Pathos and Politics: Nicholas Love's *Mirror* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

*Sarah Stanbury*

As critics remarked in a virtual flood of pre-release commentary, Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, gives an excruciating amount of airtime to Christ’s scourging. For the viewer, one even prepared by the media buzz for a harrowing spectacle of violence, the discomfort of watching the scourging is compounded by a few surprise elements, as if the sheer amount of time that we are forced to sit in our seats watching were not enough. One of these surprises comes when whips are replaced by flails. Pilate has sentenced Jesus to punishment—and it seems, after a few long minutes, that the punishment is over. But when Jesus staggers to his feet, a foreshadowing, no doubt, of his body’s superior power, Pilate orders that the scourges begin anew. This time they choose not whips but nail-studded flails that literally shred Christ’s skin. But at least as painful is the camera’s attention to Jesus’s mother’s reactions to her son’s torture. For most of the scene the camera concentrates on the gleeful faces of the torturers and on Jesus’s progressively mutilated body as it receives each blow, but it also cuts briefly to show the crowd, in particular Mary, who is performed powerfully by Maia Morgenstern, and Mary Magdalene as a kind of younger version of herself. As the scourges test out their flails, Jesus and his mother exchange looks across the crowd. Later, as the blows continue, she wanders through an arcade. As we listen to the sounds of torture—the swish of the flails through the air, the sinking sounds as the flails make contact with skin, Jesus’s groans, the hooting of the crowd, and especially the tallying of blows (‘viginti otto’ …)—the camera cuts to Mary’s face.

How can she bear to listen and watch? If we are uncomfortable, we ask ourselves—as the camera shifts to her face—how can a mother bear it? Aren’t there some things, such as your child’s execution, you should never have to see? Mary’s presence, however, is a continuous one, and as the film progresses we understand she has no choice. Her love for her son requires her presence, even at his death. She is there among the crowd as people call ‘Crucify him.’ She is one of the crowd of onlookers as he carries his cross to Calvary, even taking a shortcut to bypass the crush. At the Crucifixion the camera cuts several times to her face as she watches with Mary Magdalene. At the end of the film,
after Christ has been taken from the cross, she holds his body and looks out to meet the viewer’s gaze, a shot that is carefully composed to echo centuries of devotional art. She becomes the mother in the pietà.

The pietà is so deeply iconic that it does not require a degree in art to recognize this moment in the film through its visual history. How our familiarity with a film’s story affects our reception is a complex topic—and a question that is especially pertinent to Gibson’s film, where virtually all viewers will know at least part of its narrative; if little else, most will know how the story ends. For viewers who are also acquainted with medieval art and literature, not only Gibson’s pietà but also his entire film comes as a déjà vu. If there is a single story retold again and again in sermons, drama, lyric, and didactic literature, pictured in wall paintings and in stained-glass windows, and carved in stone, it would be story of Christ’s Passion—his death and resurrection. In late medieval Europe, many of the episodes that Gibson has used for his film—the Betrayal, the Flagellation, the Carrying of the Cross, the Crucifixion and the Deposition—were pictured virtually everywhere one would find images. Mary’s presence forms an important node in these narrative traditions. Although Mary is rarely present at the flagellation in medieval art, she is invariably to be found at the foot of the cross in representations of the Crucifixion, sometimes even pointing to Christ’s wounds. Her presence here forms a sub-genre of late medieval Passion representation in both literature and the visual arts. In some traditions she swoons in some she turns away and averts her gaze. In images of the Man of Sorrows, she studies and displays her son’s wounded body, sometimes even appearing to engage in dialogue with him. Playing ‘Passion’ as compassion, Mary’s dialogue with Jesus on the

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cross has a vital life in medieval lyrics in the *planctus* tradition, many of which brilliantly exploit dramatic possibilities: the mother, fainting with grief, tells her son she can't bear to see him suffer; and the son, dying, responds that he can't bear to watch her suffering for his sake. The Virgin's presence is so central to medieval representations of the Passion—and so crucial to acts of witnessing in Gibson's film—that we might ask how the spectacle of her gaze, the spectacle of her participatory spectatorship, shapes the viewer's responses. Why, in the history of Passion pictures, has it been so important to experience Christ's death through the gaze of his mother?

