goal of all Christians, according to the Bible is to become more Christ-like.[55] Therefore, the mercy that *Mars* inspires can aid the contemplative viewer toward salvation.

The arresting humanity of both Velazquez's Mars and the Christ of his Prado *Crucifixion* invite the viewer to step into their skin and feel their pain. This effect is created through a series of choices on the part of Velazquez. Both figures are depicted as if they are sagging with the force of gravity. Both have been given partially obscured

[55] John 8:12

faces, adding to a mood of solitary melancholy. Both paintings, in sum, feature a single, almost nude, subject in an exposed, helpless state. Velazquez's Christ is nailed to a cross, patently unable to help himself. The painting prompts us to remember Christ's call for help, saying according to the Bible, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"[56] Like his Christ, Velazquez's Mars is also helpless, but in his case, he is helpless in the sense that he is pondering a past failing about which he can do nothing.

Both instances reveal the humanity of the subject and use it to teach. In the case of Mars, the (superficial) lesson is "See how miserable I am – Don't give in to lust, don't commit adultery." In the case of Christ the lesson is "See how miserable I am – I suffered greatly for your sins, to save you." Christ and Mars both suffer. Both pay a price, but of a very different order. For his part, Mars pays the price of embarrassment, forced by the vengeful Vulcan who was jealous of Mars's adulterous love with his wife. Christ pays the price of his life out of his own free will, out of perfect love. Thus, Mars and Christ provide a contrast between earthly and divine love, and both pay a price for their respective types of love. Furthermore, it is for sins like Mars's love affair that Christ had to die and perpetually dies on the cross. He neutralizes such sins with his pure, selfless love. Following this analogy through to its conclusion, Velazquez's Mars and the Christ of his *Crucifixion* can be understood as pendants, with Mars representing the sin Christ died for, and Christ representing the price paid for such sin. Depending on the meditative disposition of the viewer, Velazquez's painting of *Mars* is potentially evocative not only of his own suffering, but also of Christ's love and suffering, which were the meditation topics *par excellence* in renewing one's soul according to religious authorities like the Jesuits and other Orders.

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[56] Mark 15: 34

Both the *Crucifixion* and *Mars* demonstrate Velazquez's ingestion and reproduction of religious imperatives, imperatives that in both cases led to the creation of something not just superficially religious and sermonizing, but deeply spiritual and moving. In regards to the initial question of how Velazquez reconciled pagan mythology and Christian aims in his paintings, I would argue that Velazquez does not turn *Mars* into a simple Christian allegory of a repentant sinner receiving his due punishment, nor does he turn *Mars* into Christ. He absorbs and utilizes these connotations, and then moves beyond them to produce something still Christian, not solely on a didactic or representative level, but also on a deeper, more meaningful level, evoking compassion, empathy, and a complicated web of thoughts about how Mars is like Christ, how, as repentant sinners, both Mars and the viewer relate to Christ, and how Mars relates to the viewer, who is placed in the role of Christ. Velazquez deftly uses an abject human figure to stir the soul into a whirlpool of emotion and wonder. It is in the awakening and repenting of the soul that the viewer is put on the path to salvation.

This ameliorative effect is not necessarily limited to the viewer. In conceiving of and creating his paintings, Velazquez could receive the same sort of spiritual benefits as his viewers. Within a poetic economy that has humanity as its subject, his personal connection to that subject, and his progress through painting toward salvation, are necessary preliminary steps in creating an image that could give the same spark to someone else.[57] Of course, any attempt to determine how an artist relates to what he or she creates is tricky at best (especially when the artist is dead). Here, it is useful to turn

[57] See Jean Campbell, "Style and Judgment: On Boccaccio and the Early Italian Painters," (Unpublished Paper, Emory University, 2009), 1-37.

to Erwin Panofsky and his analysis of how Titian identified with the Ovidian tales he painted. Panofsky recognizes an unusual connection between Titian and Ovid:

> He [Titian] must have felt an inner affinity to an author profound as well as witty, sensuous as well as aware of mankind's tragic subjection to destiny. And it was precisely this inner affinity which enabled Titian to interpret Ovid's texts both literally and freely, both with minute attention to detail and in a spirit of uninhibited inventiveness.[58]

