

Pamela Turton-Turner

*Encoding the Maternal: Female benevolence in naked charity calendars*

This article deconstructs archetypal maternity which resonates in the recent spectacle of naked charity. It aims to demonstrate how the vision of a sexually tame, domesticated female figure evident in naked charity, is evocative of historical notions that link maternity and female benevolence. This occurs despite a bid by naked charity to be transgressive in a popular postfeminist medium, in which maternity is often reconceptualised as overtly sexual and glamorous. Naked charity here refers to consciousness-raising campaigns. It involves diverse groups of amateur models enacting extraordinary performances, while cast as nude pin-ups in calendars to aid good causes. This style of project typically represents a strategic joke devised to enhance public awareness about, and raise funds for, the cause. The theme is employed as an amusing shock tactic which, at times, results in unprecedented public curiosity, and, in some instances, handsome financial rewards for charity through extraordinary fund-raising success.<sup>1</sup> This study of naked charity takes a paradigmatic approach in a qualitative semiotic analysis of a typical sampling of calendar images. It further employs visual analogy between these images and a variety of historical precedents in which charity (*caritas*) is symbolised by implied sexually-neutral, iconic allegorical mother figures, such as Maria Lactans or Peace. The discussion is informed by the key concept of *charity* and its implications to idealised maternity in Western society. It further considers how this formula is juxtaposed with repression of female desire in visual culture in which a whore/madonna complex (first defined by Freud in 1910) emerges.<sup>2</sup> The concept of charity that resonates this dichotomy is characteristically symbolised in art through deployment of the female breasts as its referents. Textual distinctions are often made between the sacred and profane breasts whereby the metaphorical divine breast is profoundly linked to the image of the generous, self-sacrificing, and apparently sexually neutral, madonna figure.

In a recent innovation that resonates this distinction, albeit in comical form, naked charity arguably highlights an unusual paradox.<sup>3</sup> While it remains both in accord with Christian and secular traditions of altruistic female generosity, in contrary terms, by invoking the female nude as its protagonist, it is curiously antagonistic to it. On the one hand, the nudity in naked charity is utilised as a suggestive act devised to shock, and to attract extraordinary public

interest in good causes. On the other hand, while the impetus for naked charity is proposed as less than ‘sacrosanct’, paradoxically, through its use of the naked female, fetishistic nudity deems it to be acceptable in the public eye, particularly as it is done in the spirit of charity.<sup>4</sup> In part, to achieve this status, symbolism employed by naked charity privileges comically ‘tamed’, domesticated female figures who downplay erotic significance when aligned with the ‘caring’ body. Its theme further correlates with historical convention in art which invokes the bodies of iconic benevolent females. These will include for later discussion the secular figure of Charity (*Caritas*), Christianity’s *Maria Lactans*, and the Classical figure of Pero who features in a pagan theme of Roman Charity (*Carità Romana*).

While the focus of the article is on a form of maternal caring resonant in naked charity, it is recognised that a variety of male projects also form an integral part of the genre. In an earlier study in 2008, I analysed the semiotics of twenty-four naked charity calendars, including eleven male projects, produced over a ten-year period between 1997 and 2007 (Turton-Turner 2008). Male campaigns, such as *The Men of Batavia Rotary Club Calendar*<sup>5</sup>, 2005, USA, and *Men at War and Peace*<sup>6</sup>, 2007, Australia, were shown to predominantly invoke gender equivalent cultural resources to uphold idealised masculine norms, to validate the power of the (concealed) phallus.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, in its most successful<sup>8</sup> form, female projects invoked a logic of fetishised female identity that invoked notions of a muted, restrained female libido reinforced by the models’ judiciously concealed breasts and genitals. Male naked charity typically transmits messages that masculinity is intrinsically linked, for example, to heroism, public life or sporting prowess. And while men involved are not necessarily muscle-bound or provocative ‘he-man’ types, and they may wish to promote gay identity, they are often presented as either overly active or considered individuals. A recent example featuring hypersexually-charged male figures, depicting ultra-fit models, is the *Warwick Rowers Calendar* produced in Britain in 2014.<sup>9</sup> Men in nude fund-raisers of varying descriptions connote an admix of strenuous activities such as rowing, operating machinery, surfing, toting fire hoses, or playing sport; pursuits enhanced by shrewd ordination of activity-appropriate, suggestive accoutrements which is common to successful projects. Whereas in the female version, hidden genitalia, concealed breasts, and sexual suggestiveness characterise the double entente, in the male version, the hidden phallus is the site where the joke shifts meaning in the genre.

