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Adultery and the Gaze: A Reading of Lucrezia Tornabuoni's *Story of Devout Susanna (La istoria della casta Susanna)*

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The crucial knot of Lucrezia Tornabuoni's *Story of Devout Susanna (La istoria della casta Susanna)* is the narrative insistence on the reifying effects of a gaze gendered as male: Susanna is, as in the apocryphal/deuterocanonical account, represented as an object of voyeurism. It is my aim to show the subtle ways in which Tornabuoni's depiction of Susanna embraces a series of allusions to other female figures such as Dante's Matelda, Beatrice and Proserpina (Pg XXVIII, XXX, XXXI), Petrarch's Laura and Danaë (RVF 126, 23). Carrying the plurivocal traces of other women represented as visual objects, Tornabuoni's reinterpretation of the biblical heroine suggests how the objectifying effects of the male gaze can slide from exaltation to abasement, from love to rape. After having evoked the equally detrimental repercussions of the female gaze when it reproduces the logic of domination (Medusa), the sacred narrative seems to open up, in its final part, to another account of an allegedly adulterous woman (Jn, 7.53-8.11). By means of this intertextual inclusion the verbal texture of Tornabuoni's *Susanna* operates to endow the female protagonist with a Christlike visual stance, one that holds the potential to subvert and transcend the dominance-submission dynamic.

One of the main aspects of Lucrezia Tornabuoni's *Istoria della casta Susanna*—a late fifteenth-century verse retelling of the apocryphal/deuterocanonical story of an innocent woman accused of adultery¹—is the narrative insistence on the reifying effects of a gaze gendered as male: the female protagonist is, as in the biblical account, represented as the object of male voyeurism.²

¹ Lucrezia Tornabuoni de' Medici, who was the wife of Piero de' Medici and the mother of Lorenzo il Magnifico, composed a number of *laudi* as well as five verse retellings of biblical narratives, including *La istoria della casta Susanna*. The sacred story was written after Piero's death in 1469 (Tylus 2001b: 59). All quotations from *La istoria della casta Susanna* in this essay are taken from Paolo Orvieto's edition (Tornabuoni 1992), hereafter indicated as *Susanna*.

² On the voyeuristic male gaze, see Mulvey 1999: 833-844. For a reading of the biblical account of Susanna influenced by Mulvey's theory of spectatorship and feminist film theory in general, see Glancy 2004: 288-302. On the issue of voyeurism in the biblical

The biblical story goes as follows: Susanna is the beautiful and pious wife of a wealthy Jew, whose home serves as courthouse. Two elders, elected as judges for the year, covertly watch Susanna during her daily walks in the garden adjacent to the house, each developing a sexual desire for her. The two voyeurs disclose their lascivious feelings to each other and act in concert to entrap Susanna. One day Susanna decides to take a bath in the garden. The elders, who had been spying on her as usual, show themselves and tell her that, if she refuses to lie with them, they will testify that she committed adultery with a young lover, which is tantamount to condemning her to death. Susanna responds that she prefers to die "rather than sin in the sight of the Lord" (Sus, 1.23),³ and cries out for help. Two trial scenes ensue: in the first, the elders put Susanna to trial in front of a crowd of people. The woman directs her gaze heavenward: "through her tears Susanna looks up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord" (Sus, 1.35). The people believe the elders' accusations, and condemn the innocent woman to death. At that point Susanna cries out "with a loud voice" (Sus, 1.42) to profess her innocence to God, who stirs up "the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel" (Sus, 1.45). In the trial scene that immediately follows, Daniel, who acts as judge, cross-examines the elders and declares them guilty. The crowd condemns the elders to death, administering the same punishment the villains wanted to inflict on their victim. Susanna's husband and her parents praise God "because she was found innocent of a shameful deed" (Sus, 1.63). From that day onward, "Daniel had a great reputation among the people" (Sus, 1.64). No praise of Susanna's courageous resistance is to be found in the end of the account.⁴

Tornabuoni's rendering of the story, a rendering that at first glance seems to closely follow the biblical account,⁵ thematises the crucial knot of the biblical

Susanna story and in the associated visual tradition (with particular emphasis on works by Rembrandt), see Bal 2006: 138-176. Bal's essay proposes not only a "narrative reading of the paintings", but also "a visual reading of the Biblical Susanna story" (Bal 2006: 141). Mulvey's binary approach to the gaze—according to which "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 1999: 837)—is radically different from Bal's narrative theory of visibility, although both are feminist in nature. For this see Bryson 2001: 7-15. Bryson points out that "Bal's reading agrees with Mulvey's and post-Mulveyan accounts of the Gaze in its sensitivity to vision as determined within institutions of masculinist, even rapist, power—yet the strategic outcome is different" inasmuch as "resistance is built into each point of the image's field," thus creating "a far more complex and volatile arena of power in vision" (Bryson 2001: 15). This essay is indebted to all of the aforementioned works.

³ Biblical references in English appearing in this essay are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (AA. VV. 2001). Biblical references in Latin are taken from the *Biblia Sacra juxta Vulgatam Clementinam* (Tweedale 2005). All English translations of the Vulgate follow the so-called Douay-Rheims version.

⁴ Toni Craven, for instance, points out that "the importance of Susanna's voice in the narrative's conclusion is not noted" (Craven 1998: 313).

⁵ There is uncertainty among scholars about whether Tornabuoni drew on the Latin Vulgate or on translations of the Bible into the vernacular (Tylus 2001a: 44).

episode, that being the depiction of a woman as object of the controlling, dominating and violent gaze of two male characters in a position of power. While the overall narrativization encourages the reader to identify with the perspective of the characters represented as morally upright and condemn the voyeurs and would-be rapists depicted as evil,⁶ both the biblical account and the Renaissance retelling promote the contemplation of the beauty of the female body on display, a beauty represented as enticing and therefore accountable for engendering the very voyeuristic behaviour that the narrative seemingly discourages.⁷ This ambivalence, due to which, in Mieke Bal's terms, "the moral dimension of the tale absorbs the pornographic one" (Bal 2006: 155), is further complicated in Tornabuoni's version, where the invitation to adopt the viewing position of the elders is reasserted, amplified even, while simultaneously resisted.⁸ Indeed, on one side, the Renaissance text offers a series of close-ups of the woman's naked body depicted as provocative—Susanna is, for instance, represented in the act of disrobing and, later, of trying to cover her breasts and her *pudenda*, which is a potentially titillating deviation from the biblical text:⁹

Susanna, udite si false novelle,
stupì et diventò pallida et rossa;
la suo vergogna cuopre et le mammelle;¹⁰

On the other side, the threefold apostrophe¹¹ to the internal reader—a "lector" (v. 22) summoned not only to read and hear ("chi questa operetta legge o ode,"

⁶ In her reading of the biblical text, Bal claims that "there can be no doubt that the overall focalizer stands on the side of the righteous", but "at certain points the focalization of this verbal story works to combine the view of the overall subject of the text with the view of the Elders" (Bal 2006: 154).