In the forward from a volume of photographs from the film, Gibson comments that 'Holy Scripture and accepted visions of The Passion were the only possible texts I could draw from to fashion a dramatic film.' “Accepted visions” include those of German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824), whose meditations, *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, were transcribed in the 1820s. The details of this lengthy meditation on the Passion are so close to Gibson’s film, in fact, as to suggest that Gibson owes not only credit to Emmerich’s estate but also royalties. Emmerich imagines herself present at the Passion. She speaks as a witness:

> When the executioners took Jesus into the guardhouse, to crown him with thorns, I longed to follow that I might again contemplate him in his sufferings. Then it was that the Mother of Jesus, accompanied by the holy women, approached the pillar and wiped up the blood with which it and the ground around were saturated. The door of the guard-house was open, and I heard the brutal laughter of the heartless men who were busily employed in finishing off the crown of thorns which they had prepared for our Lord. I was too much affected to weep, but I endeavoured to drag myself near to the place where our Lord was to be crowned with thorns.

In this scene, which Gibson has followed closely, Emmerich adopts the persona of a member of the crowd. She watches Mary and the holy women as she takes on the job of recording events and feeling pain.

Yet many of Gibson’s less-acknowledged debts can be located between the writing of the Gospels and Emmerich’s visions. Emmerich’s *Dolorous Passion* derives from apocryphal sources, the most important of which is the *Meditations Vitae Christi, or Meditations on the Life of Christ*. This prose work, of which Gibson appears to have been unaware, is believed to have been written by the Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus in San Gimignano in the fourteenth century, was one of the most widely read and translated texts of the late Middle Ages, and had an influence on later art, drama, and devotional literature that

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Emmerich, who pictures these scenes in first person, thus performs the mandate of the Meditations; told to imagine Christ’s life, she presents her vision as a direct experience. In both of these sources—and in Gibson’s adaptation as well—seeing also becomes the reader’s ethical and devotional mandate.14

My interests in these Passion remakes center on the social and even political uses of empathy and horror as those emotions are transferred from internal viewers to the audience. How do writers or film directors use visual theater to move the emotions and desires of their audiences? By quickening our emotional responses, how do texts and visual media make us want what we want? This essay first explores the uses of witnessing in the Meditations, taking a particular look at an early fifteenth-century English translation and adaptation, the Mirror of the Life of Christ, by Nicholas Love, a Carthusian prior, and then using it as a lens through which we can then examine Gibson’s feminization of pathos.15 How does the narrator organize and socialize his reader by telling that reader where to be, what to look at, and how to feel about it? I have chosen Love’s translation of the Meditations from a large set of vernacular versions, because it offers a particularly striking example of the way a text can be reprinted to address issues of its own time. Gibson and Nicholas Love both use the Passion to stir their audiences toward faith communities; both also guide the audience’s emotions and sense of the sacred in the service of conservative social and political agendas. They differ strikingly, however, in their uses of the Virgin and of the Virgin’s participatory gaze as a filter for our emotions. For Love, the Virgin’s presence works to reframe the community of the faithful as a new form of family unified against enemies of the Church and even the state. For Gibson, the Virgin’s gaze and presence at scenes from the Passion serve to sacralize a particularly masculine, and particularly twenty-first-century, idea of martyrdom.

Extant in over fifty manuscripts, the Mirror, the first complete translation of the Latin Meditations,16 was extremely popular in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, serving as an important iconographic mine for pre-Reformation English drama and devotional art.17 Love’s version of the Meditations is fascinating as a popular, vernacular text that was written to further specific religious interests—and perhaps political ones as well. This work was probably published in 1410, just one year after Archbishop Arundel had circulated a set of Constitutions condemning as heretical the ownership of all books associated

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13 Ragusa and Green trans., Meditations on the Life of Christ, 333.
16 Salter, Nicholas Love’s ‘Myrrour,’ 45.
critics have labeled ‘incalculable.’ Some viewers of Gibson’s films have remarked that the film owes a debt to medieval Passion plays; that is certainly true, but much of the iconography in medieval drama was based itself on the Meditations. The work can be thought of as the urtext for representations of Christ’s life and death as those scenes have appeared in stained glass, panel painting, and manuscript illumination since the time of its writing. The Meditations also provided specific scenes and narrative form for countless reprise dis of Christ’s life story in drama and devotional literature from the late Middle Ages even to the present day. St Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises (1520s through 1540s) are based in large measure on the Meditations; modern Christmas pageants as performed by millions of children throughout the world today are also a direct legacy.