As well the domesticated model discussed here, naked charity is multi-faceted and includes campaigns that feature hypersexualised women. The domesticated style, as well as male-

oriented projects, can be compared to campaigns that feature glamorised women. There are many instances in which glamorous models appear, similarly to men, preoccupied with strenuous or ‘laddish’ activities while simultaneously projecting a strong sense of female sexual assertiveness. Recent examples include the *Warwick Womens Rowing Club Calendar*<sup>10</sup>, 2015, created in England to raise funds for cancer support; and *Game Birds*<sup>11</sup>, 2013, produced to raise funds for the Midlands Air Ambulance service in England. These examples resound neoliberal narratives to portray overtly sexualised women on view as apparently desiring subjects. But as Rosalind Gill (2007) has asserted in *Gender and the Media*, popularised neoliberal, postfeminist trends in mass media, set fashionable standards of pseudo-empowered female identity. A recent shift in representation of gender in which logic that predominantly aimed to portray women as passive (docile) objects on view as the object of the male gaze, has been inverted to redirect the emphasis of the look to one where women are depicted as active (self-directive) participants in the narrative. Portrayals of neoliberal subjectivity implies, amongst other things, that femininity comprises a package of essential sexual qualities, and that intimation of revamped codes of looking function where a female subject is on view as a free agent making her own (positive) choices as to how she is viewed. Gill argues that popular media is known to have a formidable influence on our ideas of female subjectivity when she writes: ‘Adverts and women’s magazines have been identified as key sites of this form of power in a society increasingly oriented towards the visual media’ (Ibid., p. 63). The concern is that despite popular postfeminist narratives, there is a need to evaluate and assess symbolism which reinstalls deterministic sexual divisions. It is actually female autonomy and individual identity which is under attack in the postfeminist era.

Angela McRobbie (2009) has argued that the terms ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ in this ethos are false and misleading.<sup>12</sup> They are absorbed by media and institutions to signal the emergence of an enlightened individual female subject whose discursive presence, on the one hand, provides implicit approval of feminism. On the other hand, it refers to symbolism which, in the end, serves as a restrictive mechanism in which the idea of ‘freedom’ upholds a liberal economic and the state: ‘[...] brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means. Freedom is revitalised and brought up-to-date with this *faux*-feminism’ (Ibid., p.1). A plethora of popular media such as glossy fashion spreads; advertising, cinema or billboards increasingly transmit powerful messages, projected at women and girls, normalising cultural expectations of female identity. The message is that females should perform as simultaneously overtly infantile and glamorous.

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**Pamela Turton-Turner, Encoding the Maternal: Female benevolence in naked charity calendars**

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In a study of ‘hen lit’ and celebrity advice, Jo Littler (2013) has highlighted the prevalence of a particularly infantile, high consuming female figure popularised as the ‘yummy mummy’.<sup>13</sup> The yummy mummy theme appears to challenge conventional encoding of asexual maternity, as this figure asserts a type of ‘hot’ sexuality assigned to the young mother. The yummy mummy restates motherhood in ultra feminine, and preferably ultra chic, terms as a ‘[...] hyperfeminine heterosexual form of materialism’ (Ibid., p. 238). This model provides an insight into a cultural shift from depictions of maternity as apparently sexually-neutral, to the mother as a subjective individual, albeit that she still functions in a ‘conservative fantasy’ in which individuals seem blinkered to the ramifications of broader societal forces, such as celebrity status and politics, which engender dependency on them. The yummy mummy is defined by Littler as ‘[...] sexually attractive and well groomed, and who knows the importance of spending time on herself’ (Ibid., p. 227). The stereotype is designed to encourage a positive inclination towards the sexually desirable ‘hot’ mother. ‘In other words, it involves the extension of a fashion and beauty complex to the pregnant and postpregnant body’ (Ibid., p. 230). Whereas the celebrated yummy mummy figure appears to represent a modern, confident, cool, and dynamic mode of maternity, at the same time, negative governing regimes underpin the discourse. Her impeccable grooming, her favouring of designer labels, as well as having a keen eye for physical fitness, serve to enmesh the yummy mummy within the constraints of a liberalised politic and economic standard. This stereotype is further governed by principles reinforcing a woman’s social positioning as privileged, affluent, and middle class, with individual aspirations towards upward social mobility. This compares favourably to the less privileged model, in which the mother is located in low economic circumstances, and is therefore ascribed a devalued social status. As Littler has demonstrated, the yummy mummy is infantilised in a realm of ‘retreatist fantasy’; sexualised as a desirable subject, while, at the same time, juxtaposed with the demonised ‘pram face’ or ‘chav’ abjected model of maternity (Ibid., p. 228).