⁷ As Tylus emphasizes, "Tornabuoni freely indulges in the code of courtly love when she has one of the elders say that Susanna's beauty has led him into her prison" (2001b: 56). See the verses: "Susanna mi tien qui per suo prigione, / le gratiose sue gentil' maniere / m'hanno acceso nel core un tal disio, / ch'ì sempre il viso bel vorre' vedere" (*Susanna*, vv. 120-123).

⁸ Dan W. Clanton underlines the "intensification of sexual overtones within the interpretive tradition" of the Susanna story during the Renaissance, although he points out that "several Renaissance readings provide counter-readings," offering "models for readers to resist the sexually exploitative features of both narrative and its interpretations" (Clanton 2006: 3-4, 121).

⁹ The narrative's insistence on Susanna's beauty—aligned with "the conventional ease with which Western culture uses women's bodies for erotic looking" (Bal 2006: 174)—can be interpreted as a means of justifying, at least partially, the sexual extortion exerted by the would-be rapists. If Susanna's physical appearance is to be held accountable for the attempted rape, the perpetrators themselves become victims of a visual provocation. This aspect of the narrative, already present in the biblical pre-text (see, for instance, Glancy 2004) and further amplified in Tornabuoni's retelling, blurs the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. One is reminded of the words in Sir, 9:8: "many have been seduced by a / woman's beauty, / and by it passion is kindled like a / fire."

¹⁰ *Susanna*, vv. 169-171.

¹¹ According to Bal, the apostrophe is a device that "makes the semiosis personal and makes the reader/spectator aware of her or his position" (Bal 2001: 103).

v. 400), but also to see the unfolding of the narrative (“come vedrai,” v. 77)—counters the identification with the voyeuristic viewing posture.¹² The fact that the narrating voice directly addresses the reader prevents or at least discourages the adoption of a voyeuristic stance and the identification with the elders’ visuality. Namely, while the voyeur covertly looks without being seen, Tornabuoni’s reader is warned that he or she is perfectly visible and being watched. And, accordingly, the reader is expected to adopt a critical viewing posture, one able to resist the potentially pornographic elements of the text.

Yet the apostrophe to the reader is hardly the only narrative strategy employed by Tornabuoni to problematise the voyeuristic representation of Susanna as “to-be-looked-at-ness”.¹³ It is at the level of the interpenetration between the textual and the intertextual dimension that Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s sacred narrative, as I will argue, manages to thematise and problematise, invert and finally subvert the hierarchical subject/object dynamic of a patriarchally founded orchestration of the gaze.

Setting the problem: Susanna’s body and the male gaze

Tornabuoni’s sophisticated re-vision of Susanna—a rewriting in which the narrating voice is explicitly represented as re-telling Susanna’s story: “ridirò” (*Susanna*, v. 43)—carries the intertextual traces of other female figures represented as objects of the male gaze:

Quando la gente andava a suo magione,
Susanna bella entrava nel giardino
sul mezzo dì per suo recreatione,
et coglie fioraliso et gelsomino
et faceva ghirlandette assa’ sovente,
cantando le ponea in sul biondo crino.¹⁴

As Jane Tylus aptly notes (2001b: 56, 62 n. 20), Tornabuoni’s representation of Susanna brings to mind Dante’s depiction of Matelda in the *Purgatorio*:¹⁵

¹² Interestingly, the reader is invited to use sight as an ethical instrument, one that enables him/her to regard the elders’ actions as dishonest, in agreement with the judgment of God: “Ma l sommo Dio, per la lor gran malitia, / come vedrai, provide et parlò questo: / ‘Da duo di Babilonia assai nequitia, / che sono antichi, et un atto disonesto, / ch’a me molto dispiace, è proceduto.” *Susanna*, vv. 76-80.

¹³ For a reading of the biblical Susanna as epitomizing “to-be-looked-at-ness” see Glancy 2004. According to Mulvey’s influential—yet criticized—dualistic theory of the gaze, men are active agents of the gaze, while women are positioned as objects of spectacle, embodying “to-be-looked-at-ness” (see Mulvey 1991: 833-844, and especially 837). For a critique of Mulvey’s theory of spectatorship see, for instance, Creed 2007. As I will argue in the central part of this essay, Tornabuoni’s text alludes to the figure of Medusa, to a woman who bears a powerful, dominating gaze.

¹⁴ *Susanna*, vv. 88-93.

¹⁵ See also Pezzarossa 1978: 75.

e là m'apparve, sí com' elli appare
subitamente cosa che disvia
per meraviglia tutto altro pensare,
una donna soletta che si gia
e cantando e scegliendo fior da fiore
ond' era pinta tutta la sua via.¹⁶

Dante the pilgrim, the active male agent of the gaze, watches Matelda, the object of the gaze, while she is gathering flowers in the Earthly Paradise, a setting that intertextually enhances the lushness of Tornabuoni's description.¹⁷ Tornabuoni's *giardino* is, indeed, depicted as a visually appealing Edenic site characterized by the presence of fresh and clear water ("Egli havea un giardin di gran bellezza / più che nessun che fusse in quella terra [...] Questo luogo era di gran dilectanza: / quivi eran fonti fresche et molto chiare", *Susanna*, vv. 55-56, 64-65), and as a site of floral profusion in which, as we have seen, a female figure isolates herself every day to collect flowers. Yet, the Dantesque representation of Matelda contains a disturbing reference to Proserpina. Dante the pilgrim addresses the following words to Matelda immediately after seeing her:

