CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLES

Reading Gesture in John 20.16–17 and Its Afterlives

Clarissa Breu 📍

Institut für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, Universität Wien, Vienna, Austria
Email: clarissa.breu@univie.ac.at

Abstract

In research literature and works of art, the textual gap of Mary's bodily action, implicit in Jesus' phrase μή μου ἅπτου (John 20.17b), is frequently filled either with a *proskynesis* or a standing embrace. Against the background of Judith Butler's theory of gesture, this article analyses attempts at filling in the gaps in the text. The notion of gesture as bodily quotation helps to interpret Mary and Jesus not as counterparts, but as a performative unit enacting continuity and difference after Jesus' death. The reading offered in this article focuses on the interaction between bodies, and it undermines the dichotomy between speech and body, man and woman, heaven and earth. This article examines exegetical interpretations of Mary's gesture, alongside artistic interpretations, to show that the way the textual gap is filled is significant because gestures are significant.

Keywords: gesture; John 20; Judith Butler; performativity; Mary Magdalene; Noli me tangere; reception; proskynesis; anagnorisis scenes

1. Introduction

At the Holy Thursday Mass in 2016, Pope Francis washed the feet of eleven Muslim asylum seekers in a refugee camp and a woman from the refugee organisation. His gesture of foot washing is clearly recognisable as a 'quotation' and variation of Jesus' gesture in John 13.1–20. The gesture impacts upon material realities: the bodies of the refugees continue and actualise the bodies of Jesus' disciples. Their bodies become different in the moment the gesture is performed. Hence, the gesture materialises an invisible reality and, at the same time, creates a new reality that slightly modifies Jesus' gesture. The Pope's gesture provoked discussions about inclusion, interreligious dialogue and gender roles. It also shows that gestures are significant because they create new material realities.

In her dissertation, Sophie Schweiger, a German studies scholar, argues that gestures are significant in the analysis of texts because they show that 'bodies develop their own plots and these plots are significant'.[1] According to Schweiger, 'observing a body *in actu* and in exchange with its immediate environment means observing an act of production

---

and, simultaneously, an act of becoming'.[2] She does not regard bodily acts as expressions of feelings or meanings but rather underlines their ability to create their own materiality.[3]

In her lecture, 'When Gesture Becomes Event', Judith Butler develops a theory of gesture that compares bodily acts to performative speech acts, proposing that not only speech acts, such as 'I hereby sentence you to two years of prison,' but also bodily acts create material realities. As 'citational acts',[4] gestures can be repeated in new contexts and take on new meaning, as shown by Pope Francis' act in the refugee camp. Words but also bodily acts can be *quoted*. Butler, however, emphasises the importance of continuity between spoken language and bodily acts, and their possible transfer to new contexts, as well as the role of interruption as a significant aspect of bodily acts. She defines gesture as a 'truncated form of action'[5] characterised by interruption. Butler explains this by referring to a scene in a play by Bertolt Brecht, which is discussed by Walter Benjamin in his text on gesture, 'What is Epic Theatre?': A mother is about to throw a bronze bust at her daughter when a stranger enters.[6] The interruption holds the gesture as if in a still image and prevents it from becoming a completed action. The interruption exposes a scene of domestic violence and brings it to a halt. The spectator, who already imagines that the bust flies towards the daughter's head and hurts her, is surprised by the interruption. The expected course of action is not continued. As I see it, the mother, the daughter and the stranger who interrupts the scene form a performative unit because the interruption is now part of the mother's bodily act. The shared activity in the same bodily act serves to blur the boundaries between the characters involved.

The significance of gestures, as underlined by Schweiger and Butler, is also reflected in the vast research literature on this subject. The publication of gesture research in nearly every area of the humanities, including classics,[7] anthropology,[8] linguistics,[9] art history,[10] theatre studies,[11] and political science,[12] has rightly been described as the 'coming of age of [...] gesture studies'.[13] This development, however, has not until now been applied in the field of New Testament studies,[14] although there is a marked increase in publications on the significance of bodies and their material realities for the interpretation of New Testament texts.[15]

---

[2] Schweiger, 'Acting Bodies', 3–4.

[3] Schweiger, 'Acting Bodies', 4, 7.

[4] J. Butler, 'When Gesture Becomes Event', *InterViews in Performance Philosophy: Crossings and Conversations* (ed. A. Street, J. Alliot and M. Parker; Performance Philosophy; London: Macmillan, 2017) 171–91, at 22.

[5] Butler, 'Gesture', 182.

[6] W. Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre?', *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (ed. H. Arendt; New York: Schocken, 1976) 147–54, at 150.

[7] Alex C. Purves, *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture* (Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[8] C. Wulf, 'Der mimetische und performative Charakter von Gesten: Perspektiven für eine kultur- und sozial-wissenschaftliche Gestenforschung', *Paragrana* 19 (2010) 232–45.

[9] A. Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[10] F. Göppelsröder, T. Hildebrandt and U. Richtmeyer, ed., *Bild und Geste: Figurationen des Denkens in Philosophie und Kunst* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014).

[11] S. Felber, *Travelling Gestures – Elfriede Jelineks Theater der (Tragödien-) Durchquerung* (Wien: mdw Press, 2023).

[12] V. Darian, ed., *Verhaltene Beredsamkeit? Politik, Pathos und Philosophie der Geste* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009).

[13] S. Goldin-Meadow and D. Brentari, 'Gesture, Sign, and Language: The Coming of Age of Sign Language and Gesture Studies', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40 (2017) 1–60.

[14] Exceptions are J. Glancy, 'Jesus, the Syrophoenician Woman, and Other First Century Bodies', *BI* 18 (2010) 342–63 and my own work; see C. Breu, 'Double Turning and Other Duplicities: A Performative Reading of John 20', *JRAT* (2024) 1–20 and C. Breu, 'The Exposure of Violence: A Performative Reading of Sacrifice in Genesis 22 with Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben', *JRAT* 8 (2022) 275–89.