In contrast to the confident sexuality ascribed to the yummy mummy, as stated earlier, the main objective of this paper is to elicit repetitive cultural codes evident in significant versions of naked charity which resonate a more homely form of maternity. The concern is that an excess of seemingly innocuous symbolism in popular media like naked charity, rather than merely being ‘innocent fun’ for good purposes, reiterates loaded messages devised to anchor women as society’s biologically determined, virtuous helpers.

Naked charity is a significant medium in which this occurs.<sup>14</sup> Simple mathematics indicates that if, for instance, a conservative estimate of a known six hundred projects in 2008 occurred over a ten year period, producing an average of one thousand copies each (the Rylstone branch of the WI in England in 2000, the inspiration for the film *Calendar Girls*, produced over eighty-eight thousand calendars alone), this then is the equivalent of six hundred thousand such artefacts in circulation with an indeterminate number of viewers (Turton-Turner 2008). Each object contains an average of fourteen images (some have eighteen or more). This causes one to further speculate that the narratives of the popular medium — by sheer weight of numbers alone — are not inconsequential or as innocent as they might first appear. Add to which naked charity leaves unchallenged a problematic assumption that it is perfectly acceptable to ridicule and debase the bodies of women in the name of charity.

Charity, in Judaeo/Christian tradition, in its most sublime manifestation as defined by St Paul in I Corinthians, is *love*. For St Paul, charity means sanctification of an individual through love of God, and linked to Christ's teachings. It derives from the Greek concept of *agape* which refers to helping others in need, but in its most intense form charity means love. In the *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas Aquinas gave precedence to charity as the model of virtue when he says, '[I]t would seem that faith and hope are never without charity. Because, since they are theological virtues, they seem to be more excellent than even infused moral virtues. But the infused moral virtues cannot be without charity'.<sup>15</sup>

Christian charity associated with women, however, often transmits an altered subtext that contradicts the profound statements of St. Paul and St. Thomas. The relationship between women and *acts* of charity reminds us of various implications within the early Christian Church in which charity was an occupation available to a woman with the sole purpose of raising her spiritual import. This was proposed to compensate for her acute association with the original sin of Eve, and the profundity of an 'evil' woman's affront against God. Thus, charity, in the form of *enacting* good deeds, was prescribed for women as an approved-of way to atone for this onerous burden. Reay Tannahill (1980) has asserted: 'What Christianity did offer [a woman] was spiritual equality [...] the Church was able to make public use of her in works of charity and evangelism, while keeping her (on the private level) firmly in her place.' (Ibid., p. 148). In *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* Maria Luddy (1995) has further argued that an incentive for benevolent females was to influence peasantry into compliance, to convince others of her own point of view in Christian and social terms (Ibid., p. 185). Philanthropic women of any denomination could bolster church congregations

through their charitable efforts. Christian charity for women signalled a conditional arrangement which constituted a ‘trade-off’ implicit in the act of giving: it suggested that both privilege and underprivilege oscillated between ideas of loss and gain on the part of both benefactor and beneficiary. But in terms of evangelism and respectability, in return for acts of kindness, the Church offered charitable women higher spiritual and moral status.