This long work of instruction is a guided meditation, laced with homiletic interludes, on the events of Christ’s life and death. A narrator explains in the Prohemium to the Meditations that to understand Christ it is important to imagine his life, even if we go beyond the exact text of the Gospels. When the narrator interrupts the homily to describe the sequential events of the life of Christ, he does so through instructions on how to watch: the voice is direct and personal as it tells us how to imaginatively ‘behold’ the Angel receiving his instructions from God, or how to imagine the scene when Gabriel comes to Mary: ‘Let us pause here and remember what I told you in the beginning, that you must learn all the things said and done as though you were present. Thus here you may imagine God and regard Him as best you can. . . .’ Like the Virgin in Gibson’s film—and also like the narrator in Emmerich’s Dolorous Passion—we take on the role of witness, both feminine and feminized, emotionally present at the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Raising of Lazarus, and especially the Crucifixion, as I discuss below. Where the medieval Meditations differs from Emmerich’s Dolorous Passion is in the use of person; Emmerich uses a first-person ‘I’ to tell us precisely how she sees the Passion unfold, while the narrator in the earlier Meditations adopts the voice of a priest directing us in second person (‘you’) exactly where to stand and how to watch:

With your whole mind you must imagine yourself present and consider diligently everything done against your Lord and all that is said and done by Him and regarding Him. With your mind’s eye, see some thrusting the cross into the earth, others equipped with nails and hammers, others with the ladder and other


12 Ragusa and Green trans., Meditations on the Life of Christ, 15–16.

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instruments, others giving orders about what should be done, and others stripping Him.13

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13 Ragusa and Green trans., Meditations on the Life of Christ, 333.
16 Salter, Nicholas Love’s ‘Mynour’, 45.
with the important Oxford theologian John Wyclif. Particularly targeted in this censorship campaign were English translations of the Gospels by Wyclif and his followers. The Lambeth Constitutions imposed, it has been argued, some of the most draconian acts of censorship in English history. Just a few years before the Mirror was published, heresy had become a capital offense, with burning the punishment of choice. Lollardy, as this reformist movement was called, had apparently become a significant enough threat to the established church as to merit classification as an official heresy, punishable by death.

Nicholas Love's narrative circulated in the fifteenth century, not only as a work of religious meditation and instruction, but also as a social and even political text. As Paul Strohm has argued, Lollardy may have offered usurper Henry IV a convenient enemy as he worked to solidify the legitimacy of his dynastic claims. The same Archbishop who outlawed Lollard texts in 1409 gave, in 1410, his stamp of approval to Nicholas Love's Mirror, a gesture suggesting that Love's version of the Meditations might even have been written in part to order, commissioned as an English gospel narrative to counter the newly outlawed vernacular Bible. The margins of many manuscripts contain the annotation, presumably by Love, 'contra lollardos'—to indicate where Love has added text defending certain church rituals or beliefs that the Lollards opposed. You are a good Christian or else you are a heretic—that is, you are a Lollard. And in the Passion sequence, this division separating Us from Them is dramatized through the narration of the death of Christ. We live our orthodoxy not only through the articles of the faith but also by active participation in its story—through our mirroring, in our acts, of its 'life.' We are with the faithful (which means positioned with Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John) or else we are an enemy, maybe one of the torturers. In early fifteenth-century Lancastrian England, Church and royal power were closely allied; and it is in this sense I suggest that Love's Mirror uses pathos for politics. This work, in compelling ways, uses a holy family romance to make us want to be part of that family—the community of the faithful—and perhaps even good subjects of the nation, a metaphorical family, as well.

The section on the Passion gives a vivid demonstration of orchestrated devotional witnessing. In medieval Passion plays and visual arts this scene is often vividly dramatized, with the workers who are doing the nailing pictured as both vulgar and efficient. Gibson's scene of the Crucifixion follows directly

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21 Jesus's stretched arm nailed by crude-faced workers appears in stained glass at the Church of St Peter, Stockerston, Leicestershire; see Sarah Crewe, Stained Glass in England 1189–1540 (London, 1987), Fig. 30.