Tu mi fai rimembrar dove e qual era
Proserpina nel tempo che perdette
la madre lei, ed ella primavera.¹⁸

The inclusion of the intertextual traces of both Matelda and Proserpina in the representation of Susanna's solitary gathering of flowers, suggests how the objectifying effects of the visual drive can easily slide from exaltation to abasement, from appreciation to rape. Proserpina is, in the Ovidian pre-text, represented as victim of the violating impulse of a powerful dominating gaze gendered as male:

Within this grove Proserpina was playing, and gathering violets or white lilies. And while with girlish eagerness she was filling her basket and her bosom, and striving to surpass her mates in gathering, almost in one act did Pluto see and love and carry her away: so precipitate was his love. The terrified girl called plaintively on her mother and her companions, but more often upon her mother. And since she had torn her garment at its upper edge,

¹⁶ *Pg*, XXVIII, vv. 37-42. Alighieri 1998a: 455.

¹⁷ Even if we do not know whether Tornabuoni drew on the Latin Vulgate or on translations of the Bible into the vernacular (Tylus 2001a: 44), it is worth noticing that in the Bible the garden is merely mentioned (Dn 13.4): "Erat autem Joakim dives valde, et erat ei pomarium vicinum domui suae" ("Now Joakim was very rich, and had an orchard near his house"). Moreover, the biblical Susanna is not depicted in the act of gathering flowers (Dn 13.7): "Cum autem populus revertisset per meridiem, ingrediebatur Susanna, et deambulabat in pomario viri sui" ("And when the people departed away at noon, Susanna went in, and walked in her husband's orchard"). The Vulgate edition I have used throughout is the *Biblia Sacra juxta Vulgatam Clementinam* (Tweedale 2005). All translations of the Vulgate are taken from the Douay-Rheims version.

¹⁸ *Pg*, XXVIII, vv. 49-51. Alighieri 1998a: 455.

the flowers which she had gathered fell out of her loosened tunic; and such was the innocence of her girlish years, the loss of her flowers even at such a time aroused new grief.¹⁹

The potentially reifying effects of the visual domination of a woman positioned as passive are evoked by the degeneration from Matelda's floral plenitude to Proserpina's floral loss, a loss that coexists with and metaphorically represents the violent de-floration. Since Susanna's is a tale of attempted rape, the subtle intertextual evocation of the raped Proserpina—one underlined by the floral *fil rouge* that links the three female figures—can be read as being capable of redirecting the reader from the visual appreciation of a female body represented as beautiful to the critical consideration of the disturbing consequences that a scopophilic drive might engender.

The causal connection between seeing and raping asserted in the intertextual echoes of the garden sequence is further emphasized in the scene of Susanna's bathing, where a proliferating chain of literary allusions endows Susanna with the features of Laura and Beatrice, on the one hand, and of Danaë on the other:

Un giorno, stando quivi, fu venuta
la bella donna et seco ha in compagnia
duo damigelle et ciascuna l'aiuta
cavar le veste, perché la volia
bagnarsi nelle fonti fresche et chiare
(cred'esser sola et di nulla temia,
le porte del giardin fatte serrare),
entrando in epse nuda come nacque,
per le sue belle membra recreare.²⁰

"Fonti fresche et chiare"²¹ brings to mind Petrarch's "Chiare, fresche et dolci acque," a *canzone* which contains, as is well known, a visually enticing scene of floral profusion.²² In Petrarch's *canzone* Laura's body is represented as the source of intense visual pleasure on the part of a male-gendered lyric subject:

¹⁹ *Met.* 5.391-401. Ovid 2004: 265-267.

²⁰ *Susanna*, vv. 139-147.

²¹ The image of fresh and clear water already appeared in the first mention of the garden, as we have seen: "Questo luogo era di gran dilectanza: / quivi eran fonti fresche et molto chiare", *Susanna*, vv. 64-65. Tylus aptly notes that "quivi eran fonti fresche et molto chiare" is "a possible echo of Petrarchan allusions in the *Canzoniere* 126: 1 to «chiare, fresche, e dolci acque»" (Tylus 2001b: 61, n. 17). Interestingly, the subsequent mention of water ("gelide acque", v. 148) can also be read as a Petrarchan echo, see note 38 in this essay.

²² The first verses of Petrarch's *canzone* 126 are the following: "Chiare, fresche et dolci acque, / ove le belle membra / pose colei che sola a me par donna". *RVF*, 126, vv. 1-2. Petrarch 1999: 194. The presence and proximity of the syntagms "fonti fresche et chiare" (v. 143) and "belle membra" (v. 147) in Tornabuoni's text reassert the intertextual evocation of *RVF* 126 within the fifteenth-century sacred narrative.

Da' be' rami scendea
(dolce ne la memoria)
una pioggia di fior sovra 'l suo grembo,
et ella si sedea
umile in tanta gloria,
coverta già de l'amoroso nembo;
qual fior cadea sul lembo,
qual su le treccie bionde
ch'oro forbito et perle
eran quel dì a vederle,
qual si posava in terra et qual su l'onde,
qual con un vago errore
girando pareva dir: "Qui regna Amore."²³

From Laura's "pioggia di fior" and "amoroso nembo" to Beatrice's "nuvola di fiori" is but a short step:²⁴

così dentro una nuvola di fiori
che da le mani angeliche saliva
e ricadeva in giù dentro e di fori,
sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva
donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
vestita di color di fiamma viva.²⁵

The Earthly Paradise setting of Dante's second *cantica* is evoked yet again.²⁶ The intertext is, moreover, characterised by the presence of the very same verb that defined the subject-object visual encounter in the Matelda scene: "m'apparve." Matelda, Beatrice and Laura—all depicted as objects of a male gaze in an Edenic context of floral profusion—function as mirror-images of the visually appealing figure of Susanna. Yet, as in the Matelda-Proserpina equation, the complicity between the Petrarchan and Dantesque floral intertextual echoes surreptitiously operates to evoke another female figure. I am quoting from Petrarch's "metamorphosis canzone":

²³ *RVF*, 126, vv. 40-52. Petrarch 1999: 196.