Female benevolence in this tradition has a formidable history. F. K. Prochaska (1980) studied women and benevolence, and reminds us that a woman’s ‘nature and mission’ was an oft used term in English writings of the era.<sup>16</sup> (Ironically, this status did allow women to be heard, in part, in public which later became a precursor to more positive developments in terms of equity in social and political life). Fundamental to social values linking women and philanthropy in the nineteenth-century, was the way in which women were assumed to possess inherent ‘feminine’ traits of generosity. Prochaska’s study reveals that in relief against the additional potential female sins of ‘idleness and pretension’, together with the spectre of Eve, that a woman’s natural traits were reeled off in writings as being predictably ‘[...] moral, modest, attentive, intuitive, humble, gentle, patient, sensitive, perceptive, compassionate, self-sacrificing, tactful, deductive, practical, religious, benevolent, instinctive and mild [...]’. (Ibid., p. 3). Such behaviour was encouraged and nurtured; particularly in young girls whose destiny it was to become domesticated homemakers, wives, and carers. Prochaska has further asserted: ‘The claims of women to moral authority and greater social recognition depended on public belief in their special and essential qualities’ (Ibid., p. 8). Therefore, a woman’s biologically determined characteristics were expected to facilitate an unproblematic transition into the secular world through the act of giving. These ideals were reinforced in art in which powerful imagery reminded women of their place in the social schema. Whereas boys were encouraged to pursue intellectual and outdoor, active worldly pursuits, girls were expected to find significant inspiration for benevolence in themes taken from the Scriptures. Biblical motifs were often used as exemplars of highly acceptable charitable women in the following terms:

Mary Magdalen at Calvary was the model of fidelity; Phoebe of Conchreae, ‘a servant of the church’ compassion incarnate; Dorcas of Joppe, who made clothes for the poor, synonymous with good works; Rebekah was the personification of industry and piety; Lydia an example of benevolence and self-sacrifice; Priscilla an active Christian; Mary a contemplative one; Esther a patriot; and Ruth a friend. (Prochaska, 1980, p. 16).

The motif of Dorcas of Joppe from the Acts of Apostles imparts inspiration for the modern-day Dorcas Society and provides an instance of a charitable tradition for women. A pictorial example of the Dorcas theme can be found in a nineteenth-century image called *A working party or Dorcas meeting* representing a typical Dorcas Society group. The Dorcas Society, founded in the Isle of Man in the nineteenth-century, was established in thanksgiving when the town of Douglas escaped a cholera epidemic in 1834. Henceforth the Dorcas Society (like Dorcas of Joppe) pledged to provide garments and other needlework for the poor. According to Prochaska, the name refers to a Christian archetype for women, namely, ‘Dorcas of Joppe, who made clothes for the poor, [and is] synonymous with good works [...]’ (Ibid., p. 16). The Dorcas Society, now an international organisation, remains concerned with ‘feminine’ occupations for girls and women including the domestic arts. Latterly it promotes more general charitable activities, but sewing and quilting remain typically predominant as the Dorcas philanthropic *raison d’être*. A comparison to be made in a moment between the ‘working party’ and an example from the Maine Dorcas Society calendar-cookbook in 2006, called the *Dorcas Dishes* (Fig. 1), provides an insight into the paradoxical nature of contemporary benevolence, and the implications to feminine convention.<sup>17</sup>



**Fig. 1.** *Dorcas Dishes*, fund-raising calendar/cookbook, 2005-6. (Available at: <http://www.buxtonnews.com/node/143>. Accessed 3 March, 2015.)

The ‘working party’ consists of eight figures, most of whom are engaged in stitching garments in a Victorian parlour. Six individuals, including a small child, comprise young females engrossed in needlework. The industrious young women purport how satisfaction for females is achieved through domestication; a disposition extended into community life

through activities associated with the Society. To emphasise their ‘feminine’ purposefulness, sewing baskets and fabric with various domestic accoutrement (scissors and cotton reels etc.), lie at hand. An air of concentration connotes productivity and dedication as each individual focuses in steadfast manner on the task, with respective focused gazes indicating a serious commitment applied to the cause. This type of gaze (or look) has been identified by semiotician Trevor Millum (1998) as ‘*Practical*: concentrating, engaged on the business in hand, mouth closed, eyes object-directed, sometimes a slight frown, hair often short or tied back’.<sup>18</sup> Two adult figures, a male and female, feature in the tableau. A soberly-dressed young man (a marital prospect?) stands with his back to the viewer, and, in a curious gesture holds forth a small box or basket towards two seated young women. By contrast, the austere female overseer favours the viewer. Illumination of her serious visage highlights a sedate, approving smile as the woman is clearly visible and central to the narrative. As she leans inward, a small girl holds aloft an infant’s garment. Bright light illuminates the item as the revered centrepiece of the allegory. The child’s work looks set before a glowing ‘altar’, perhaps indicative of a divine offering held upward as the girl seeks the woman’s approval. The woman in turn engages the girl with a solemn look of contemplation, to signal her motherly endorsement. Millum describes this type of look as: ‘*Maternal*: motherly, matronly, mature, wise, experienced and kind, carrying a sort of authority [...]’.