Throughout the chapter, Panofsky strives to retrieve Titian's personal understanding of Ovid by noting which Ovidian details Titian carefully maintains and, more significantly, those which he alters or disregards. For instance, with reference to Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* of circa 1556, he observes that Titian "changes a line" of Ovid to better communicate what he considers key about the setting. Ovid's original line is, "In [the forest's] utmost recesses there is a sylvan cave, not produced by any art. Nature's own genius had imitated art; she erected a natural arch of live pumice stone and tufa."[59] Titian instead paints a natural setting surrounded by collapsing, man-made ruins that look like works of nature. He has taken Ovid's description a step further to emphasize the cathedral-like setting. Panofsky considers this choice to be an indicator of artistic license and consequently an indicator of the meaning Titian found in Ovid's tales and hoped to communicate.

Velazquez's *Mars* suggests that he, like Titian, identified strongly enough with certain of Ovid's stories to take liberties, but those liberties are not limited to the iconographic choices that Panofsky observes in Titian's mythologies. For an analysis of

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[58] Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian Mostly Iconographic* (New York City: New York University Press, 1969), 140.
[59] Panofsky, *Problems,* 157.

license in Velazquez's mythologies, it is helpful to turn to Svetlana Alpers who, in her book *The Vexations of Art: Velazquez and Others* focuses on technical choices, such as the use of color and application of paint, as ways to interpret paintings. Referring to Velazquez's painting of *Mercury and Argus* of 1659, she points out that Velazquez does not paint Io, the captured cow, the brilliant white that Ovid specifies (Figure 11). Instead, he opts for a muted brown, causing less distraction from the central figures.[60] Alpers' analysis of Velazquez's paintings demonstrates that a formal approach, which defers questions of meaning in favor of formal considerations, can produce conclusions which help to answer these very questions of meaning and function that Panofsky sought to answer. By analyzing the composition of the painting *Mercury and Argus,* Alpers arrives at the conclusion that the painting is intended to stimulate contemplation on the equality of the human condition. Alpers points out that the men, one about to kill, one about to be killed, are at an even height, legs overlapping.[61] She finds another indication of equality in the fact that both men are made from the same model, and different parts of their bodies are taken from different parts of the model, the statue *Fallen Gaul*. Together they make up the complete whole of the model from which they were drawn.[62] Alpers comments on the equilibrium between the two figures: "Killer and victim, the one who is vulnerable and the one who is not, are united in and bound together by the picture. There is a common feeling for the hunter and for the hunted."[63] While emphasizing the compositional reciprocity, Alpers also points to the lack of interaction between the two figures:

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[60] Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art; Velazquez and Others* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 126.
[61] Alpers, *Vexations,* 116.
[62] Alpers, *Vexations*, 120.
[63] Alpers, *Vexations,* 120.

> The killer does not overwhelm; the victim does not resist. Faces are largely hidden from view or obscured by paint. The two are depicted as equals. At a fleeting glance they might be brothers, one younger and one older. Action is suspended. Only the slightest hint of death is in the air.[64]

In this painting, as Alpers observes, Velazquez takes a violent moment, like the murder of Argus, and stills it to bring attention to the equality of humans before death, or fate, or the general conditions of humanity. In Alpers words, "The equal nature of people is the human lot as Velazquez depicts it."[65]

Clues to how Velazquez understood his role as a painter can be found throughout his mythological paintings in the choices he makes, not only thematically, but also, as Alpers demonstrates, in their composition and facture. Alpers' observation that Velazquez chooses the quieter moment in his painting of Mercury and Argus also makes sense with reference to Velazquez's depiction of Mars. In the Prado painting the proud, strong, god of war is shown silenced on his bed. Velazquez shows Mars in a moment of weakness. The composition of the painting as a whole is characterized by a downward slide: the figure of Mars is shown hunched over, and the sheets are depicted as falling to the ground, along with the armor, which Velazquez composes as in a precarious pile. Mars's helmet strap hangs down, as does his loin cloth, trailing off the edge of the bed. All of these choices, along with decision to make his disgraced god a middle-aged man instead of a youth, reflect Velazquez's particular understanding of Mars in this moment and his attempt to communicate this understanding to his viewers in a shared moment of compassion. The strong sense of gravity heightens the sensation that this Mars is a real

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[64] Alpers, *Vexations*, 121.
[65] Alpers, *Vexations,* 121.

human, subject to real forces, however inconvenient they may be, and that he is vulnerable, just like anyone else, to the conditions of humanity, and the often unfortunate consequences of being human.