22 'Take hede thi lorde Jesu & beholde somes, & the heeres the other insterme hoes, clothes. Ar that peple, & se scouryng by thy normalization the:

23 'Now also she sorrowful out 176, lines 20–22.
in this tradition. In the Mirror, the description of how Jesus was nailed to the cross takes up fifty-five lines. As a preamble to them, the narrator states that we are meant to visualize this process in detail:

Take heed now with all your heart, all the things that are come to pass, and make yourself present there in your mind, beholding all that shall be done against your lord Jesus and that has been spoken or done against him. And so with the inner eye of your soul behold some people setting and fixing the cross firmly in the earth. Some preparing the nails and the hammers to drive them with. Others preparing and setting up ladders, and choosing other instruments that they think necessary, and others hurrying about to strip him and take off his clothes. And so is he now for the third time stripped and stands naked in sight of all those people, and so now for the third time the bruises of his wounds from his scourging are renewed by the tearing of his clothes from his flesh.\(^\text{22}\)

Right after this we are told that his mother is there at the cross as well, watching and responding with shame and horror: 'Now first his mother also sees how he is taken this way and ordained to death. Wherefore she is immeasurably sad and full of shame to see him standing all naked.'\(^\text{23}\) Since our presence and postures as witnesses mimic hers, we, by extension, should also feel her horror. We are even led to try to imagine her agony: 'Aa lorde in what sorowe is hir soule nowe? Sothely I trowe that she mihte not speke one worde to him for sorowe' (lines 26-27). The directives to be 'present there in your mind' beholding 'all that shall be done against your lord' thus use Mary as a lens for our own imaginative visualizing.

It may seem from this Passion sequence that Nicholas Love's text is a direct source for Gibson's film. While it is a source through Emmerich, and next to the Gospels, perhaps even the chief source, there are crucial differences in ways these two works orchestrate our emotions and identification. One hundred and fifty pages of the Mirror (Sargent's edition) deal with Jesus's life preceding his death, and only thirty-nine pages concern the Passion. In the film, however, we see very little of that previous history. The Mirror gives us that background so that by the time we get to the chapter on the Passion, we have heard about Jesus's entire life.

The Mirror also invites its readers to be part of imagined communities by using Christ's life to simulate ritual actions of the established Church in ways that differ from \textit{The Passion of the Christ}. The analogy between the life of Christ

\(^{22}\) Take hede now diligently with alle thi mynde, beholdyng alle that shalle be done ageyns thi lorde Jesu & that bene spoken or done of him. And so with the inmene eye of thi soule beholde sume, settyng & ficching the crosse fast into the erthe. Sume makynge redye the naiels & the hameres to dryue hem with. Othere makynge redy & settyng vp ladders, & ordyneyng other instrumentis that hem thuotu nedeful, & other faste aboue to spoile him, & drawe of hees clothes. And so is he nowe the thridde tympe spoilide & standeth nacked in sibh of alle that peple, & so bene nowe the thridde tympe renveide the brisouris of the wondres in his scourging by the cleasing of the clothes to his flesh.' Love, \textit{Mirror}, 176, lines 7-19. I have normalized the spelling in all quotations from Love, writing thorns as 'th' and yoghis as 'g.'

\(^{23}\) Now also first his modere seeth how he so takene & ordyned to the deth. Wherefore she sorouful out of mesure, & hauynge shame to se him standyng alle nacked.' Love, \textit{Mirror}, 176, lines 20-22.
and liturgical ritual made by Love is perhaps nowhere more carefully orchestrated than in the scene of the deposition, where Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, The Virgin, John, and Mary Magdalene all help take Jesus from the cross:

And then Nicodemus comes down to draw out the third nail from the feet, and in the mean time Joseph supports the body. Truly blessed is he that may sustain and hold that holiest body of our lord Jesus. Then our lady reverently takes in her hands our lord’s right hand, and looks at it and lays it to her eyes and devoutly kisses it, sadly weeping and sighing. And when the nail was drawn out from his feet, Joseph came down quietly and laid it to hand, and took our lord’s body and laid it down on the earth, and our lady took the head and shoulders and laid it on her lap. ...24

This passage is remarkable for its representation of shared, communal handling of Christ’s body. Consonant with the ocularto directives of the text as a whole, the passage describes watching as a fully embodied and physical act, a kind of visual touch—or what one recent scholar might call ‘ocular communion’.25 And indeed, gazing in this passage suggests communion of a literal kind: the shared touching of Christ’s body in the deposition evokes the Eucharist, the ‘sharing’ of Christ’s body. One of Love’s most ardent defenses ‘contra lollardos’ concerns the literal, physical presence of Christ in the eucharistic wafer—the ‘real presence.’ Lollards, often described by scholars as having been proto-Protestant in their attitude toward the Eucharist, challenged the doctrine of transubstantiation, or the belief in the literal transformation of the eucharistic wafer into God’s body.26 Throughout the Mirror, Love, in a counter move, insists on the physical presence of bodies, using a guided meditation to give emotional force to a doctrinal argument. Paul Strohm speculates that Archbishop Arundel and Henry IV may have even exploited the Eucharist as a foil for another kind of debate about authenticity. The insistence on the real presence of the Eucharist as it developed in the reign of usurper Henry IV may have symbolized the legitimacy of another transformation: the man into a king through the ritual of coronation.27 Love describes the deposition as a eucharistic ritual, a community formed through sharing of a sacramental body. Nicodemus draws out the nail, Joseph supports the body, Mary holds his hand. Touched and held, Christ’s body is literally shared among his community of believers. Each of the faithful gets a piece of his flesh.