²⁴ See, for instance, Vickers 1981b: 6.

²⁵ *Pg*, XXX, vv. 28-33. Alighieri 1998b: 484.

²⁶ Vickers aptly notes that Petrarch's *canzone* 126 carries another echo of Dante's *Purgatorio*: the syntagm "le belle membra" (*RVF*, 126, v. 2) appears, indeed, in *Pg* XXXI as referred to Beatrice (v. 50), and "reflects the only use of the expression 'le belle membra' in the entire *Commedia*" (Vickers 1981b: 5). As we have seen, this reference, one that binds once again Petrarch's *locus amoenus* to the Dantesque Earthly Paradise setting, appears in Tornabuoni's text as well (see note 22 in this essay). The presence of the syntagm "belle membra" in the fifteenth-century sacred narrative underpins the intertextual inclusion of both Laura and Beatrice in Tornabuoni's representation of Susanna. It is striking that all of the Dantesque allusions in Tornabuoni's text mentioned thus far are taken from the Earthly Paradise sequence of the *Purgatorio* (namely, *Pg* XXVIII, XXX, and XXXI).

Canzon, i' non fu' mai quel nuvol d'oro
che poi discese in preziosa pioggia,
sì che 'l foco di Giove in parte spense;²⁷

Laura's "pioggia di fior" with its golden accents and Beatrice's "nuvola di fiori" become the "nuvol d'oro" that violated Danaë in the form of "preziosa pioggia."²⁸ Laura's and Beatrice's flowers—their "fiori"—are lost, just as Proserpina's, erased and substituted by visually enticing adjectives indicating golden preciousness, and the de-floration is not merely verbal. Susanna—just as her doubles Matelda, Laura and Beatrice—is represented as in danger of becoming Proserpina or Danaë. Visual pleasure is depicted as being disturbingly close to rape.²⁹ Moreover, the incorporation within Susanna's voice of the intertextual traces of other female figures—Matelda, Laura, Beatrice, Proserpina, and Danaë—subtly problematizes the general objectification of women, their traditional positioning in the literary canon as objects of a gaze gendered as male. Tornabuoni's text opens up, in other words, a subtle critical reflection on the constrained role afforded to women within the male-dominated literary tradition, here epitomized by authors of the calibre of Dante, Petrarch and Ovid.

A Medusan inversion: the (seeming) power of the female gaze

After having gazed at Susanna's naked body, the two voyeurs unabashedly threaten the woman to submit to their sexual desire, saying that, unless she complies, they will testify that she committed adultery. It goes without saying that attempted rape is a traumatic and de-humanizing experience. As Rooney puts it, "a feminine subject who can act only to consent or refuse to consent is in fact denied subjectivity" (Rooney 1991: 92):

E 'nn-ogni parte m'hanno circundata:
perché, s'io adempio vostra voluntade,
la morte eterna m'è aparecchiata,
et s'ì nego, le vostre crude mani
fuggir non posso, et sarò condemnata.

²⁷ RVE, 23, vv. 161-163. Petrarch 1999: 34.

²⁸ The connection between Laura's rain of flowers and Danaë's golden shower is pointed out by Vickers: "the cloud of flowers that opens stanza four [RVE 126] falls from the branches like a rain associated with both whiteness and gold into the *grembo* (lap, but also womb) of the lady" (1981b: 8).

²⁹ The intertextual insistence on rape—accomplished by means of allusions to Proserpina, Danaë, and, as I will show, Medusa—discourages the traditional interpretation of the account as a story of attempted seduction rather than attempted rape, of, in other words, a potentially consensual rather than coercive experience. For a discussion of the traditional interpretations of the biblical account as "a tale of a virtuous woman who resists seduction" and of the reasons why "an attempted rape resists classification as such" (Glancy 2004: 288) see Glancy 2004. See also Bal, who stresses "the use of voyeurism in the Susanna tradition to transform the rape of a woman [...] into seduction by a woman" (Bal 2006: 140).

Ma megl'è di morire, o falsi et vani,
senza cagione, innanzi che peccare
et che 'l cor mio dal Signor si lontani.³⁰

Susanna is willing to face the public accusation of adultery, an accusation that, given the authority of the assailants, could by all means result in her execution ("sarò condannata"). One must notice that Susanna's decision is courageous yet problematic inasmuch as she is prepared to give away her life rather than being raped.³¹ Interestingly, as in the Bible, the argument she adduces is not directly linked to the preservation of her marital status.³² Susanna is represented as halting the elders' attempted rape not to defend her husband's exclusive claim on her body, but to safeguard her relationship with God.³³ During the trial scene that ensues, just before the elders publicly pronounce their false accusations, Susanna prays to God:³⁴

Tenea Susanna al Ciel le luci fisse
con lacrime divote, verso Dio,
et di buon cuor tutta in Lu' si rimisse:
"Ogni mie spem'è in te, O Signor mio,
libera me, Signor, sed e' ti piace,
da tanto falso et da tormento rio!"³⁵

"Tormento rio" is, as Paolo Orvieto aptly notes, a quotation from canto IX of Dante's *Inferno* (Tornabuoni 1992: 53). The setting is no longer the Earthly Paradise. Susanna's garden—her Petrarchan *locus amoenus*, her Dantesque Eden—is intertextually transformed into the infernal city of Dis ("grande campagna, / piena di duolo e di tormento rio"; *Inf* IX, v. 111; Alighieri 1998a, 95). As Tobias

³⁰ *Susanna*, vv. 176-183.

³¹ Glancy maintains that the "implicit premise of [Susanna's] statement is that any rape victim is by definition guilty." For a discussion of Susanna's problematic decision, see Glancy 2004: 298, and *passim*.

³² Both in the biblical account and in the Renaissance retelling, Susanna is depicted as preferring death to sin. See the Vulgate (Dn 13.22-23): "Angustiae sunt mihi undique: si enim hoc egero, mors mihi est: si autem non egero, non effugiam manus vestras. Sed melius est mihi absque opere incidere in manus vestras, quam peccare in conspectu Domini" ("I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death to me: and if I do it not, I shall not escape your hands. But it is better for me to fall into your hands without doing it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord"). Glancy, however, reads in the words of the biblical heroine "the implicit narrative promotion of the idea that a virtuous woman prefers death to the dishonor a rape brings to a man's household" (Glancy 2004: 290).