In other words, Velazquez's Mars has to face the same struggles that we do, with respect to something as basic as gravity, or something as intrinsically human as suffering. His is not an allegory floating in a symbolic space; nor is he a lofty, untouchable deity. He is tired and has a messy bed. As in the case of *Mercury and Argus,* Velazquez has taken a moment that invites an active, even aggressive portrayal and transformed it into one that invites meditation on humility and the lowliness of the human condition.

In addition to compositional choices, the application of paint itself offers insight into Velazquez's understanding of both his subject and his goals. His painterly style does not delineate clearly, but instead creates a foggy ambiguity. Such obfuscation would not seem to fit well with the Church's concern that art serve and educative function. As Viladesau notes "…there was often a preference for art that was simple, clear, and easily understood…"[66] This general preference raises the question of why Velazquez would opt for such a painterly style, especially if, as I am arguing, his purpose was to foster religious understanding.

On one level, his shrouding brushstroke might be considered a form of aposiopesis, forcing the viewer to work for a conclusion. The painterly brushstroke also draws attention to the physical process of painting. Speaking of "coincidence of technique and meaning" in Titian's painting, David Rosand usefully explores the concept of a painting

[66] Viladesau, *Triumph,* 260.

as a record an activity.[67] He says: "the process is also the carrier of meaning; the stroke of the brush acquires a fully affective as well as mimetic function, a genuine eloquence."[68] Rosand posits that: **"**The charge retained by the individual stroke, the distinctive physiognomy of *tocco* or *macchia*, can never totally shed that retrospective allusion of its own process of becoming."[69] Mary Pardo offers a similar interpretation of the effect achieved in the brilliant shawl in Savoldo's *Magdalene*. She says: "The gleaming shawl re-represents the pigmented and brush-imprinted canvas in terms of illusion and thus invites us to contemplate on its own terms that other content, the artistic process itself."[70] Importantly, for the present argument, Pardo argues that the purpose of the incredibly tight brushstroke that produces the *trompe l'oeil* metallic shine of the Magdalene's shawl is to "engage our self-conscious awareness of pictorial artifice" rather than to show off.[71] The indiscernible brushstrokes and the luminescent quality of the paint focus attention on the action of creation, thereby undermining the Magdalene's supposed role as subject. Within such a system, however paradoxically, the central figure cedes its place as the center of attention.

This last principle is an important one to bear in mind in considering Velazquez's *Mars*, but first the effects of his brushstroke deserve consideration in their own right. His loose, painterly brushstrokes are often compared to Titian's.[72] In Velazquez's paintings, as in Titian's, visible brushstrokes call to the viewer's attention the actual presence of the paint, and the process of applying the paint. His *Mercury and Argus*, which was painted

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[67] David Rosand, "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush," *Artibus et Historiae* 2, no. 3 (1981), 88.
[68] Rosand, "Titian," 85.
[69] Rosand, "Titian," 95.
[70] Pardo, "Savoldo's Magdalene," 90.
[71] Pardo, "Savoldo's Magdalene," 84.
[72] See Alpers (*Vexations*, 146, 175), who discusses Titian as a resource for and an inspiration to Velazquez, and says that Velazquez learned his handling of paint from Titian and other Venetian painters.

about twenty years later than *Mars,* exemplifies a later, more extreme, manifestation of Velazquez's painterly style. This style tends to make everything more abstract since the brushstrokes take greater prominence than the forms themselves.[73]

In the *Mars,* Velazquez's brushstroke hides, dims, and obscures, heightening our curiosity and asking us to look with care. It creates a hazy veil which, in a way, shields the culpable and vulnerable Mars from our harsh glances, our judgments, and, therefore implicitly, our exploitation of his destroyed pride.