[15] See, e.g., B. E. Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); A. Weissenrieder and K. Dolle, ed., *Körper und Verkörperung: Biblische Anthropologie im Kontext*

In this article, I examine this research gap by analysing a New Testament passage where a gesture is present, although not explicitly mentioned. In John 20.11–18, Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus after his death in the famous *Noli me tangere* scene. At first, she takes him to be a gardener, but when he calls her by name, she expresses her recognition of him by naming him 'Rabbuni'. Jesus reacts with the words μή μου ἅπτου (20.17b), which can be translated as 'do not touch me'.[16] There is evidently a textual gap between the spoken words 'Rabbuni' and μή μου ἅπτου because Mary's utterance alone does not fully explain Jesus' reaction. The reader has to relate both utterances to each other by constructing a bodily interaction between Jesus and Mary.[17]

In her book *Dialogue and Drama*, Jo-Ann Brant argues, notably in the chapter 'Speech as Gesture', that the textual gap in John 20.17 is an example of deictic language, that is, 'an action encoded in [...] speech'.[18] Deictic language offers a way to bypass stage directions by integrating them into dialogues. Brant applies this concept to John 20.17 and explains why a gestural action is in the text, although it is not mentioned.[19] Mary's gesture in John 20.16–17 is part of a textual gap, while Jesus' deictic words clearly imply some kind of bodily action. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that the textual gap has been filled by readers, interpreters and artists in various ways. In most cases, they imagine either a *proskynesis* or an embrace. My aim is to demonstrate that the ways in which the unmentioned gesture is constructed produce different kinds of bodies. It will be argued that a focus on gesture can counter a long tradition that understands Jesus' utterance as the repudiation of Mary's touch[20] and the whole Gospel of John as a spiritual sublimation of the physical.[21] Bodily interaction deconstructs the opposition between the earthbound, sensual, bodily, female disciple, who desires to touch, and the heavenly, spiritual, speaking, male teacher, who averts the touch. It will be shown that Mary's gesture and Jesus' interruption form a performative unit, rather than representing an instance of two characters in opposition to each other. The focus on gesture entails two central questions: Does μή μου ἅπτου imply that Mary touches or tries to touch Jesus, and what is the posture that shapes the interaction between Mary and Jesus? After a brief introduction on the possible implications of μή μου ἅπτου, two larger sections of the article will be dedicated to the postures of *proskynesis* and embrace, juxtaposing exegetical findings and aspects of cultural history with later artistic representations of this textual gap. Touch, *proskynesis* and embrace function as gestures in line with Sophie Schweiger's definition of gestures as 'postures and movements of

---

antiker Medizin und Philosophie: Ein Quellenbuch für die Septuaginta und das Neue Testament (FSBP 8; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019); C. Moss, 'The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34', *JBL* 129 (2010) 507–19; A. D. Myers, '"In the Father's Bosom": Breastfeeding and Identity Formation in John's Gospel', *CBQ* 76 (2014) 481–97.

[16] More on the question of translation will follow in section 2.

[17] On the functions of textual gaps in the reading process, see, W. Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (München: Fink, 1976) 302.

[18] J.-A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth* Gospel (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004) 56.

[19] Brant, *Dialogue*, 86.

[20] For overviews of previous research on the passage, see H. W. Attridge, '"Don't Be Touching Me": Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene', *A Feminist Companion to John*, vol. II (ed. A.-J. Levine and M. Blickenstaff; FCNTECW 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003) 140–66; R. Bieringer, '"I Am Ascending to My Father and Your Father, to My God and Your God" (John 20:17): Resurrection and Ascension in the Gospel of John', *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (ed. C. Koester and R. Bieringer; WUNT 222; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 209–35, at 209–17; R. Bieringer, 'Touching Jesus? The Meaning of μή μου ἅπτου in Its Johannine Context', *To Touch or Not to Touch? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the 'Noli me tangere'* (ed. R. Bieringer, K. Demasure and B. Baert; ANL 67; Leuven: Peeters, 2013) 61–82.

[21] D. Kolesch, 'Die Geste der Berührung', *Gesten: Inszenierung, Aufführung und Praxis* (ed. Ch. Wulf and E. Fischer-Lichte; München: Wilhelm Fink, 2010) 225–41, at 231: 'The prohibition of touch rejects the materiality of the senses and the world of the senses; Christian culture seeks the authentication of reality in a metaphysics of the Word and Scripture'; My translation of: 'Das Berührungsverbot weist die Materialität der Sinne und der Sinnenwelt zurück, die christliche Kultur sucht die Beglaubigung der Wirklichkeit in einer Metaphysik des Wortes und der Schrift.'

the body or its parts'.[22] In keeping with this definition, posture is used as a sub-category of gesture.

2. Previous Research on μή μου ἅπτου and the Artistic Representation of Touch

Previous research on John 20.16–17 primarily addresses the question of how to translate μή μου ἅπτου, for different translations imply different assessments of Mary's and Jesus' characters.

The scene is variously evaluated, depending on whether Mary tries (or succeeds) to touch Jesus or seeks to cling to him. This aspect is especially important for feminist research on the passage, because, if Jesus rejects Mary's touch in general, it contrasts with his invitation to the male Thomas to touch him (John 20.27). However, if it refers only to a certain kind of touch ('clinging to'), '[...] the stark contrast between this scene and the following encounter with Thomas is reduced'.[23] The translation 'do not cling to me' is based on the durative aspect of the negated present imperative and the interruption of an action already begun.[24] A more general rejection of Mary's touch would raise the question whether the reason for the rejection is based on whether Mary is impure or misunderstands the situation.[25] If the touch is rejected because Mary tries to hold onto Jesus, the focus lies on Jesus and his transitional state.[26] Reimund Bieringer offers a third way of translating μή μου ἅπτου. Based on an analysis of a comparable semantic inventory in the Septuagint, he translates ἅπτομαι as 'to draw near', 'to reach,'[27] in the sense of 'approaching someone to be close to that person and possibly to go with someone to stay in that person's presence'.[28] This translation does not imply that Mary touches Jesus, and simultaneously emphasises the durative aspect of the present imperative. It is not her touch that is rejected *per se*, but her attempt to remain in Jesus' presence. These different proposed translations show that the question of touch in John 20.17 is not easily resolved, but the characters are certainly evaluated differently if Jesus rejects Mary's touch because it is *her* touch or the wrong *kind of* touch or because *he* does not want to be or cannot be touched at all.

The ambiguity of μή μου ἅπτου is also reflected in artistic interpretations of this Johannine scene. No other phrase uttered by Jesus has so often been the subject of a

---

[22] Schweiger, 'Acting Bodies', 3.

[23] Attridge, 'Don't Be Touching Me', 141–2 n. 6.

[24] Bieringer, 'Touching', 63, suggests distinguishing between a milder (negated imperative present) and a harsher (negated imperative aorist) tone instead (76–7).

[25] R. Zimmermann, 'Symbolic Communication Between John and His Reader: The Garden Symbolism in John 19–20', *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* (ed. T. Thatcher and S. D. Moore; Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study; Atlanta: SBL, 2008) 221–35, at 233: 'The symbolic tradition of the garden-temple (Jub. 3) [...] claims different times of purity for men and women, which may explain why [...] Thomas, as a man, is permitted to touch Jesus – after fulfilling the week's waiting period (John 20:26–27)'; C. Tuckett, 'Seeing and Believing in John 20', *Paul, John, and Apocalyptic Eschatology: Studies in Honour of Martinus C. de Boer* (ed. J. Krans, B. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, P.-B. Smit and A. Zwiep; NovTSup 149; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 169–85, at 182: 'Mary [...] is being told to realise that resurrection means departure, not presence in the same way as before'; K. B. Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (BIS 93; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008) 204: 'Jesus does not primarily seek to protect Mary (and himself) from moral or ritual defilement, but to correct her understanding.'