³³ The relationship between Tornabuoni's Susanna and the divine will be further clarified in the last pages of this essay.

³⁴ As Tylus points out, this brief prayer is not present in the biblical narrative (2001b: 66, n. 23). Again, as in the garden sequence, a portion of the verse retelling that deviates from the biblical narrative is charged, as I will show, with intertextual echoes functional to Tornabuoni's reinterpretation of the biblical heroine.

³⁵ *Susanna*, vv. 229-234.

Foster Gittes argues in his fascinating essay on the motif of rape in Dante's *Inferno*, the image of the celestial emissary who "disdainfully opens the doors" of the infernal city with his little wand ("verghetta"), causing the trembling of the two banks of the Styx, can be read as evoking the rape of a female body (2005: 12-13).³⁶ And it comes as no surprise, then, that the infernal canto under consideration contains the reference to an already violated Proserpina, depicted as "regina de l'eterno pianto" (*Inf IX*, v. 44. Alighieri 1998a: 91). This disturbingly all-female representation of lower hell³⁷ is further enhanced by the presence of the Furies who utter the following retaliatory words: "Vegna Medusa: sì 'l farem di smalto" (*Inf IX*, v. 52; Alighieri 1998a: 92). If the intertextual echoes operated, up to this point, to thematise and problematise female visual reification—a mechanism that strengthens the hierarchical logic inherent in patriarchal gender relations—the allusion to Medusa challenges and reverses the pattern according to which women are necessarily posited as objects of the colonizing male gaze.³⁸ The dominating gaze is not exclusively male: Medusa is the bearer of a powerful, objectifying gaze. As Barbara Creed points out, "the notion of the monstrous-feminine challenges the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity" (Creed 2007: 151). The Gorgon's petrifying gaze, however, while clearly posited as active and dominating, is the result of a traumatic experience. Visuality is yet again connected with rape in the inter/textual play of Tornabuoni's sacred narrative: Medusa, a once beautiful girl, was brutally violated in the temple of Athena.³⁹ The woman's transformation from vulnerable victim into powerful monster was caused by another woman:

³⁶ "Venne a la porta e con una verghetta / l'aperse, che non v'ebbe alcun ritegno" (*Inf IX*, 89-90; Alighieri 1998a: 94). According to Tobias Foster Gittes, "the use of a diminutive derived from *virga* stresses the pliancy of his wand while suggesting the inherently sexual nature of the forced opening" (2005: 13-14).

³⁷ Gittes stresses the "emphatically feminine quality of Dante's entrance to lower hell," for "where we would expect to hear mention of Hades, we hear instead of his wife Proserpina; where we would expect to hear the name of Lucifer, hell's prince, we hear instead the name of Medusa; where we would expect to hear of Rhadamantus, the infernal judge of Tartarus (*Aeneid VI*, 566), we hear only of the Furies" (Gittes 2005: 23).

³⁸ The verses immediately preceding the attempted rape—"et così stando in queste gelide acque, / mandò le damigelle pe' suoi unguenti" (*Susanna*, vv. 148-149)—carry an allusion to Petrarch's madrigal 52, to the image of Acteon's voyeuristic gaze directed at the naked Diana: "Non al suo amante più Diana piacque / quando per tal ventura tutta ignuda / la vide in mezzo de le gelide acque." *RVF*, 52, vv. 1-3 (Petrarch 1999: 82). We know from Ovid's text that Diana's aggressive reaction is about to ensue: she metamorphoses Acteon into a stag, setting his own dogs to hunt him and torn him apart. See *Met.* 3.155-252 (Ovid 2004: 134-143). The reference to Diana, to a female figure that refuses and strongly reacts to her own positioning as the object of male visual pleasure, anticipates the allusion to Medusa. For an intriguing interpretation of Petrarch's rendition of the Diana/Acteon's myth in the light of Mulvey's theory of spectatorship, see Vickers 1981a.

³⁹ The link established thus far in Tornabuoni's text between the gaze and rape can be read as stemming from the acknowledgement that visuality carries the potential to become instrumental to patriarchal power relations based on a dominance-submission dynamic. The gaze—male and female alike—can be an act of domination.

the goddess Athena herself engendered the metamorphosis, and the ambivalence of the Ovidian text prevents the reader from clearly discerning whether it was an act of female empowerment or, rather, the crude punishment of an abuse victim held accountable for the rape perpetrated against her:⁴⁰

She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful—for so I learned from one who said he had seen her. 'Tis said that in Minerva's temple Neptune, lord of the Ocean, ravished her. Jove's daughter turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis. And, that the deed might be punished as was due, she changed the Gorgon's locks to ugly snakes.⁴¹

The Gorgon's sadistic female gaze will be, ultimately, defeated: Perseus will behead the powerful woman by turning her own visual power against herself, which is tantamount to saying that the reversal of the subject-male/object-female binary performed by the monstrous-feminine is ultimately detrimental to women themselves. The (only seemingly) empowered Medusa is not Susanna's visual role model. She, indeed, looks somewhere else: to be "freed" from the "tormento rio"⁴²—from the textual patriarchal male gaze and the intertextual petrifying female gaze, one that ultimately endorses patriarchy—Susanna directs her gaze toward heaven.

Susanna, Jesus and the Virgin: subverting the logic of domination

The visual heavenward posture of the female protagonist, one that appears both in the biblical account and in the Renaissance retelling, has usually been interpreted as conveying the notion of Susanna's passivity, as emphasizing, in other words, her subordinate visual position with regard to the elders' gaze. For instance, Jennifer Glancy, in her reading of the biblical episode, argues that Susanna "turns her eyes to heaven, which precludes the possibility that she might return the elders' gaze or challenge their vision."⁴³ As far as Tornabuoni's retelling is concerned, I will argue, on the contrary, that Susanna's heavenward

⁴⁰ Lynn Enterline aptly notices that "although it may seem that Medusa is being punished for her own rape, the narrative remains deliberately vague about who is being punished; we should note, for instance, that Medusa's victims are all men." Enterline 2000: 28.