Velazquez's decision to make Mars's face emerge rather timidly from under his helmet *and* from behind the fog elicits more pity and compassion than we might feel if we were looking at a figure that was not hidden at all. We feel the intrusion on Mars's privacy in the shielding brushstroke. Velazquez refuses to articulate too clearly the lines of his face, and refuses to put his deflated subject in a glaring and all-revealing light. Instead, he prompts a more delicate revelation. His brushstroke has as protective function, which serves to intensify the sense of Mars's vulnerability. He is like a skittish deer in a foggy wood. If the observers make their presence known, the deer will flee. Those observers want to look more closely at the deer, but every time they get to close, he disappears into the fog. We can approach Velazquez's Mars, but if we get too close he disassociates into stains on a canvas.

The viewer's awareness of the act of painting is especially important with a mythological painting like the *Mars* because it turns attention to the creation process, reminding the viewer that the true meaning of the painting does not lie in Mars's pagan identity as a god. Velazquez's overt but humble style is a way to draw attention to the

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[73] Alpers notes how the almost impressionistic style in *Mercury and Argus* brings "an overall attention to the painted field" (*Vexations*, 128).

process of painting without necessarily drawing attention to his skill.[74] With the attention focused on the act of painting, the entire creation process, including the artist's mental, emotional and technical processes of understanding the subject, is brought forward. By demanding that the viewer engage in the process of understanding Velazquez prevents exclusive focus either on his skilled painting or on *Mars* as an object, helping to direct the viewer away from potential idolatry. The humble, unpresuming brush stroke corresponds with the humble, unpresuming figure of *Mars.* This double dose of humility reinforces the idea that *Mars* himself is unworthy of worship and adoration. He is ordinary—no halo, no divine glow—an unimpressive god seen through a cloudy lens. With the impulse to objectify the image as a cult object so clearly discouraged, the experience of the divine must be accessed through contemplation.[75]

Like his *Christ in The House of Mary and Martha*, Velazquez's *Mars* requires an active viewer to realize its full meaning. The viewer's action is necessary because the painting withholds its subject. By way of contrast, it is useful to look at Guercino's *Mars, Venus and Cupid* of 1633 (Figure 12). In this painting Mars, wearing his brightly shining armor, pulls back a curtain to stare greedily at Venus, who stares at the viewer along with cupid. Cupid not only stares, but also unflinchingly points a bow and arrow straight at the viewer. The implied relation of the painting to the viewer is the reverse of the one that Velazquez stages. In his *Mars* the sword lying harmless on the floor does not point outward, it points inward, at Mars. Even the slightest threat of a discarded weapon

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[74] In a conversation with Jean Campbell, she commented on Velazquez's use of paint, saying that: "His artifice is obvious, but not ornamental; he is disclosing the mundane act of painting." November 2008.
[75] See Thomas Hyde, "Boccaccio: The Genealogies of Myth," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 100 (1985): 737-45. esp. 741. In this article Hyde discusses how Boccaccio, also dealing with volatile gods, isolates them from their accompanying practices. Hyde states that "Boccaccio detaches myth from pagan religion by avoiding any mention of cults."

pointed at the viewer is thus defused. Instead, the handle of the sword faces the viewer, indicating the necessary action of the viewer, and the possibility of injurious action toward Mars, but also the possibility of non-injurious action, namely, the compassion and forgiveness the viewer might feel toward him. Metaphorically speaking, the viewer has the option of using or not using the sword. If the viewer chooses the later, and gives Mars compassion and mercy, the viewer receives these very same benefits, and hopefully the eventual total absolution that is salvation. In other words, the viewer, in having compassion and forgiveness for *Mars*, receives compassion and forgiveness from God. Essentially, the viewer must do unto Mars as he or she would have done unto him or herself.