[26] M. R. D'Angelo, 'A Critical Note: John 20:17 and Apocalypse of Moses 31', *JTS* 41 (1990) 529–36, at 535: '[T]he state of Jesus is different when he encounters Mary from when he [...] invites Thomas' touch'; Attridge, 'Don't Be Touching Me', 166: 'the verse does not indicate a problem with Mary, but with the situation of Jesus' transitional state'; Tuckett, 'Seeing', 182: 'In this state of being in the process of departing, any kind of physical contact is not appropriate, because the physical presence which it implies [...] is about to end.'

[27] Bieringer, 'Resurrection', 229; Bieringer, 'Touching', 72.

[28] Bieringer, 'Touching', 80.

pictorial motif as *Noli me tangere*.[29] Many artists depict the textual gap of touch as a blank space: in Giotto's representation of the scene in the Capella Scrovegni (1306),[30] the stretched-out hand can imply rejection, the attempt to touch or even a blessing.[31] Fra Angelico's fresco (1442)[32] depicts a tension in the middle of the constellation between the hands of Jesus and Mary.[33] In Titian's painting (1514),[34] moreover, the spectator cannot say for sure whether Mary touches Jesus' garment or fails to touch it.[35] Lucas van Leyden's *Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalene* (1519)[36] is a typically Catholic representation of the *Noli me tangere*, because it depicts Jesus touching Mary's forehead in a gesture of blessing[37] and thus alludes to the reliquary of Mary's forehead in medieval France.[38] Jacopo da Pontormo (1531)[39] depicts Jesus touching Mary's breast, which offers 'tactile proof'[40] of the resurrection.[41] It alludes to the ritual of anointing the breast,[42] Mary's change of heart or a reversal of the *Incredulity of Thomas*: Jesus instils belief in Mary by touching her and reminding her of the location of his wounds.[43] With regard to this iconography, Jean-Luc Nancy writes that

---

[29] See J.-L. Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 12 and the list in Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 103–5; see also 'Noli me tangere', *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. III (ed. E. Kirschbaum; Rome: Herder, 1971) 332–6, and 'Christus erscheint Maria Magdalena – Noli me tangere', *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, vol. III (ed. G. Schiller; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1971) 95–8.

[30] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_-_Scrovegni_-_-37-_-_Resurrection_(Noli_me_tangere).jpg (accessed 17/09/2024).

[31] D. Kolesch, 'Geste', 232; cf. also Lavinia Fontana's (1581) painting at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lavinia_Fontana_-_Christ_appears_to_Mary_Magdalen._Noli_me_tangere,_1581_(cropped).jpg (accessed 17/09/2024); D. G. Adams, 'To Touch or Not to Touch: Perceiving in Art the Intertextuality of a Faithful and Wise Mary Magdalene with a Doubtful Thomas and a Faithful Miriam', *The Subjective Eye: Essays in Culture, Religion, and Gender in Honor of Margaret R. Miles* (ed. R. Valantasis, D. J. Haynes, J. D. Smith III and J. F. Carlson; Princeton Theological Monograph 59; Eugene: Pickwick, 2006) 175–7, at 176.

[32] https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Angelico,_noli_me_tangere.jpg (accessed 17/09/2024).

[33] G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance et Figuration* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009) 29.

[34] https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-noli-me-tangere (accessed 17/09/2024).

[35] Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 33: '[I]n certain paintings the superimposition of planes without clear depth makes it impossible to know whether a hand touches or whether it is only located in a plane closer to the foreground. Titian is exemplary in this regard. In his version, the woman's right hand could be seen either as passing in front of the cloth or as brushing against it […].'

[36] https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/364778 (accessed 17/09/2024).

[37] B. Dykema, 'Woman, Why Weepest Thou? Rembrandt's 1638 *Noli Me Tangere* as a Dutch Calvinist Visual Typology', *Mary Magdalene, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (ed. M. A. Erhardt and A. M. Morris; SRA 7; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012) 249–66, at 255; cf. also the painting of Alonso Cano (1640), https://www.wikiart.org/de/alonso-cano/noli-me-tangere (accessed 18/09/2024).

[38] Dykema, 'Woman', 255–6: 'the close-up focus on Christ's touch in the print was aimed to refute the teaching of Protestants who denied the cult of the saints and the efficacy of relics'; see also C. Harbison, 'Lucas van Leyden, the Magdalen and the Problem of Secularization in Early Sixteenth Century Northern Art', *Oud Holland* 98 (1984) 117–29, at 121.

[39] https://www.casabuonarroti.it/en/museum/collections/other-works/noli-me-tangere/ (accessed 17/09/2024).

[40] L. M. Rafanelli, 'Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* for Vittoria Colonna, and the Changing Status of Women in Renaissance Italy', *Mary Magdalene, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (ed. M. A. Erhardt and A. M. Morris; SRA 7; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012) 223–48, at 234.

[41] Suthor, Nicola. 'Bad Touch? Zum Körpereinsatz in Michelangelo / Pontormos Noli me tangere und Caravaggios Ungläubigem Thomas', *Der stumme Diskurs der Bilder: Reflexionsformen des Ästhetischen in der Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit* (ed. V. von Rosen, K. Krüger and R. Preimesberger; Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2003) 264–5, interprets Mary's impulse to embrace Jesus as a reaction to the touch of her breast, which also initiates recognition.

[42] On this ritual, see 'Catechesis 3: On the Holy Chrism', *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments: The Procatechesis and the Five Mystagogical Catecheses* (ed. F. L. Cross; trans. R. W. Church; Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986) 65.

[43] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 234. An erotic connotation could also be implied; see Adams, 'To Touch', 177; Suthor, 'Körpereinsatz', 263–4.

Jesus takes over the active part in the scene: 'Don't touch me, for I'm touching you, and this touch is such that it holds you at a distance.'[44] Jesus gains control over the scene, because he is not exposed to Mary's touch, although she is exposed to his reaction. The art historian Barbara Baert expresses in what ways this is problematic: 'The iconographic history of *Noli me tangere* is situated within the *contrapposto* of feminine desire and masculine prohibition. It is precisely this contrast that forms the *Pathosformel*[45] of this iconography.'[46]

The interpretive decision as to whether Jesus rejects Mary's touch in general or only a specific kind of touch, whether he does not want to be touched or reverses the roles of touched and touching person, creates different kinds of bodily interactions. The opposition between Jesus and Mary is diminished when they are interpreted as a performative unit of gesture and interruption. The tension between possible touch and its interruption emphasises that both bodies are in the process of *becoming*: Mary's body is about to materialise Jesus' presence among the disciples (20.17c), and Jesus' body is in a status of transition between death and heaven.