24 ‘And than Nichodem cometh done fort drawe out the thridde naile of the feete, & in the mene tymce, Joseph susteyneth the bodye. Sotely wele is him that may susteyn & clippe that holiest body of oure lorde Jesu. Therewith oure lady taketh in hir handes reuerently oure lordes riht hande, & beholdeith it & leith it to hir eyene & deuoutlly kisseithe. Sore wepyng & silyng. And when the naile of the feete was drawe out. Joseph came done softly & alle leiden to hande, & token oure lordes bodie, & leide it done on the erthe, & oure lady toke the hede & the sholderes & leide it in hir barme.’ Love, Mirror, 185, lines 18-27.
25 Susanna Biernoff, Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages (Houndmills, England, 2002), 133-64.

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in the late Middle Ages was a visual one: the elevation of the consecrated host.
The directives to picture the life of Jesus, voiced by a priest, are also directives to participate in the Eucharist, the condensed sign of Christ. The scene of the Deposition thus crystallizes the visual practices that conscript us, as readers, into a Christian community, imagined through the domestic trope of the family and, with particularly emotional clarity, the mother. Just as Christ’s followers touch and share his body, the worshipper sees, and hence shares, that body as well.


32 On Christ’s body as a demonstration of the Eucharist, see Hans Belting, *The Image and its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1990), 68–89; see also Miri Rubin, *The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval
In Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, witnessing is far less communal—though one story, perhaps an urban legend, has it that after watching the film a murderer came forward to confess his crime; ‘community’ in a celluloid and cyber-world has dramatically broader dimensions. In the film, the group of supporters is very small and scattered, and the host of enemies impressively large. This Passion remake, which comes at us with little or no historical framing, situates the good and the true as scattered and disparate people surrounded by a world of enemies. Whereas Nicholas Love organizes his readers into witnesses in order to idealize Christian communities as forms of family, the film exploits techniques of distance: in real (or reel) time we can watch, but we can’t help at all. The very organization of lines of sight through the camera lens works to reinforce the viewer’s helplessness. As the camera cuts to the anguished faces of the small group of supporters, it forces us to acknowledge just how small that grouping is. There is also a vast difference between watching a film and listening to directives on how to imagine. The camera lens, selecting what and how we see, gives a film director far greater control over visual sequencing than even the most explicit narrator of a written text. No matter how coercive the book’s narrator’s voice might be in its directives to picture Jesus’s life, it at least allows us to put the book down, whereas the film traps us in our seats. Our only escape from the picture is literally to close our eyes and ears.

The past three decades have seen a rich proliferation of studies on vision, or more exactly ‘visuality,’ that have helped us understand how vision is an act closely tied to cultural or psycho/social norms. Postmodern studies of vision, which have revolutionized our understanding of vision as a cultural practice, have also contributed in far-reaching ways to discourses on race, gender, and intersubjectivity: how we know, claim, and use the other is a reflex, in part, to our gaze on that other. Work on vision has spanned many fields, but a central shared insight is that gazing is linked to the psychodynamics of power and domination. Feminist film theory, in particular, has exposed the sexual politics of looking by showing how Hollywood cinema reinforces dynamics of sexual power through its very structure. In Hollywood film the filmic apparatus, it has been suggested, is a technology that both produces and reproduces gender relations: a ‘male’ viewer takes a distanced, controlling, often voyeuristic position of mastery; the female body—fetishized, objectified, sexualized—is the object of that look. To see is primarily to take the position of male characters in the film or of the male-identified audience. To-be-seen is to take the position of a woman.33

Identities,’ in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit, 1992), 50.