The Dorcas allegory depicts a contemplative and productive scene. It indicates how joy and satisfaction for females was achieved through needlework — especially that which aids others in need. Perhaps it is ironic, then, that the original intent of the Dorcas Society was dedicated to sewing, to provide clothes for the naked, if one considers the unclad models in a more recent depiction of Dorcas philanthropy. The *Dorcas Dishes* represents a nude pin-up calendar-cookbook (ca. 2005-6). While models in this display do not appear erotically-charged in *Playboy* or *Penthouse*-style, or in contemporary yummy mummy mode, their portrayal of naked charity seems well-distanced from the demure, dedicated girls stitching garments in a Victorian parlour. At the same time, the *Dorcas Dishes* exemplifies how this style of naked charity typically employs kindly, amicable female figures. The project portrays an eclectic group of ten unclad, amiable-looking women. Unlike in conventional erotica, the models represent diverse age groups and display various physical attributes. By comparison to the ‘working party’, models encircle an oval desk in typical meeting style with paperwork to hand, thus transmitting a more cerebral message. At the same time, models are judiciously arranged with their full nudity concealed by the desk. And while each woman engages the viewer



directly with her gaze, her visage is genial and non-flirtatious as there is little attempt to titillate the viewer. It is important to note, though, that emphasis placed on the breasts reinforces them as the most salient referents in the image. While their portrayal is not explicit or suggestive in provocative plumped-up displays, or with nipples revealed, this part of a woman's physiognomy is crucial to the narrative. Several devices are employed to fetishistically conceal (and emphasise) a model's cleavage. For example, crossed arms in *Venus pudica* fashion reiterate a classically coy, Aphroditic gesture devised, on the one hand, to signal modesty while simultaneously accentuating the sensuous form of the breasts. A further conventional gesture evident is where long, flowing hair conceals the model's body recalling the image of Lady Godiva, an earlier naked philanthropic female. A 'busty' model to the right foreground holds a quill pen as if to further signify the *Dorcas Dishes*' stated intent as her gesture hints at the historical significance of the Dorcas Society, which includes the more recent rationale underpinning the Hollis and Buxton project:

First, *Dorcas Dishes* is also a real cookbook. [...] The photographs and quotes from KDW [Kate Douglas Wiggin] books make reference to our current work in fundraising such as sewing, gardening for profit, annual quilt raffle, Peabody pew performance, annual Silver Tea, Dorcas Fair, Christmas Fair, monthly meetings [usually clothed ...] (*Dorcas Dishes*).

Emphasis placed on concealed breasts in the *Dorcas Dishes* reminds us that they are perceived as both the cultural site of maternal and erotic significance. Double encoding of breasts has a strong precedence in art through, for example, a multitude of portrayals of the figure of Charity. There are many works in which the concept of charity is signified by a young, fecund, bare-breasted female. Perhaps Salviati's *Charity* (oil on wood, 1543/5, Fig. 2) provides a defining instance of unconditional love represented in art associated with the sacred/profane breast distinction.



**Fig. 2.** Francesco Salviati, *Charity*, 1554-58. Oil on wood, 156 x 122 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Both the physical and figurative meanings ascribed to the Salviati associated with fertility and nourishment, are meant to communicate spiritual ideals of generosity profoundly linked to the bodies of women. Golda Balass (2006) has provided some historical background to the metaphor of the female breast as it relates to the quintessential image of Charity.<sup>19</sup> She has highlighted that the figure is represented — out of Faith, Hope and Charity, as St. Paul wrote about the Virtues — as the most important. This is an image in which ‘[...] the breast and breast-feeding acquired moral qualities, becoming an expression of charity’ (Ibid.). The secular breast of Charity is allied with the divine one of Mary whose milk connotes generosity and spiritual abundance. Simultaneously, the virtuous exposed breast is metaphorically placed well-distanced from its concealed, perturbing, and devalued erotic partner.