Just as the question of touch creates multiple interpretive possibilities, so does that of Mary's posture, which I analyse in the following section. If the focus lies on *proskynesis*, an allusion is identified to the *proskynesis* of Mary and 'the other Mary' who grasps the feet of the risen Jesus in Matthew 28.9 (ἐκράτησαν αὐτοῦ τοὺς πόδας καὶ προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ). If the focus, rather, lies on a standing embrace, it establishes an allusion to ancient anagnorisis scenes and their gestural inventory. Both readings of Mary's posture, however, interact well with the translation 'do not cling to me', because the word κρατέω in Matthew, and the long-term reunion of formerly separated characters in recognition scenes, point to the durative aspect of the verb.

3. Proskynesis

3.1 Exegetical Considerations

Scholars who assume that the textual gap in John 20.16–17 is a reference to the *proskynesis* of the women in Matthew 28.9 sometimes do not elaborate on this decision. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Jean Zumstein suggests, without further explanation, that Mary throws herself to the ground and grasps Jesus' feet.[47] Felix Porsch similarly states that Mary mistakenly wants to worship Jesus as an eschatological figure.[48] Thomas Söding explicitly mentions Matthew 28.9 as a reference point for the rendering 'do not cling to me'.[49] This filling in of the gestural gap, however, creates a tension with Matthean Christology. *Proskynesis*

---

[44] Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, 36.

[45] This is Aby Warburg's notion of gestural patterns in art; see Aby Warburg, 'Dürer and Italian Antiquity', *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Texts and Documents; Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Arts and the Humanities, 1999) 553–8, at 555. M. Elo, 'Light Touches: A Media Aesthetic Mapping of Touch', *Internationales Jahrbuch für Medienphilosophie* 3 (2017) 33–57, at 50, defines pathos as 'exposure to something excessive and unexpected'.

[46] B. Baert, 'Touching with the Gaze: A Visual Analysis of the *Noli me tangere*', *Noli me tangere: Mary Magdalene: One Person, Many Images* (ed. B. Baert, R. Bieringer, K. Demasure and S. van den Eynde; Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 43–52, at 44.

[47] J. Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium* (KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016) 753; see also R. Tomson Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Edinburgh: Clark, 2004) 189.

[48] F. Porsch, *Pneuma und Wort: Ein exegetischer Beitrag zur Pneumatologie des Johannesevangeliums* (FTS 16; Frankfurt: J. Knecht, 1974) 348.

[49] Th. Söding, '"Mein Herr und mein Gott" (Joh 20,28): Das Thomas-Bekenntnis im Duktus der johanneischen Christologie', *Mein Herr und mein Gott: Christus bekennen und verkünden: FS Walter Kardinal Kasper* (ed. G. Augustin, K. Krämer and M. Schulze; Freiburg: Herder, 2013) 17–31, at 26 n. 21.

as a bodily gesture attesting Jesus' divine status (cf. Arrian, *Anab.* 4.11; Xen. *An.* 3.2.13)[50] is one of Matthew's 'key christological terms'.[51] Several persons fall to the ground in their encounter with Jesus, including the wise men, a leper, the disciples, the Canaanite woman and a slave.[52] In John, nevertheless, προσκυνέω means 'to worship' in a spiritual sense (cf. John 4.21–4; 12.20), and only once (9.38) is Jesus the object of *proskynesis* as a bodily gesture.[53] In 9.38, the healed blind man expresses his recognition of Jesus and his divine status in a scene of conflict with the Pharisees. The different context and the changed mode of Jesus' presence could be the reasons for the rejection of reverence in John 20.17.[54] Mary attests to her recognition of Jesus' divine status, but her reverence is redirected from this soon-absent body towards the Father. Bieringer further elaborates on this argument with a methodological recourse to redaction criticism. If the Matthean version forms the backdrop of Jesus' rejection of a *proskynesis* in John, and Jesus, thus, repudiates a *proskynesis*, it can be understood as the redirection of such a gesture away from Jesus toward God.[55] This explains the connection to verse 17c. That is, the translation of μή μου ἅπτου as 'do not approach me' (like a sacred object),[56] and the theological consequence that Mary's desire to be close to Jesus is redirected to the Father and to the brothers and sisters in faith[57] align well with each other (cf. also John 14.2–3). The negative imperative signals that Mary must first seek Jesus' presence in the community of believers. Bieringer thus interprets the gestural gap in the text with something that is not in the text, that is, Matthew's version of the scene. According to Bieringer's interpretation, the performative unit of *proskynesis*-and-interruption enacts the risen Christ's redirection of worship to God and is thus part of John's distinct Christology. If readers decide to fill in the textual gap with a *proskynesis* in the Matthean sense, they emphasise that the gesture is a 'citational act'. They transfer it to a new context where it takes on new meaning, because it turns into a gesture that is redirected towards the Father. The performative unit of a bodily act and its interruption brings to halt a gesture of worship in response to the divine presence in Jesus' body. It thereby produces a body in the process of becoming, because its identity is negotiated in the encounter between Jesus and Mary.

The next sub-section will examine cultural-historical aspects of *proskynesis* to describe the bodily relation created in the encounter between Mary and Jesus.

3.2 Cultural-Historical Aspects of Proskynesis

It is evident that a *proskynesis* does not suggest a meeting between equals but emphasises a difference in their status. This can be substantiated with reference to ancient texts. Herodotus understands *proskynesis* among the Persians as follows: 'When one man meets another in the way, it is easy to see if the two are equals; for then without speaking they kiss each other on the lips; if the difference in rank be but little, it is the cheek that is kissed; if it be great, the humbler bows down and does obeisance (προσπίπτων

---

[50] J. Wiesehöfer, 'Proskynesis', *Brill's New Pauly*, online at: https://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e1010900 (accessed 12/02/2024); Th. Staubli, 'Proskynese', *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet*, online at: https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/ressourcen/wibilex/altes-testament/proskynese (accessed 12/02/2024).

[51] My translation of 'christologisches Leitwort', in Staubli, 'Proskynese'.

[52] Cf. Matt 2.2, 8, 11; 8.2; 9.18; 14.33; 15.25; 28.17; 20.20.

[53] Bieringer, 'Resurrection', 226.

[54] Larsen, *Stranger*, 160.

[55] Bieringer, 'Resurrection', 225; see also J. Frey, 'Leiblichkeit und Auferstehung im Johannesevangelium', *DDCLY* (200) 285–328, at 299; against this view: S. Petersen, *Maria aus Magdala: Die Jüngerin, die Jesus liebte* (BG 23; Leipzig: EVA, 2011) 75.