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33 David I Medieval Eng
In Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ, the spectacle of desire and violence gets extraordinarily queer play. I have argued that Nicholas Love draws on theories about the workings of sight that circulated in his own time to structure the Mirror; and a similar argument can be made, I believe, for Gibson’s film, though much of the film’s impact relies on reversals of Hollywood norms. The body on display is that of a man, looked at by, among others, a woman. As we have seen, the Virgin plays a strategic role in this drama of heroic and cultic masculinity in part because her presence ratchets up the violation: I can take it, we might think, but can or should a mother? She re-routes our empathy. When the camera cuts to her face, we watch almost furiously to see how she is taking it. But her gesture, a woman looking at a scene of torture, also bespeaks more than maternal pain, I think. Ignoring laws of decorum and passivity that might relegate the female to the position of the observed, not the observer, she chooses to watch. Feminist film theory might even suggest that she is being punished for looking. As Linda Williams has provocatively argued for horror and slasher films, the visually assertive woman—usually coded as inquisitive or vampish—finally does see, but what she sees will often be horrifying or even fatal to her.34

Does Mary’s look cross the bounds of decorum and go too far? Maternal right, of course, legitimizes her gaze; ‘looking after’ the children was never just a metaphor. Real mothers spend hours each day literally looking at their children. Nevertheless, reversals in action and passivity set Jesus and Mary apart from the crowd in the film as well as from the audience in the theater. She watches him; he rarely looks back. The woman becomes the subject of the gaze and the man its object. Furthermore, Christ, played by James Caviezel, dazzles as a beautiful man and Mary, acted by Maia Morgenstern, seems simply too young to be his mother. They seem more like lovers than mother and son. Camera work also makes Caviezel seem uncannily large, and always manly. Often Caviezel is shot from below, a technique that gives the illusion that he is even something of a giant. His body, in scenes of the scourging or the carrying of the cross, is always that of a large man.

In contrast, humanity, and even a feminized or passive humanity, is central to the representations of Christ in the medieval tradition.35 As Caroline Walker Bynum has shown, the idea of Christ as a nurturing mother was a commonplace, at times he was even described as feeding the faithful with milk from his

Footnotes:
34 Linda Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks,’ in Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Theory, ed. M. A. Doane, P. Mellencamp, and L. Williams (Frederick, MD, 1984), 83–92; as Madeline Caviness has skillfully argued, gendered taboos on gazing are by no means restricted to the modern West, but also underwrite numerous pictorial representations in medieval art: Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle, and Scopic Economy (Philadelphia, 2001), 45–81.
breasts, Julian of Norwich, writing in the late fourteenth century, speaks of 'Mother Jesus,' sweet, kind, and nourishing: 'The moder may ley the child tenderly to her brest, but our tender Moder Jesus, He may homely leden us into His blissid brest be His swete open side...' Gibson's Christ, however, is tall and well-muscled—even a working icon of the body-building Jesus now popular among evangelical Christians. In what may be the only comic moment in the film, a flashback shows Jesus as a young carpenter building a table and proudly showing it to his mother—but the scene reads more like one of young husband and wife than mother and son.

The slippage in family roles thickens the family plot to allow the maternal drama a share of heterosexual romance: several kinds of love are at play through Mary's determined and persistent watching. If there is transgression, it comes partly through the apparent shifting of roles. While the love relationship between Mary and Jesus was a commonplace in medieval poetry and liturgy, it is much less familiar today and hence carries the shock of surprise for a twenty-first-century viewer. Mary's pain here is a lover's as well as a mother's; and looking at a body in pain, she is literally punished herself.

That's the punishment for love. But we can take this further, I think. If Nicholas Love's Passion narrative builds a synergy between family values and Christian communities, using a feminized gaze of helpless veneration as a model for the gazes and postures of good Christian subjects, do the gazes of women in Gibson's film serve a similar agenda? There are some significant differences, especially if we consider the assertively heterosexist slant of Gibson's family values. By organizing a gaze through female spectators, the film tells us that compassion and love belong to male/female relationships, and only there. We are first shown this in a literal jolt. The film opens with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is with his disciples, but is agonized by grief and isolation from them. Shots cut back and forth between the garden and the temple of Caiaphas, as we watch Judas take his bribe and lead Caiaphas' henchmen to the spot. Just at the moment that Jesus is taken, the film cuts, for the first time, to Mary. When he is taken, she jerks awake in her own bed at home; Mary Magdalene asks her what is wrong. What this scene communicates, in the first of many like it, is that Jesus is umbilically connected to his mother and secondarily to Magdalene. He belongs to women as defined by two principle roles, the mother and the lover.

This emotional linkage is framed by queer alternatives. Contrasting with the love of women is the perverse desire of queered others, who also have their uses for Jesus's body. One of these is the freaky Satan, played by Rosalinda Celentano, who lurks in the garden and slips through the crowd during the rest of the performance... as is argued in Satarian intertextuality. Eve, one sinners are too good to even be in the film. I think Passion is for non-Bruno worshippers. At the same time... it is too heavy on...)