Salviati’s portrayal of Charity resonates the definitive meaning of ‘the milk of human kindness’ symbolised by feminine form. Its imagery further connotes a dialectic of erotic tension to recall an apparent maternal sacrifice of sensuality. In this strong, energetic and vibrant composition, in which earthy hues suggest Mother Earth or Nature, Salviati depicts Charity as a voluptuously pregnant, young woman. With the exception of her exposed sanctified right breast, Charity is fully clad. In promoting tension between the maternal and the erotic, as though they apply to two distinct embodiments, crimson and translucent *draperie mouillée* flow at the interstices of the forbidden and concealed flesh of Charity. Her garment romantically emphasising both sacred and profane female dispositions. Whereas Charity’s partly concealed pregnant belly indicates the inviolable maternal body so revered in sacred iconography, the subtle translucency of her flowing red chemise connotes passion. The

demarcation between earthly and heavenly states is especially emphasised through Salviati's inclusion of both the concealed and revealed breasts.

It is notable that a child-like figure, a putto evocative of Eros or Cupid, hovers at Charity's right shoulder. With this inclusion, Salviati has introduced an intra-diegetic dynamic crucial to the allegory to restrain Charity's sexuality.<sup>20</sup> Through Cupid's impish form, the artist transmits a dialogue of sexual tension that fluctuates between passion and piety; between the untouchable maternal body and sensual delights. One observes how the child's puckish gaze, wry grin and coquettish manner indicate sexual playfulness; gestures intensified as Cupid points towards the partly concealed fetishised left breast of Charity. This site of her anatomy is idealistically opposed to the revered exposed lactating right breast. At the same time, in a commanding and 'maternal' manner, Charity's unswerving directive look towards Cupid deflects the meaning of the cherub's gaze. In a stern, but gentle, 'motherly' reminder of unyielding resistance, Charity's gesture suggests admonishment of her smallest, most impish child. Her forthright gaze to engage Cupid wards off suggestions that erotic pleasure and worldly sensuality are indulged by the sacred mother. Salviati has abjected Charity's sexuality with this gesture, while, at the same time, he elevates her maternity to a high, rarefied status.

Another motif referring to the life-giving qualities of the breast is that of Maria Lactans. This concept alludes to symbolism in which sacred milk spurts forth from the Virgin's sanctified breast. A good example is *The Apparition of the Virgin to St. Bernard of Clairvaux* (oil on canvas, ca. 1660, Fig. 3) by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, in which the Virgin miraculously nourishes St. Bernard with her breast milk.



**Fig. 3.** Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Apparition of the Virgin to St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, c. 1660. Oil on canvas, 311 x 249 cm. Museo del Prado.

The gesture of overt lactation is symbolic of celestial guardianship, in which Mary is conceptualised as a divine intercessor between God and Man, whereby she purports to nourish the spirit of all humanity. The mother of God is portrayed in the vision of *Maria Lactans* as nourishing humankind in both physical and spiritual terms, thereby elevating her as a nursing mother to a lofty, untenable position for ordinary women to aspire to. Other works such as Rubens' *Maria Lactans* (oil on panel, 1614), or van Cleve's *Virgin and Child* (oil on wood, ca. 1525) typify how the divine breast provides a powerful visual metaphor for perfect womanhood through virtuous lactation.

The breast as a symbol for life-giving nourishment has been further developed by artists such as Rubens in *Allegory on the Blessings of Peace* (oil on canvas, 1629-30, Fig. 4), and Vigée-Lebrun in *Peace Bringing Back Abundance* (oil on canvas, ca. 1780, Fig. 5).



**Fig. 4.** Peter Paul Rubens, *Allegory on the Blessings of Peace*, 1629-30. Oil on canvas, 203.5 x 298 cm. National Gallery, London.



**Fig. 5.** Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun, *Peace Bringing Back Abundance*, c. 1780. Oil on canvas, 104 x 132 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

In complicating the *Maria Lactans* archetype, Rubens depicts Peace as an earth-mother type set amongst subdued satyrs, muses, and wild animals who live in perfect harmony under Peace's bountiful breast. The figure of Peace is central to a landscape in which her expelled breast milk nourishes all. In both Rubens' and Vigée-Lebrun's renditions of maternity, the divine life-giving properties of breast milk are further intertwined with idealistic serenity, cornucopia, and the fruits of the earth. Arguably, the images of *Maria Lactans* and Peace are extrapolated from the earlier pagan theme of Roman Charity discussed in a moment. Similarly

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to Christian and secular iconography its narratives denote quintessential altruistic lactation occurring by way of the impeccable female.