Since the sword can be understood as inviting action and offering a choice, the viewer's place is implicitly more charged with responsibility than it is in the case of Guercino's painting. In the Guercino, a tense looking Venus seems to be warning the viewer. With one hand placed on Cupid's arrows, she uses the other hand to point at the viewer, reinforcing Cupid's gesture, and thereby reinforcing the passive and receptive position of the viewer. The message of the danger of temptation and carnal love is immediately clear and clearly threatening. There is no need to pause and ponder for long to understand. Guercino's example of such an aggressive address provides an excellent foil to Velazquez's portrayal of an unassuming, perplexing Mars. The central figure does not even look directly at the viewer. In fact, of all the paintings by Velazquez considered thus far, the only one which features a figure making direct eye contact, and arguably the most pedantic, is his *Christ in The House of Mary and Martha.* This earlier painting betrays a clearer didactic function than either the *Mars* or the *Crucifixion*. In these later

paintings the withheld contact intrigues the viewer and, in accordance with the rhetorical function of aposiopesis (literally, falling silent) motivates the viewer do the work of communication and engage the painting's subject in depth.[76]

Velazquez's mythological portraits subsume the Christian allegories with which they are associated, creating animate, profoundly human figures which seize the viewer and demand to be engaged as such. If properly meditated upon, the interaction will lead to the overarching goal of salvation, but the salvation can only be accessed if the interaction is one of deep contemplation and subsequent emotional arousal. The painter must communicate an emotion through his painting, and the viewer must respond, resulting in an exchange. Only then is the buried, innermost meaning of the painting brought to the surface. The tension between pagan poetics and Christian truth is resolved in this way: the humbled, human, mythological figure of Mars offers the possibility of a salvific experience to one who is willing to do the work. While potentially fulfilling a command of the Church, Velazquez's *Mars* is not thereby bleached of his humanity, quite the opposite. Rather, the painting functions within the religious world as a stimulus to contemplation, and a path to salvation.

But why would Velazquez chose such a convoluted path to making a salvific image when he could simply make a heartrendingly human crucifix? As I have already argued, profound contemplation was considered an important step toward salvation, and this consideration was undoubtedly part of the reason for the circuitous route. Still, the use of the mythological figure of Mars is an unusual and problematic choice in this

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[76] In Jean Campbell's work on Boccaccio ("Style and Judgement" 3) she points out his insistence on the necessity to experience his work. She says of him: "Boccaccio demands that the experiential force and equivocal value of the words he has penned be recognized and taken on board as part of the active process of interpretation." Without having weighed the results of Boccaccio's choices through their own experience, the readers can never hope to mine his writing for all its worth.

context. This choice may have to do with a point of contention between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century. The Tridentine preoccupation with art as a means to salvation illuminates a larger difference between Catholic and Protestant beliefs of the time, having to do with perceptions of free will. As Viladesau notes in his analysis of a section of the Catholic Catechism regarding the effects of the Crucifixion and Resurrection: "…we may see a response to Lutheran ideas – or at least the Catholic perception of them – in the emphasis on the need for a truly regenerated life…. The Catechism does not explicitly take up the controverted point of human freedom, but in the section on creation simply states the God gave humanity free will."[77] In the eyes of the Catholic reformers it was the Church's urgent responsibility to teach men and women to love God and to guide them toward the right choices, but how to catch the most wayward souls?

Perhaps Velazquez's *Mars* can be seen as a response to this challenge: a novel attempt to grasp the attention of a jaded viewer who has seen one too many crucifixes. The strangeness of a defeated pagan war god is enough cause for pause, but the specter of gripping humanity and vulnerability seizes even the most bored observer, and speculations pour forth unbidden, or rather, bidden by the fascinating and peculiar *Mars*. At the very least, we can see *Mars* as the product of an innovative artist who projected his Catholic spirituality through painterly invention. His *Mars* brought a new, sharper, more poignant perspective to key ideas such as compensation for sin, humiliation and humility, human vulnerability, pain, and compassion. Through his synthesis of these ideas, Velazquez promoted a new and more acute perception of Christ's sacrifice. His *Mars*

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[77] *Catechismus ex Decreto Concili Tridentini ad Parchos,* Pars Prima, ch, II, 19, 17 as cited by Viladesau, *Triumph*, 202.

offers a different path to the goal of promoting good works. The Council of Trent mourned that "….we, professing to know Him [Christ], yet denying him by our *actions*, seem in some way to lay violent hands on him."[78] If a person's sinful actions can lay violent hands on Christ, then a person's good and kind actions can glorify and honor Christ, and are, according to Catholic doctrine, necessary for salvation. Therefore, people had to be motivated to repent, and to perform good works, good actions.