⁴¹ *Met.* 4.794-801. Ovid 2004: 235.

⁴² See Susanna's words in her first prayer to God: "libera me, Signor, sed e' ti piace, / da tanto falso et da tormento rio!" (*Susanna*, vv. 233-234).

⁴³ Glancy reads the biblical Susanna exclusively as "the one who is seen," failing thus to address the import of Susanna's gaze. According to Glancy, "Susanna's vision never shapes the story," and the heroine "does not emerge as a subject in her own right." See Glancy 2004: 290-291, 301. However, the very fact that the biblical Susanna looks at God is telling, inasmuch as she is proposing a gaze that is different from that of the elders, a gaze that, consequently, holds the potential to challenge and transcend their mode of visuality. A potential that Tornabuoni's text, as I will argue, acknowledges and emphasizes.

gaze is represented as a powerful visual stance, one that enables her to challenge the retaliatory pattern that characterises the behaviour of the other characters: of the elders, of the fickle crowd, and even of Daniel.

First of all, Susanna's gaze, unlike Medusa's, does not reproduce in a reverse fashion the male-female opposition on which the patriarchal logic of domination is based. Susanna's gaze is not Medusan, but is, nonetheless, active. The woman is not forced but chooses not to respond, not to return the elders' look. She directs her gaze somewhere else, breaking eye contact with her assailants. And the direction of her look is revealing. Susanna, both in the biblical account and in the Renaissance retelling, consciously looks up to God,⁴⁴ a God that she defines in visual terms as the bearer of a powerful, all-seeing gaze, a gaze from which nothing can be hidden.⁴⁵ In her second prayer to God, Tornabuoni's Susanna pronounces the following words:

Susanna udì ch'ell'era sentenziata,
gridava forte et disse: "O Signor mio,
in te mi fido, Maiestà bēata;
nasconder non si può nessun disio
che nasca dentro al cor: prima lo sai,
et sie come si vuole, o buono o rio."⁴⁶

Therefore, the only powerful gaze to which Susanna is willing to submit—or, rather, the only one she is willing to imitate—is God's.

There is, moreover, a detail in Tornabuoni's text that is not present in the biblical account. Namely, while in the Bible there is no reference to the method of execution employed, Tornabuoni's retelling explicitly condemns the guilty to death by stoning (as punishment for adultery, given that they were sentenced to the same punishment they had intended for Susanna).⁴⁷ This detail, which

⁴⁴ "Tenea Susanna al Ciel le luci fisse" (*Susanna* v. 229). In the Bible the elders are represented as turning their eyes away from God (Dn 13.9): "et everterunt sensum suum, et declinaverunt oculos suos ut non viderent cælum" ("And they perverted their own mind and turned away their eyes that they might not look unto heaven"). On the contrary, Susanna is depicted as directing her gaze to God (Dn 13.35): "Quæ flens suspexit ad cælum: erat enim cor ejus fiduciam habens in Domino" ("And she weeping looked up to heaven, for her heart had confidence in the Lord").

⁴⁵ In the Bible Susanna prays to God only once. The first part of the prayer goes as follows (Dn 13.42): "Deus æterne, qui absconditorum es cognitor, qui nosti omnia antequam fiant [...]" ("O eternal God, who knowest hidden things, who knowest all things before they come to pass").

⁴⁶ *Susanna*, vv. 262-267. Dan W. Clanton points out the theological impeccability of Susanna's words, inasmuch as "God is traditionally characterised as one who can see all, as in Sir 17:19; 39:19-20; and 42:20" (Clanton 2006: 67). Tornabuoni's Susanna shares with her biblical predecessor this theological insight into the all-seeing quality of God's visuality.

⁴⁷ As Glancy aptly notes, "Israelite law on perjury stated that whoever registered a false accusation was to receive the punishment he or she had attempted to inflict on another" (Glancy 2004: 299). The Bible mentions stoning as a penalty for adultery in Deut 22:20-24, Jn 8:4-5.

deviates from the biblical account but is in line with the tradition of literary and artistic renderings of the Susanna theme,⁴⁸ can be read, in my opinion, as opening up an intertextual resonance that I consider helpful in clarifying the logic on which Susanna's visual stance is founded:

"Lapidati sien presto et ciascun morto
et fatto quanto nella legge è scripto
et l'inocente ripigli conforto!"⁴⁹

Namely, this seemingly insignificant detail can be read as a reference to another account of a woman allegedly taken in adultery. I am referring to the passage from the Gospel of John known as the *pericope de adultera* (Jn, 7.53-8.11).⁵⁰ The story is a confrontation between a group of men in a position of power and Jesus over the punishment by stoning of an allegedly adulterous woman.⁵¹ The scribes and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman and make her "stand before all of them" (Jn, 8.3).⁵² Her body is positioned—like Susanna's—as spectacle for the gaze.⁵³ They invite Jesus to judge her case, saying:

"Teacher, this woman was surprised in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"⁵⁴

Instead of returning the scribes' and Pharisees' looks—and the looks of the crowd waiting for the opportunity to release its accumulated anger against an acceptable victim—Jesus resists visual confrontation and bends down, writing

⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that "neither the Vulgate nor the Greek of Theodotion from which Jerome translated it are explicit about the nature of the death to which Susanna, and later the elders, are condemned", in the literary renderings of the Susanna theme we often encounter the stoning of the elders. David A. Wells points out that "a writer with quite modest theological knowledge would have known from both the Old and New Testament contexts that stoning was the accepted punishment for adultery". See Wells 2004: 60-61. As an example of the presence of the elders' stoning in fine art see Albrecht Altdorfer's *Susanna in the Bath and the Stoning of the Elders* (1526), Alte Pinakothek, München.

⁴⁹ *Susanna*, vv. 367-369. The reference to stoning is reiterated immediately after: "Et morti furon senza alcun rispitto, / co' sassi lapidati a gran furore" (vv. 370-371).

⁵⁰ This part of my essay is indebted to Girard's intriguing analysis of the so-called *pericope de adultera* (2008: 49-61), and to his theory of mimetic desire in general.