[56] Bieringer, 'Resurrection', 231, states that ἅπτομαι often designates 'the touching of holy or unclean objects in the Septuagint, more specifically the tabernacle (cf. Num 3:10, 28 and 17:28)'.

[57] Bieringer, 'Resurrection', 234.

προσκυνέει) to the other' (Herod., *Hist.* 1.134 LCL 117.175). Plutarch, moreover, describes how two barbarians bend down before Octavius (Plut., *Crass.* 31.1), which accentuates their subordination,[58] while Xenophon narrates how Cyrus' awe-inspiring appearance provokes others to prostrate before him (Xen., *Cyrop.* 8.3.14). *Proskynesis* indicates a hierarchy, which can be accompanied by binary oppositions like male/female, heaven/earth and spirit/flesh. Mary's posture contrasts her with Jesus, who is standing (John 20.14)[59] and on his way to his Father (20.17) instead of lying on the ground as if dead (20.13, 15). Jesus is directed towards heaven; Mary is bound to earth. Lisa Rafanelli states that in 'most Western philosophical systems, erect posture is associated with moral character and intellectual elevation (and therefore, by extension, masculinity)'.[60] The argument that the gesture of *proskynesis* enforces a dichotomy can be substantiated by a side-glance at ancient texts about gesture and posture.

In *Legum Allegoriae*, Philo interprets Genesis 2.24 as indicating that the female part holds back the male part and binds him to the level of the senses, whereas – potentially – the woman could also cleave to the man and become spirit:

> Observe that it is not the woman that cleaves to the man, but conversely the man to the woman, Mind to Sense-perception. For when that which is superior, namely Mind, becomes one with that which is inferior, namely Sense-perception, it resolves itself into the order of flesh which is inferior, into sense-perception, the moving cause of the passions. But if Sense the inferior follow Mind the superior, there will be flesh no more, but both of them will be Mind (Philo, *Alleg.* 2.50 LCL 226.255–7).[61]

In Philo's *De gigantibus*, the dichotomy of spirit/man and senses/woman is also applied to gesture. Persons who mostly adhere to the fleshly sphere are said to crawl on the ground like animals, because they are rooted in the earth: 'But those which bear the burden of the flesh, oppressed by the grievous load, cannot look up to the heavens as they revolve, but with necks bowed downwards are constrained to stand rooted to the ground like four-footed beasts' (*Gig.* 31 LCL 227.461). Here Philo's thinking is shaped by the philosophy of Plato, who writes:

> God has given to each of us, as his daemon, that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and which raises us – seeing that we are not an earthly but a heavenly plant – up from earth towards our kindred in the heaven. And herein we speak most truly; for it is by suspending our head and root from that region whence the substance of our soul first came that the Divine Power keeps upright our whole body (Plato, *Tim.* 90 a–b LCL 234.245–7).

Thus, Mary's crawling posture, which the *proskynesis* becomes when she starts to move towards him but does not approach Jesus on equal footing, can be regarded as part of a long tradition of a dichotomy between heaven/spirit/man and earth/flesh/woman. This tradition is even reinforced in Hippolytus' commentary on the Song of Songs, which also

---

[58] On the ritual of *proskynesis* and the Roman Emperor, see Th. Witulski, 'Jesus und der Kaiser: Das Ritual der Proskynesis', *Christ and the Emperor: The Gospel Evidence* (ed. G. van Belle and J. Verheyden; BTS 20; Leuven: Peeters, 2014) 101–46.

[59] K. Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium* (vol. II; ThKNT 4/2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001) 293, states that standing on one's feet expresses livelihood (see Ez 37.10; bSanh 92b), which is an interesting aspect in the context of a resurrection scene.

[60] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 231.

[61] A comparable idea appears in 1 Cor 7.14, where the dichotomy shifts focus from man/woman to believing/unbelieving.

fills the textual gap in John 20.17 with a Matthean *proskynesis.* Martha and Mary take over the role of Mary Magdalene and meet Jesus at the tomb. They try to delay his ascension by clinging to his feet, which is then explained as follows: 'O blessed woman, who held on to his feet, that she might be able to fly up in the air!' (Hippol., *Cant.* 25.2).[62] Hippolytus places a plea into their mouth: 'Christ, do not abandon me on earth! So that I may not stray, take me up to heaven!' (Hippol., *Cant.* 25.3).[63] The dichotomy between heaven and earth is here connected to the dichotomy between man and woman because, in Hippolytus' view, Martha and Mary reverse Eve's act of leading Adam into sin by carrying the message of the resurrection to the apostles.[64]

To summarise, if Mary's 'citational act' quotes a subordinate posture that is then rejected by Jesus, what is foregrounded is the opposition between them. It is also an opposition that has been connected to other dichotomies, such as between man and woman, heaven and earth, spirit and flesh. A female subordinate body is contrasted with the erect body of Jesus.

3.3 Proskynesis in Artistic Interpretations

Painters were ready to fill the gestural gap in John 20.17 with a *proskynesis.* The paintings by Corregio (1525)[65] and Titian[66] in particular can be interpreted in the tradition of creating a dichotomy between the male divine teacher and the female earthbound disciple. In Correggio's depiction of the scene, Jesus points to the sky, whereas Mary's arm points to the ground:[67] '[...] Christ's emphatic gesture and *contrapposto* pose function as a rhetorical call for Mary Magdalene, firmly grounded to the earth, to forego the incertitude of the material world and embrace the divine.'[68] The dichotomy also exists in Titian's painting, where the ground beneath Mary is dry, whereas green grass sprouts from beneath Jesus' feet.[69] According to Titian's interpretation, Jesus draws his garment away from the crawling Mary as if frightened by her touch. Kathryn Murphy, however, offers a way to interpret Titian's painting that undermines this dichotomy, one which resonates with the notion of a performative unit that has been developed in this article. She points out that Jesus not only draws away his garment, but also bends his head towards Mary: Titian thus 'softens the scene's awkwardness by making of the two figures a dyad, a triangular compositional whole, which gathers up the internal dynamics of attention, yearning, separation, and care into a single arrangement'.[70] Here, Murphy dissolves the dichotomy between the heavenly Jesus and the earthly Mary into

---

[62] Y. Smith, *The Mystery of Anointing: Hippolytus' Commentary on the Song of Songs in Social and Critical Contexts: Texts, Translations, and Comprehensive Study* (GSECP 62; Piscataway: Gorgias, 2015) 535.

[63] Smith, *Mystery*, 536. The tradition of a connection of John 20 to Song of Songs and Genesis can only be mentioned in passing here because it would comprise an article of its own (see p. 12 n. 67 of this article).

[64] Smith, *Mystery*, 98.

[65] https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/noli-me-tangere/d5bb017a-4c8f-4293-a08d-4d97e7057d2b (accessed 17/09/2024).