For Velazquez, the creation of a religious painting was a good work. For the viewer, the active contemplation and engagement of a religious painting is both potentially a good work in and of itself and a source of inspiration to perform more good works in one's life. Velazquez's *Mars,* because he is passive and ambiguous, demands to be prodded and pondered; he demands to be engaged in a process of discovery, or else he remains a mystery, and a potentially blasphemous mystery at that. Velazquez created a painting that demanded a time-consuming, difficult, emotionally exhausting, *good work* to be opened.

Engaging the viewer with a new and affective subject entailed the exploration of dangerous territory. In the sense that Velazquez used pagan mythology as a new source of moving stories, and sought to revitalize these stories in a non-blasphemous way, he can be considered an inheritor of the enterprise that Boccaccio began in his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*.[79] Like Boccaccio before him, Velazquez necessarily encountered peril as he tried to utilize pagan gods in a Christian world.[80] If the gods were to be taken back,

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[78] Viladesau, *Triumph*, 198.
[79] Thomas Hyde, "Boccaccio: The Genealogies of Myth," *PMLA* 100, no. 5 (1985), 737-745, esp. 740, where the author discusses how Boccaccio saw antique mythologies as an un-mined wealth of relevant, moving stories. Hyde says that Boccaccio gives renewed energy and meaning to the ancient myths, "revealing the human secular truths" within them.
[80] Hyde, "Boccaccio," 738.

they had to be taken back in lowly human forms, as protection against idolatry and damnation, and to rid them of their terrible connotations. Velazquez's depiction of Mars as a pathetic human subject with wounded pride would have helped extinguish the threat of idolatry.[81] Velazquez thus succeeded in turning something potentially monstrous in the eyes of his contemporaries into something human.

Aside from the disapproval of the Church, Velazquez, like Boccaccio, undoubtedly had to face some degree of guilt and fear for his creations. Unburying the pagan gods was risky and even soul-threatening business. Speaking of Boccaccio's perilous charge in the writing of the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods,* Thomas Hyde explains: "The mythographer must not only shape his dusty and dismembered material to human form but overcome its monstrosity, bind it in adamantine chains, and bring it once more to light."[82] The chains imply that the mythographer's creation must be carefully guarded, and reflects the fear that once revived the monster may get beyond the control of the creator, like the monster in Mary Shelly's Frankenstein.

Velazquez, and all artists who invoked the pagan gods, had to deal with the fact that they were creating a possibly destructive and dangerous force, from their Christian view points. Consequently, most pagan gods became blatant, unmistakable servants of Christianity in order to survive. They remained cold, distant, and dead, in the sense that they no longer told their own stories. Velazquez chose the alternative path of making his gods human. He sought a way to embrace the ancient myths, and valued the humanity he

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[81] Hyde ("Boccaccio," 740) points out a passage of the *Genealogies of the Gentile Gods* in which Boccaccio likens his reconstruction of the genealogy of the pagan gods to Aesculapius restoring the body of Hippolytus. Hyde explains that when Boccaccio likens himself to Aesculapius, reconstructing a damaged body, "myth emerges as no longer monstrous but human – maimed and imperfect at first but finally restored in the shape of Hippolytus.''

[82] Hyde, "Boccaccio," 740.

found in them, the nuggets of shared identity that transcended time. Even though Velazquez's motivations were shaped by the dominant concerns of the Catholic Church, there is no reason to assume that Velazquez chose to show *Mars* in his bed of defeat solely to answer those concerns. Furthermore, the salvation that Velazquez offers is not through a didactic scolding, but through an emotional connection. The humanity of Velazquez's mythological portraits serves as connective tissue in multiple senses. In the seventeenth century it helped to connect the spirit of the ancient mythologies with his contemporary, Christian viewers, and it helped to connect those viewers to God. Its function is not, however, exhausted in that context. If we, the modern viewers, feel the humanity in Velazquez's *Mars*, if it intrigues us, or makes us sad, or makes us embarrassed for him, it connects us all the way back, through every point on the line of connections that began with the poetic invention of the gods.

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