Perhaps it is ironic, then, that the symbolism of the generous *Maria Lactans* and the bounteous earth-mother in the form of Peace, ultimately provide *safe* models for the exposed breast in naked charity. While in most naked charity wholly exposed breasts are deemed unacceptable to be viewed in public, there are examples where the breasts are fully revealed, yet remain within the bounds of social acceptance. For instance, in 2007 the *Breast of Canada* (Fig. 6) produced to enhance breast cancer and awareness in Canada, invoked traditions in which the bodies of bare-breasted females were associated with fecundity and sacred nourishment.<sup>21</sup>



**Fig. 6.** January, *Breast of Canada*, nude fund-raising calendar, 2007. (Photo credit: Christian McLeod Reprinted with Permission from [www.breastofcanada.com](http://www.breastofcanada.com))

In part, the *Breast of Canada's* mission statement refers to '[...] cultivating a positive body image [stimulating] a higher quality of life'.<sup>22</sup> In a typical example from the project (January), a topless model is arranged with exposed breasts to suggest that she is an archetypal 'earth-mother' reminiscent of Rubens' mother-goddess, or Murillo's *Maria Lactans*. The spectacle of a maternal figure in the *Breast of Canada*, and spurting breast milk, is crucial to the storyline. However, while the model's breasts are fully exposed, unlike her historical predecessors, she does not express her own milk. Her breasts are substituted for the lactating

udder of a fecund she-goat. The model features in a pastoral scene, crouching on straw in a barnyard while flanked by the lactating animal. The goat's presence in the tableau figures at least on a par with the model's, and its udder strategically interrelates with the woman's breasts as she captures the 'hallowed' fluid in the 'sacred vessel' (a steel bucket).

Female generosity in the *Breast of Canada* is linked in this sense to peace, serenity, subdued beasts, and the earth's bounty. But in a contrary portrayal, the iconic vision of bounteous breast milk is displaced onto an abundant goat. While we can observe how the woman's fully exposed breast denotes a fetishistic connection to the abjected lactating woman, it is the substitute animal that reinforces and complicates the message. Displacement of virtuous maternity onto an goat's anatomy further suggests that beasts, the primitive, children, and mythological figures co-exist in art with munificent goddesses. This transference leads one to further speculate that a woman's *real* lactating breasts are deemed to be inappropriate when displayed in public — particularly within a philanthropic context. Breasts in *The Breast of Canada* are employed as stylistic objects to signal the 'good' healthy, and health-giving mother's body. The project is fashioned with strong maternal overtones in which women's bodies connote valuable nurturing objectivity. At the same time, while each model's breasts are fully revealed (as in the January example), most notably, their faces are fully *concealed*. The project to an image goes to inordinate lengths to ensure that a woman's face does *not* identify the owner of breasts. Thus, it can be argued, that in contrary terms to its mission statement the *Breast of Canada* implies (albeit unwittingly) that the female body is in fact perceived in *negative* terms. The message suggests that fully exposed lactating breasts are indeed an unacceptable spectacle in the public arena. In this sense, breasts are more like props or 'corporate logos' displayed on an array of de-identified female bodies, thereby (despite its good intent) neutralising the profundity of the project's quest.

In the classical rendition of Roman Charity secular art provides another example of transcendental lactation. There are many depictions of Roman Charity in art including famous works by Rubens and Zoffany. Caravaggio's *The Seven Works of Mercy* (oil on canvas, 1607) includes Roman Charity as crucial to its message. Van Baburen's painting of *Roman Charity, Cimon and Peres* (ca. 1623, (Fig. 7) provides a defining example.



**Fig. 7.** Dirck Van Baburen, *Roman Charity, Cimon and Peres*, 1623. Oil on canvas, 127 x 151 cm.  
York City Art Gallery.

In this tableau the artist depicts a young woman nourishing a feeble old man with her breast milk. The theme of Roman Charity symbolises an act of altruistic lactation; one of pure filial piety presupposed to encompass feminine devotion of the daughter, usually to the father.<sup>23</sup> It is an allegory in which a young woman, originally in the form of Pero of Classical mythology, offers her full breast to save her dying father Cimon, formerly a powerful Greek statesman. According to Robert Roseblum, a monument called the ‘Temple of Filial Affection was erected on the prison site’ to honour Pero as an exemplar of the dedicated, pious, and generous woman (Ibid., p. 47). As a heroine, Pero is celebrated for engaging in a most profound act of righteous generosity. At the same time, it is evident that the artist articulates a gesture which exudes intense sensual vibrations. While sexual undertones are detected in Roman Charity, the signifiers dilute female sexual significance.