[66] https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/noli-me-tangere/d5bb017a-4c8f-4293-a08d-4d97e7057d2b (accessed 17/09/2024).

[67] K. Murphy, 'Staying the Distance', *Apollo* (2020) 33–7, at 35, emphasises that during Correggio's time, paintings often enacted dichotomies like light/darkness, body/soul and standing/kneeling.

[68] M. A. Morse, 'Mary Magdalene Between Public Cult and Personal Devotion in Correggio's *Noli me tangere*', *Mary Magdalene: Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (ed. M. A. Erhardt and A. M. Morris; SRA 7; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012) 295–314, at 311.

[69] N. MacGregor with E. Langmuir, *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2000) 189.

[70] Murphy, 'Distance', 34; see also Lisa M. Rafanelli, 'Sense and Sensibilities: A Feminist Reading of Titian's *Noli me tangere* (1509–1515)', *Critica d'Arte* 35–6 (2008) 28–47, at 33.

two characters that performatively enact the new status of Jesus[71] and its ambivalent veering between absence and presence. Although the *proskynesis* amounts to a subordinate posture, Mary is not contrasted with Jesus, because they form a dyad, a unit of action that, through the interruption of Mary's bodily action, shows that contact with Jesus is still possible after his death, but that the character of their relationship must change.

This filling in of the textual gap with a *proskynesis* emphasises not only the dichotomy of heaven and earth, man and woman, spirit and body but also the subordination of Mary. When she is imagined as approaching Jesus with a *proskynesis*, she is staged as an antipode to Jesus, that is, as a contrasting character who establishes his identity through her difference. This dichotomous setting can be deconstructed by Butler's theory of gesture, where characters do not appear as separate entities or antipodes, but as a unit of a gesture and its interruption. In their joint participation in the same bodily act, Jesus and Mary negotiate how this relationship can continue after death.

Mary's gesture may also be imagined as an embrace, quoting the gestural inventory of ancient recognition scenes.

4. Embrace

4.1 Exegetical Considerations

Strikingly, it is mostly those exegetes who also analyse ancient recognition scenes who clearly identify an embrace in the textual gap in John 20.16–17. Brant, for instance, states that the deictic language of μή μου ἅπτου implies an embrace,[72] but also Adeline Fehribach points out that, 'After having called out to each other, Mary Magdalene apparently embraces Jesus (20:17).'[73] Amy Huprich reconstructs an 'in-progress physical embrace'.[74] These scholars also emphasise the erotic connotations of the scene and the feminist potential of an egalitarian embrace. Their research further elaborates on the wider agreement among New Testament scholars that the narrative structure of recognition scenes shapes some passages of the Gospel of John.[75] In ancient drama and novels, anagnorisis scenes narrate the reunion of previously separated lovers, siblings, or parents and children. Romantic novels and their anagnorisis scenes were known widely in the first century CE, which may indicate that John's readers could have recognised an intertextual allusion to them.[76] In his book *Recognizing the Stranger*, Kasper Bro Larsen describes a literary inventory of what is encountered in recognition scenes: 'the meeting, cognitive resistance, displaying the token, the moment of recognition' and 'attendant reactions and physical (re-)union'.[77] All these

---

[71] In her feminist reading of the painting, Lisa Rafanelli also states that Mary's gesture is of interest. Her hand with the retracted fingertips shows that she seeks to touch Jesus, but when she recognises him, she turns to sight instead of touch and greets him as 'Rabbouni'. Titian, thus, depicts recognition instead of touch and puts the female ability to transcend tactile experience in the centre (Rafanelli, 'Sense', 34, 49).

[72] Brant, *Dialogue*, 56.

[73] A. Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998) 143–68, at 160; see also M. Whitaker, *Is Jesus Athene or Odysseus? Investigating the Unrecognisability and Metamorphosis of Jesus in his Post-Resurrection Appearances* (WUNT 2/500; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) 170 n. 293; R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986²¹) 532.

[74] A. L. Huprich, 'Jn 20:11–18: The Recognition/Reunion Scene and its Parallels in Greek Romance', *Proceedings EGL & MWBS* 15 (1995) 15–22, at 20, 22 n. 16.

[75] Larsen, *Stranger*; Attridge, 'Gospel', 38–9; S. Sjef van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love in John* (BIS 2; Leiden: Brill, 1993) 203–6; Brant, *Dialogue*, 50–7; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John 2 (xiii–xxi)* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 1008–9.

[76] Huprich, 'Jn 20:11–18', 15.

[77] Larsen, *Stranger*, 63–71.

elements are present in John 20: Jesus and Mary meet at the tomb (meeting); Mary does not recognise Jesus at first (cognitive resistance), but she recognises him when he calls her by her name (recognition token) and expresses this with her response 'Rabbuni' (recognition); the physical reaction is thus part of the gestural gap. The physical reunion is, however, denied or delayed if we follow Bieringer's assessment that Jesus must first go to his Father and prepare a place for Mary and other Christ-believers.[78] Although the physical reunion is delayed,[79] the function of anagnorisis scenes to bridge the distance between two persons[80] is fulfilled. Mary can once again relate to the formerly dead Jesus. The text thus ends with the continuation of the relationship on a different level.

4.2 The Gestural Inventory of Anagnorisis Scenes

The literary inventory of anagnorisis scenes is an important tool for making comparisons to scenes in the Gospel of John. Larsen also hints at gestures that are repeated in various recognition scenes,[81] but does not further elaborate on this. In the following analysis, I propose a *gestural* inventory of the recognition scenes as an addition to the *compositional* motives that Larsen describes. It is striking that, in recognition scenes between lovers, siblings, parents and their children, the moment of 'attendant reactions and physical (re-)union' in most of them is accompanied or materialised by an embrace.[82]

4.2.1 Recognition between Lovers

Lovers often embrace each other and fall to the ground together, as in Xenophon's *Anthia and Abrokomas* 5.13.3 (καὶ περιλαβόντες ἀλλήλους εἰς γῆν κατηνέχθησαν) or Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Klitophon* 3.17 (κατεπέσομεν). The setting of the scene by a tomb makes a comparison with John 20 even more plausible. In Heliodorus' *Theagenes and Chariklea* 2.6.3, the lovers embrace and call each other by their names. They fall to the ground together (καταφέρονται) as though they were one (ὥσπερ ἡνωμένοι), and as if they were dead (καὶ μικρὸν ἔδει ἀπο θνήσκειν αὐτούς). In Chariton's *Chaireas and Callirhoe* 8.1.8, the seemingly dead Callirhoe recognises Chaireas thanks to his voice. She shows her face, they call each other by their names, embrace each other, faint and then fall to the ground (ἔπεσον). In Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* 3.7, the lovers nearly fall to the ground (εἰς τὴν γῆν κατερρύησαν), but their kisses prevent them from doing so. On the level of gesture, no hierarchy is indicated between the lovers. They become one body in their embrace.