⁵¹ Frances Taylor Gench maintains that "we need to examine our presuppositions about the woman" since "no witnesses are produced [...], nor a partner in crime, and we are not made privy to her own reflections" (2007: 57). Has the woman accused of adultery been entrapped just as Susanna has been?

⁵² The Vulgate reads: "et statuerunt eam in medio" ("and they set her in the midst").

⁵³ As Gail R. O'Day notes, "she is an object on display, given no name, no voice, no identity apart from that for which she stands accused" (1992: 632).

⁵⁴ Jn, 8. 4-5. The Vulgate reads: "Magister, hæc mulier modo deprehensa est in adulterio. In lege autem Moyses mandavit nobis hujusmodi lapidare. Tu ergo quid dicis?" ("Master, this woman was even now taken in adultery. Now Moses in the law commanded us to stone such a one. But what sayest thou?")

something on the ground.⁵⁵ The religious authorities continue to question him, so he straightens up and says: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn, 8. 7).⁵⁶ After saying that, Jesus bends down again. In the meantime, the people withdraw. Jesus stands up again and talks to the woman, now alone, his last words being: "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (Jn, 8. 11).⁵⁷ If we take the hint of the stoning detail in Tornabuoni's text and consequently read the two accounts on allegedly adulterous women as interdependent, the similarity of intent between Susanna's heavenward gaze and Jesus' downward gaze becomes apparent, both of them being powerful visual acts of resistance. Susanna is, therefore, not passive, or rather she is passive but not submissive, her seeming 'passivity' being the means she employs to counter the gaze of the elders.⁵⁸ Moreover, as Girard's intriguing interpretation of the neotestamentary account emphasizes, Jesus "exerts his influence against violence", against the violent contagion that would be triggered among the crowd if he looked back and judged the adulterous woman (2008: 55). Namely, according to Girard, the first stone is the hardest to throw "because it is the only one without a *model*" (2008: 56):

Once the first stone is thrown, [...] the second comes fairly fast, thanks to the example of the first; the third comes more quickly still because it has two models rather than one, and so on. As the models multiply, the rhythm of the stoning accelerates.⁵⁹

The potential escalation of violence is halted by Jesus, who operates "a contagion of non-violence" (Girard 2008: 57).⁶⁰ Therefore, Tornabuoni's Daniel, the character who redirects the mob's appetite for violence against the sinful elders, is intertextually re-defined as victim of the same retaliatory logic of domination that characterises the behaviour of the elders, the mob, the scribes and the Pharisees. All the characters in both accounts function according to the same pattern—all but Jesus and Susanna. The potential allusion to the *pericope de adultera* operates to characterise Susanna as the only Christlike figure, the bearer of the only truly subversive gaze, a gaze that transcends the dominance-submission dynamic. From a close reading of the text it emerges that Tornabuoni's Susanna, far from being a figure merely instrumental to

⁵⁵ Girard maintains that "if Jesus returned their looks, these angry men would not see his look as it really is but would transform it into a mirror of their own anger" (2008: 60).

⁵⁶ The Vulgate reads: "Qui sine peccato est vestrum, primus in illam lapidem mittat" ("He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her").

⁵⁷ The Vulgate reads: "vade, et jam amplius noli peccare" ("Go, and now sin no more").

⁵⁸ To regard passivity as non-activity is to think in dualistic terms. Passivity can be a powerful strategy of resistance.

⁵⁹ Girard 2008: 57.

⁶⁰ According to Girard, the biblical account helps us "better understand the dynamic of crowds that must be defined, not primarily by violence or by nonviolence, but by imitation, by contagious imitation" (2008: 57).

Daniel's advancement,⁶¹ is an empowered subject in her own right, one divinely authorized by her imitation of the non-retaliatory logic of Christ.

As Gail R. O'Day aptly notices, the aforementioned passage from the Gospel of John unfolds in parallel fashion: Jesus bends down twice and twice stands up to address words indicating sin first to the religious authorities and afterwards to the accused woman (1992: 631-640). This parallelism is meant to highlight the fact that both the men and the woman "receive equal treatment from Jesus" (O'Day 1992: 636). In other words, Jesus' gaze challenges gender hierarchy. And Tornabuoni's Susanna—although she is ultimately restored, as in the biblical account, to her conventional patriarchal roles of faithful wife and reliable daughter—is, nonetheless, intertextually aligned with Christ's powerful gaze, a gaze capable of radically challenging and transcending the oppositional dialectic between self and other. It comes as no surprise, then, that Tornabuoni's Susanna is defined in neotestamentary terms as God's "ancilla":

et piacque a Dio la divota orazione,
et exaudi la suo humile ancilla,
et ben mostrò com'ella havea ragione.⁶²

"Ancilla" is an obvious allusion to the words pronounced by the Virgin at the moment of the Annunciation: "Ecce ancilla domini" ("Behold the handmaiden of the Lord").⁶³ The intertextually established link between Susanna and the God-bearing Virgin, the mother of Christ—a woman who actively accepts to become God's "ancilla", thus enabling the redemption of mankind—emphasizes the cruciality of Susanna's role and of her only seemingly submissive visual and verbal behaviour. Moreover, to refer to the Virgin means alluding to the collapse of binaries that takes place in her womb, a locus in which the boundaries between male and female, human and divine, self and other simply melt. The fact that Susanna is in Tornabuoni's rendering intertextually defined as a virgin-like figure, a figure that embodies the transcendence of (gender) hierarchy, is in perfect accord with the subversion of patterns of domination accomplished in Tornabuoni's text through the textual/intertextual treatment of the dynamic of the gaze.

While in the neotestamentary account the Virgin decides to accomplish the will of God, here God is represented as consenting to accomplish Susanna's will:

O Signor mio, tu sai ch'ì non peccai
et sai che ingiustamente vo a morire,
sono innocente et già mai non fallai.

⁶¹ As Glancy points out, "most modern editions of the Bible include [the story of Susanna] among the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books as Daniel 13. Although readers will respond to and remember most vividly Susanna and her predicament, the story's conclusion emphasizes Daniel's emergence as a young figure of wisdom" (Glancy 2000: 157).

⁶² *Susanna*, vv. 274-276.