He pervades this film: family is his nature of he... they... neve... so e hom... they... that... their... neut... desi... brief... We... impr... In T... cons...
of the movie. Evil, the film seems to say, is unnatural and sexually ambiguous, as is this Satan who has the face of a woman but the voice of a man. It may be argued that Gibson punishes Mary for watching by aligning her subtly with Satan; the two actresses resemble each other. Satan also announces his/her evil intent or status as evil thing through a determined and directed stare—a stare all the more venomous as the stare of a woman’s eyes. It’s an old story, of course, Eve and Mary, or as medieval writers sometimes punned, Eva and Ave: Eve, the sinner who caused the fall and Ave Maria, the Virgin who redeemed it.39 There are two women who stare in this film, one wholly evil and the other wholly good, as if they were shadow images of the same person. Satan is an Eve figure, even with a snake in the garden, the opposite face of the Virgin sleeping in her bed. This pairing of the cross-dressed Satan with Mary might make us uneasy, I think, about Gibson’s insistence on Mary’s tortured participation in the Passion, for it implies not only that women have a social role as the ones who suffer but also, and more problematically, that women need to suffer in order for men to be fully male. If we think of Mel Gibson’s roles in Lethal Weapon and Braveheart, which he also directed, we can see that the death or suffering of a woman often seems the tonic required to ignite masculine heroic martyrdom. At the beginning of Lethal Weapon 1 Riggs’s (Gibson’s) wife has been killed, a trauma that has transformed him into a suicidal lethal weapon; and in Braveheart it is the execution of William Wallace’s young wife that spurs Wallace (Gibson) on to a life of nationalistic vengeance.

Herod is also queer, even overtly feminized in a parody of homosexual perversion, as if to say that homosexuality were synonymous with the libertine. In medieval mystery plays Herod is usually as foppish and feminine, and in this sense Gibson’s representation is traditional. Yet in the context of the film’s family romance, Herod’s homosexuality works to further the film’s celebration of heterosexual, masculine heroism. The torturers may also be queer. Uniformly they are drunken and diabolical. They love to torment Jesus. Why? The film never explains their pleasure, but the pleasure never relents. Their sadism is so extreme and so sensualized as to suggest we are to see their rage as homoerotic in its drive. The torturers take pleasure in punishing that which they want but can’t have. Jesus belongs to women. In fact, at the very moment that Jesus gazes at his mother during the scourging, the torturers are trying out their flails. It may be that the film’s extremes of violence are required to neutralize its homoerotic pleasures, disciplining the audience’s own queer desires as well. The film puts on display a male body, whose beauty we see briefly in flashbacks, but then punishes what it loves. Commenting on Lethal Weapon, critic Tania Modleski writes that the film ‘takes male homoerotic impulses, embodied in homosexual panic, to their most murderous extreme.’40 In The Passion of the Christ Gibson appears to have raised the bar on what constitutes the ‘most murderous extreme.’ There are essentially two positions

39 Ernst Guldian, Eva und Maria: Eine Antithese als Bildmotive (Cologne, 1966).
40 Tania Modleski, Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age (New York, 1991), 137.
one can take: one is heterosexual, family-based. The other is queer—Herod, the happy flagellators, the ambiguous Satan. This other encompasses everyone else. Mary’s gaze works to demonize much of the world as a coalition of enemies.

Gibson’s film also shows that however much Mary may be tied to her son, she can’t leave him. This message may be summed up when in one of the flashbacks we hear Jesus telling his all-male followers, ‘The greatest sacrifice a man may make is to die for his friends.’ Friends are the boys. In present time, though, the ones who suffer most visibly and deeply are women, who can only watch. In fact the film uses Mary as spectator to suggest that heroic masculinity exists only apart from women—and even in punishing women who would try to hang on to their boys. The most graphic example of this overprotective mother comes when Mary runs to Jesus when he falls beneath his cross. Here the film flashes back to a scene from his childhood (the film’s only one), when Jesus is a toddler at home with his mother. Wandering away from her, he falls; she runs to him, her face a mask of terror. Mary’s foreboding about her son’s future is common in Christian iconography, and on a symbolic level, this brief flashback evokes that tradition. Yet modern viewers may see only an overreaction to a toddler’s ordinary tumble.