4.2.2 Recognition between Parents and Children or Siblings

In Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, the parents recognise Daphnis through the recognition tokens they had left with him. They embrace each other, kiss each other and weep (Οὗτοι πάντες περιέβαλλον, κατεφίλουν, χαίροντες κλάοντες), and Daphnis does not want to break the embrace (ἐξελθεῖν τῶν περιβολῶν οὐκ ἤθελεν; 4.23). In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the siblings Orestes and Iphigenia reunite, and Iphigenia utters the fear that her brother might fly out of her hands and into the air (Eur., *Iph*. 834–44), a fear that fits well with the translation of John 20.17b as 'do not cling to me'. Ancient statues portray the embrace of Orestes

---

78 Bieringer, 'Resurrection', 232.

79 Larsen, *Stranger*, 203, states that John leaves the inventory of ancient recognition scenes at this point, breaking with the readers' expectations.

80 Larsen, *Stranger*, 72.

81 Larsen, *Stranger*, 70: 'The motif of tactility [...] appears in the form of, for example, holding hands, falling at each other's feet, and embracing'; see also Larsen, *Stranger*, 70 n. 100.

82 I agree with Larsen, *Stranger*, 193 n.17 that not only romances are to be considered here; see also Larsen, *Stranger*, 198: 'Jesus and Mary are not portrayed as reunited lovers, but as joint members of the *familia Dei*, i.e., as brother and sister on a symbolic level [...]'.

and Iphigenia as an encounter between equals.[83] In Sophocles' *Electra*, the protagonist points to the gesture accompanying the recognition by saying to her brother Orestes: 'Do I hold you in my arms?' Orestes answers: 'So may you always hold me!' (Soph., *El.* 1226 LCL 20.287). The physical action is hinted at with deictic language.[84] In Euripides' *Ion*, Kreusa and her son Ion reunite. Ion asks Kreusa if she is trembling with the fear 'that you have me but have me not?' (Eur., *Ion* 1453 LCL 10.493), insinuating both an embrace and the ephemeral character of the moment. In Plautus' *Poenulus* 5.4, the two daughters embrace their father Hanno, still disbelieving that they have reunited. In Plautus' *Menaechmi*, twins recognise each other on the basis of where they were born. Embracing his brother, Sosicles says: 'I've recognized the signs, I can't refrain from embracing you' (Plaut., *Men.* 5.9 LCL 61.545).

Although there are various kinds of recognition scenes, most of them share the gestural inventory of an embrace. They also express the wish for the embrace to last and the fear that the reunion is only temporal. As in Butler's theory of gesture, interruption is essential here. By interrupting Mary's gesture-in-progress, Jesus also disrupts the well-known inventory of recognition scenes. This reunited couple does not fall to the ground as though dead, and as if they were one. This sheds new light on the γάρ-sentence in verse 17c: having recently risen from the dead, Jesus cannot fall to the ground as if dead. Butler's emphasis on the variation of a gesture transferred to a new context explains this difference: the quotational allusion to the gestural inventory of recognition scenes also points to its variation, because every quotation is not only the repetition of the same but also contains variation. Another variation is that, although reunited, the couple does not leave the scene together: Jesus is on his way to the Father, Mary is sent to the disciples. Against the background of recognition scenes, Mary and Jesus nonetheless perform the continuation of a relationship despite its interruption by death. Although Jesus and Mary, from now on, belong to different places and worlds, they remain connected to each other. This implies that there is no clear opposition between a misunderstanding female disciple and her male teacher who corrects her. Butler's definition of gesture as interrupted bodily action suggests that Mary's gesture and Jesus' interruption form a joint bodily act that reflects the ambiguity between their present relationship and its interruption by death.

4.3 Artistic Representations of an Encounter at Eye Level

Most artistic interpretations of the *Noli me tangere* depict Mary positioned on the ground.[85] There are, however, some exceptions that picture a standing Magdalene. This posture is not the same as an embrace, but it allows for an encounter on eye level and thus corresponds to the reunion of two equals in anagnorisis scenes. It may originate from an interpretation of the Johannine passage against the background of the Song of Songs, which emphasises an encounter between two equals,[86] but the question of where the standing position comes from is an open question.[87] In Songs 3.1–4, the female lover is looking for her beloved one and, once she finds him, she clings to him and does not let go (ἐκράτησα αὐτὸν καὶ

---

[83] Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, Inv.-Nr. 6006; Museo Nazionale, Roma, Inv.-Nr. 8604; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Catalogue_of_the_Museo_Archeologico_di_Napoli_(inventory_MANN)#/media/File:OrestesElectra.jpg (accessed 17/09/2024); see also Larsen, *Stranger*, 70.

[84] Brant, *Dialogue*, 56.

[85] Schiller, 'Christus', 96: 'Dagegen übernehmen andere Darstellungen des 11. und 12. Jh. aus ganz verschiedenen Kunstkreisen für Magdalena die Haltung der Proskynese aus der von der syrisch-palästinensischen Kunst geprägten Darstellung der Erscheinung vor den Frauen [...]. Vom 13. Jh. an herrscht die aufrecht kniende Haltung vor [...].'

[86] Dykema, 'Woman', 258–60; B. Dykema Katsanis, 'Meeting in the Garden: Intertextuality with the Song of Songs in Holbein's *Noli me tangere*', *Int* 61 (2007) 402–16, at 412–15.

[87] Dykema Katsanis, 'Garden', 415 n. 47 here detects a research gap.

οὐκ ἀφήσω αὐτόν; 3.4).[88] If this forms the intertextual background of the scene in John 20.11–18, the translation 'do not cling to me' may be suitable, but not in the context of an encounter between a subordinate and a divine figure but rather between reunited lovers. A long-lasting standing embrace is to be imagined.

It is striking that paintings hardly ever show a standing Magdalene, although she is standing at the tomb in John 20.11 (Μαρία δὲ εἰστήκει πρὸς τῷ μνημείῳ). She stands beside the cross in John 19.25 (εἰστήκεισαν δὲ παρὰ τῷ σταυρῷ).[89] Jesus, moreover, is standing in John 20.14 when Mary turns around towards him (θεωρεῖ τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἑστῶτα). A standing Magdalene would, consequently, be on equal footing with Jesus and would fit into the gestural inventory of the scene. A standing Mary would also quote her own former posture beside the cross, creating a gestural citation that links that reunion with the resurrected one to the cross, the dead to the resurrected. Hans Holbein the Younger depicts a standing Magdalene (1526–8).[90] The motif is notably influenced by his stay in Antwerp, where he also bought the oak wood for the painting:[91]

> The tradition of a standing Magdalene in *Noli me tangere* scenes is more widely developed in the illustrated Bible tradition centred in Antwerp and Amsterdam. The Biblia Sacra project has catalogued seven discrete versions of the *Noli me tangere* scene in printed Bibles from the Netherlands ranging in date from 1481–1548,[92] and in all of these, the Magdalene is standing rather than kneeling. Holbein is unique in applying this compositional strategy to the painted image.[93]

Radiography has shown that Holbein's figures were different in an earlier version of his painting, in which Mary and Jesus were equal in size and gazed at one another. In a later revision, Holbein enlarged Jesus and bent Mary's head.[94] It would be interesting to know what provoked these changes.