⁶³ Lk, 1.38. See Tylus 2001b: 57, 67 n. 26. As the scholar emphasizes, Lucrezia Tornabuoni herself was linked to the Madonna (Tylus 2001a: 38).

Ad te mi raccomando! Et finì 'l dire.
Incontamente la suo petitione,
udita fu, et non seguì il martire,
et piacque a Dio la divota orazione,
et exaudì la suo humile ancilla,
et ben mostrò com'ella havea ragione.
Suscitò Daniël, come favilla
ch'esce di legno che par che sie spento,
soffiando, poi la fiamma fuor scintilla,
così aparve quivi inn-un momento
in età puerile et fanciullino.
Gridando disse: "Ciascuno stie atento,
innocente son io!" fu 'l suo latino.⁶⁴

God carries out Susanna's desire and conveys her innocence to the community by stirring a young boy, Daniel, whose words ("innocente son io!") are the chiasmic reproduction of Susanna's words ("sono innocente").⁶⁵ This cross-gendered utterance, one that strongly deviates from the biblical narrative,⁶⁶ can be read as signalling the intentionality of the disruption of gender binaries performed by the intertextual inclusion of the neotestamentary references to Christ and the Virgin within the sacred narrative. Susanna's voice, disembodied and re-embodied in Daniel, gains power: from the safe space of the male body, Susanna manages to communicate the message of her innocence to the community. Accordingly, the empowerment of a woman in a patriarchal society can be accomplished only through the voice of a man—the only voice that holds discursive authority—or at least with the support of men in a position of power. Which is why, one is tempted to say, the text alludes to, problematises and re-reads a number of canonical male-authored literary representations of women, creating the conditions for a different mode of male/female (visual) interaction.

To conclude, in Tornabuoni's rendition Susanna is initially looked at, displayed as enticing spectacle, and finally heard. We first perceive the words she pronounces on her own and then those she utters through Daniel. In the end of the story, as in the biblical account, Susanna disappears as an active agent from the narrative.⁶⁷ She is merely mentioned as reassuming her conventional patriarchal roles of wife and daughter ("pare a ciascun che sie riguadagnata"):

Il suo marito in vista humile et pio,
quando vide la donna liberata
dal falso inganno et sozzo abominio,

⁶⁴ *Susanna*, vv. 268-283.

⁶⁵ As Tylus aptly notes, Daniel's cry suggests "that he is literally possessed by Susanna" (Tylus 2001b: 57).

⁶⁶ Daniel's words in the Vulgate (Dn, 13.46): "Mundus ego sum a sanguine hujus." ("I am clear from the blood of this woman").

⁶⁷ Glancy emphasizes that "while in the first half of the plot Susanna primarily figures as object of the elders' desire and action, in the latter half she barely figures at all," dropping "out of the plot as an actor" (2004: 291).

ringrazia il sommo Dio che l'ha scampata;
et similmente il popolo et i parenti
pare a ciascun che sie riguadagnata,⁶⁸

This patriarchal reinstatement can be read as the accomplishment of the "reintegration" anticipated in the first verses of the sacred narrative:

Così interviene a chi ha confidenza
in te con isperanza et ferma fede:
rintegrato è con gran magnificenza.⁶⁹

Yet, no magnificence is ever shown as far as Susanna is concerned. Only Daniel is represented, in the final part of (both the biblical account and) the sacred narrative, as having gained a great reputation among the people. Nonetheless, I would be cautious to read the passage as an instance of unreliable narration. Tornabuoni's Susanna is, indeed, "magnificently restored", if not to patriarchy, then definitely to herself. Namely, after having experienced the de-humanizing experience of attempted rape, one that Bal rightly defines as an attempt at "destroying the victim's subjectivity" (Bal 2001: 109),⁷⁰ the "ancilla" adopts a Virgin-like politics of the word by actively choosing to align herself with the will of God, and a Christ-like politics of the gaze that empowers her to stand for herself and undermine the logic of domination. The words she pronounces and the visual stance she adopts open up the path of self-reintegration, one that enables her to become whole again, to re-appropriate her right to live as an undivided *in-dividuum*.

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⁶⁸ *Susanna*, vv. 379-384.

⁶⁹ *Susanna*, vv. 13-15.

⁷⁰ See also Cheryl Exum: "the denial of subjectivity is an important factor in rape, where the victim is objectified and, indeed, the aim is to destroy her subjectivity" (1993: 173).

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PRELJUB I POGLED: LA ISTORIA DELLA CASTA SUSANNA LUCREZIJE TORNABUONI

Pripovjedni naglasak na štetnim posljedicama voajerističkog muškog pogleda jedna je od ključnih značajki djela *La istoria della casta Susanna* firentinske pjesnikinje Lucrezije Tornabuoni de' Medici, u kojemu se, u skladu s biblijskim predloškom, ženski lik Suzane prikazuje kao objekt muškoga skopofilskog impulsa. Prikaz biblijske junakinje u sakralnom spjevu Lucrezije Tornabuoni protkan je aluzijama na druge ženske likove, kao što su, na primjer, Danteova Matelda, Beatrice i Prozerpina (Čist. XXVIII, XXX, XXXI), Petrarkina Laura i Danaja (RVF 126, 23). Spomenutim tragovima drugih ženskih figura koje se prikazuju kao vizualni objekti, revizija kojoj Tornabuoni podvrgava Suzanu sugerira kako učinci muškoga pogleda mogu lako kliznuti iz veličanja žene u njezino ponižavanje, iz iskazivanja ljubavi u nasilje. Nakon evokacije podjednako štetnih posljedica ženske vizualnosti kada ona reproducira patrijarhalnu dinamiku (Meduza), sakralni se spjev obogaćuje, u svojem završnom dijelu, aluzijom na drugu priču koja također tematizira navodni ženski preljub (Iv 7, 53-8,11) te na taj način intertekstualno obdaruje protagonistkinju pogledom nalik na Kristov, pogledom koji uspješno nadilazi logiku dominacije.

Ključne riječi: Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Suzana, muški pogled, ženski pogled, patrijarhalna logika dominacije

Key words: Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Susanna, male gaze, female gaze, patriarchal logic of domination