If Mary is first positioned as the overprotective Madonna, at the end of the film she turns into the vampire and perhaps even the vindictive Madonna. In one of the film’s most unsettling shots, during the Crucifixion, after Jesus has died, Mary approaches the cross and kisses his feet—merging symbolically with Mary Magdalene, who traditionally has special rights over Jesus’s feet. His feet are dripping with his blood, and after she kisses his toes the camera cuts to her face to show her lips stained with blood. While the shot communicates the extent of her love, the picture of blood-stained lips is most cinematically familiar from vampire movies. What are we to make of this brief filmic echo? All along it has been excruciating to watch her watching. By the end of the film it is more painful to watch her watching than to look at Jesus’s body, reduced as it is to recognizability—and even to the likeness of a painting, brush strokes and all. She’s been punished for loving too much, and the film’s final shots show us these excesses. In one of the film’s last scenes, following the deposition from the cross, the mourners are composed into the configuration of the lamentation, a close relative of the pietà. Mary holds Jesus’s head and Mary Magdalene bends over his feet. Some viewers may even see Mary as the vindictive or judgmental Madonna, staring directly at the camera lens as if to implicate the viewer in the blame. Everything else in this composed scene is familiar except for her directed stare right at the camera lens.

What we are accused of in that stare is summed up in the film’s final shot, which shifts to the cave. The stone rolls away, and light fills the space. We see the empty shroud, billowing in a breeze. Then we see, just in profile, Jesus, his body restored. It is immensely reassuring to see this body, which had been shredded and lacerated, again intact in all its beauty. In the Gospels, when Jesus’s followers return to the cave, they find it empty. They see him only later—on the road to Emmaus and in the garden. In John 20, the first of his

44 For and the L (2004), 8.
45 For guilt. ‘The’ 43 Elsa 29 and 2 there in
followers to see Jesus is Mary Magdalene, who is warned away by Jesus’s command not to touch him, ‘noli me tangere.’  In a peculiar intervention, Gibson gives the act of witnessing over to the moviegoer and has the Resurrection happen within the cave itself. No witnesses are present at all. This is the final triumph of heroic masculinity: it is alone. Jesus doesn’t even look at us. In her final image in the film, Mary accosts us with her angry stare; all she gets is the broken body. But when that body is restored to itself, it is alone.

So what are the ends of community in this film and in its medieval precursor? Nicholas Love’s fifteenth-century and Mel Gibson’s twenty-first century Passions both conscript identification through feminized spectators, though in rather different ways; both also build communities, and do so for distinctly conservative social and political ends. Both use pathos for politics. For Love, enemies are those who would challenge orthodox practices of faith; friends, in his domestic narrative, are part of a Christian family. In Gibson’s heteronomc, homosocial, and xenophobic film, enemies, it seems, are everywhere and can be almost anyone. Released when the United States was at war with Iraq, the film also seemed particularly well-timed to idealize a Christian West, figured through American James Caviezelt as its icon of sacrificial American manhood, attacked by a hoard of Middle Eastern men in skirts. Apart from the Romans, all of the enemies are Jews, of course; but to an American audience at the time of the film’s release, conditioned to nightly news images of Afghani and Iraqi men wearing robes, distinctions among ethnicities may not have been clear in the context of this vivid picture of sacrifice in the desert.

Discussing the structure of torture in her study of suffering, The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry comments that pain is ‘world-destroying’ and that practices of torture convert ‘absolute pain into the fiction of absolute power.’ With whom does that fiction of power rest? In both of these narratives it rests in large measure in the hands of the director. In Nicholas Love’s fifteenth-century text, power lies with a voice that not only tells us how to feel but also what to see. Through his spectral priest, the narrator speaks for the Church, instructing members of the congregation (us) in postures of piety. In Gibson’s film, absolute power lies not with the scourges, even though they are the vehicles or messengers of pain. Perhaps it rests with the camera. Few viewers of the film will be unaware that camera is in the hands of Mel Gibson, an Oscar-winning international star with a legacy of hypermasculine Hollywood credits. The greatest love we can have, the movie seems to say, is for a beautiful male. The most precious body belongs to Western or Caucasian man, starkly at risk out there in the world.

41 For medieval traditions of the ‘Noli me Tangere,’ see Theresa Coletti, Mary Magdalene and the Drama of the Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England (Philadelphia, 2004), 83–84.
42 Ironically, the film has been a hit in the Middle East, principally for its portrayal of Jewish guilt. The Passion of the Arab World, The Atlantic, July/August (2004), 62.