The depictions of a standing Magdalene by Jacopo da Pontormo (1531),[95] Bronzino (1531/2)[96] and Battista Franco (1537)[97] are related, because they are realisations of a drawing by Michelangelo.[98] Lisa Rafanelli, who has analysed the iconography of *Noli me tangere*

---

[88] See also παρέκυψεν in Songs 2.9 and John 20.11. See, against an erotic interpretation of παρέκυψεν, H.-U. Weidemann, *Der Tod Jesu im Johannesevangelium: Die erste Abschiedsrede als Schlüsseltext für den Passions- und Osterbericht* (BZNW 122; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004) 456 n. 14; Bieringer, 'Touching', 75 states that 'there are clear differences between the Johannine μή μου ἅπτου and the clause ἐκράτησα αὐτόν in the Song of Songs'.

[89] Weidemann, *Tod*, 456 also recognises the analogy.

[90] https://www.rct.uk/collection/400001/noli-me-tangere (accessed 17/09/2024).

[91] J. Fletcher and M. Cholmondeley Tapper, 'Hans Holbein the Younger at Antwerp and in England, 1526–1527', *Apollo* (1983) 87–93, at 88, 90, 92; V. Pemberton-Pigott, 'Holbein's Noli me tangere: "So Much Reverence Expressed In a Picture"', *Apollo* (2002) 34–9, at 36. The painting was created later in England (Pemberton-Pigott, 'Reverence', 39) or was brought back from Antwerp already finished (Fletcher/Tapper, 'Holbein', 92).

[92] See 'Biblia Sacra', online at: www.bibliasacra.nl (accessed 10/05/2022). The search function does not work yet, but one example could be found: it is part of a Bible printed in Antwerp in 1538 with the title *Le Nouveau Testament de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ* (Brussels BR LP 7793 A, 1, K2r) and created by Lieven de Witte; see 'Biblica Sacra', https://www.bibliasacra.nl/image/20030527032 (accessed 10/05/2022).

[93] Dykema Katsanis, 'Garden', 406.

[94] Pemberton-Pigott, 'Reverence', 36.

[95] https://www.casabuonarroti.it/en/museum/collections/other-works/noli-me-tangere/ (accessed 17/09/2024).

[96] https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Angelo_Bronzino_-_Noli_me_tangere_-_WGA3289.jpg (accessed 17/09/2024).

[97] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battista_franco,_noli_me_tangere_%28da_michelangelo%29,_post_1537,_02.JPG (accessed 17/09/2024).

[98] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 223, 242 n.42.

in detail,[99] states that '[t]he Magdalene's upright stance distinguishes this *Noli me tangere* from most other contemporary depictions'. The omnipresence of *proskynesis* in comparable paintings is represented in these realisations of Michelangelo's drawing, because Jesus 'appears to be looking toward the ground rather than at her face, as if expecting her to still be kneeling'.[100] Rafanelli interprets the standing position and the fact that Mary's eyes are not downcast with Michelangelo's female patron and viewer, the poet Vittoria Colonna, marchioness of Pescara. She was an aficionada of Mary Magdalene and was familiar with literature of the *Querelle des femmes*,[101] which discussed the status of women and referred to Mary Magdalene as a role model.[102] Her story is also embedded in the context of the sixteenth century, when women gained access to power at the Ottonian court. The status of women like Colonna as patrons and viewers of art in the sixteenth century can be interpreted as one of the reasons why, since then, the *Noli me tangere* subsequently appears regularly in autonomous works of art.[103] We may therefore conclude that the depiction of a standing Magdalene goes hand in hand with female access to power and that filling in the textual gap of gesture with a standing position reflects the self-confidence of a female patron.

Accordingly, if Mary's unmentioned gesture is reconstructed as a standing embrace, Jesus and Mary appear as equals. The joy of a reunion between previously separated persons being foregrounded. Jesus' interruption of Mary's gesture emphasises that they can reconnect, although a unifying reunion, as in other anagnorisis scenes, must be delayed. Depictions of a standing Magdalene are an exception, and the posture is not chosen accidentally, but it does take the female viewer into consideration.

5. Conclusions

A gap exists in John 20.16–17 between Mary's recognition of Jesus, when calling him 'Rabbuni', and Jesus' words that refuse an implied bodily action. The reader is confronted with the gap of Mary's implied gesture: Does she touch Jesus or try to touch him? Is her bodily posture to be imagined as an embrace, as in ancient anagnorisis scenes, or with reference to the grasping of Jesus' feet in Matthew 28.9? I have argued that both attempts at filling the textual gap are based on solid exegetical arguments. I have also proposed that the way in which the textual gap is filled in makes a difference; in other words, the plot we create with gestures is significant. Mary and Jesus can appear as antipodes (*proskynesis*). *Proskynesis* creates a body in subjection that is often associated with a mix of dichotomous elements. Mary and Jesus can also appear as reunited equals (standing embrace). An embrace emphasises that the relationship can continue, but not in the same way as it would continue after other anagnorisis scenes. Hence, although it can be reasonably argued for both ways to fill in the textual gap, they produce different bodies.

Along with this observation, I argue that exegesis does not always imply the *fixation of meaning*, in our case, to answer the question of how the gap has to be filled. Sometimes, it can also present *different possible meanings* and show in what ways the various reconstructions of meaning entail different consequences for the evaluation of a passage. In this sense, when the reader fills in the gap, they encounter something about themselves and how they prefer to read the encounter. The exegetical responsibility, then, does not lie in the decision to opt for one way of reading, but in the question of the possible effects each reading can have.

---

[99] Lisa M. Rafanelli, 'The Ambiguity of Touch: Saint Mary Magdalene and the *Noli Me Tangere* in Early Modern Italy' (PhD diss., New York University, January 2004, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing Order-No. 3114220).

[100] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 230.

[101] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 241.

[102] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 236.

[103] Rafanelli, 'Colonna', 237; The motif is first attested in the ninth century (Schiller, 'Christus', 95).

A performative reading, in line with Butler's theory of gesture, helps to soften the dichotomy between the male teacher on his way to heaven and the female disciple seeking to approach him.

Competing Interests. The author declares none.