For instance, the original scene is set in a dark, gloomy, forbidding dungeon. Cimon is imagined as an elderly, withered man near death. Pathos and piety are intensified as Cimon’s hands are bound behind his back: he is in chains thus rendering him helpless like a child. Cimon is reduced to the role of dependent ‘infant’, and, as such, no longer represents a ‘manly’ threat as he is at the mercy of nature symbolised by Pero. The dedicated, loving daughter, with plump breasts and silky white skin emphasised by the artist, suckles Cimon to deliver to him the sacred neo-natal bodily fluids as his life-giving sustenance. With the breast



apparently rendered inviolable, Roman Charity appears devoid of erotic significance which should, therefore, exclude incest. In its attempt to mask sexual import, Roman Charity has deployed the lactating breast as its veil. Although its basic theme appears constant, there are subtle variations in gestures which communicate erotic significance in diverse ways whereby sensual intensity oscillates between tragedy and carnality. For example, Balass has proposed that '[...] works such as Boaz Tal's, portraying a woman suckling an adult male, are necessarily charged with sexual associations, evoking complex, ambivalent responses in the viewer' (Ibid., p. 2). Clearly Pero's breast milk is inextricably linked to sexuality and childbirth, yet this notion is subsumed under philanthropic intent of filial piety to ardently deny any sensual overtones. And yet the 'threat' of eroticism lurks in a loaded message in which role reversal is meant to refuse the sexual. Pero is young, vital, healthy, strong, and courageous: she is capable of supporting life or denying it — man-like. She is assigned with assertive, powerful traits usually associated with masculinity. By contrast, the aged and sickly Cimon is powerless at Pero's mercy; feminised and dependent like a woman or child would be depicted. This seems ironic if one considers that the symbolism of Roman Charity was deployed to exemplify rarefied womanly virtues.

I would venture that the dialectic of Roman Charity is subtly evident in naked charity. In *Yummy Mummies Bear All*, a calendar produced by mothers for the Whitsunday Kindergarten school building fund in Australia in 2005-6, September's image is called *Yummy Mummies know what's good for you*.<sup>24</sup> Through carnivalesque status inversion of the Aphroditic classic model, according to this analysis, the project tenders yet another variation on the theme of the sacred/profane breast distinction. The division is symbolised by an apple which conceals the naked model's left breast, while an infant's drink bottle hides the right. Interplay between signifiers posits an infantilised yummy mummy, aligning the childified female with carnality and maternal oral significance. Displacement of the abjected breast occurs by way of the geometric form of the 'teat' of a child's drink bottle; an artefact connoting the site of the 'sacred' nipple. Whereas the woman's 'nourishing' right breast signifies her maternal status, her left breast concealed by an apple signals naughty sexuality associated with Eve.

Sustenance, together with the activity of 'feeding' an oversized teddy bear, provides further stimulus to remind us of the woman's maternity. But as mentioned earlier, the model is infantilised — like a kindergarten child, as a 'daughter'. Therefore it is difficult, even as comedy, not to imagine more sinister, paedophilic and incestuous tendencies informing an erotic narrative, in which an 'infant' orally sustains an 'adult male'. The male's presence made

evident through the effigy of a subdued ‘grizzly bear’, which diverts (not eliminates) the threat of overt eroticism via the joke. The model’s gesture in holding food to the bear’s mouth suggests, at first glance, that she feeds the child in a pre-school setting, but within the agenda of a nude pin-up calendar the message is that she feeds a ‘man’. The orality of the breasts is transferred to the food, and, in this instance, the bear substitutes for the absent male. The ‘man’, reminiscent of Cimon, is prescribed as a muted, emasculated (feminised) male rendered subdued and helpless under the woman’s aegis. While the bear substitutes for an infantilised male, the woman, with her direct, provocative gaze, is clearly in charge — she ‘knows what’s good for you [...]’ both as mother and ‘temptress’.

The breast as metaphor places great significance upon the ‘womanly’ virtues of philanthropic sustenance. In the history of visual culture these qualities are profoundly associated with the bodies of women by way of fantasised maternity which seriously downplays female eroticism. This is especially evident when the emphasis is placed on the approved-of lactating breast, while simultaneously damping down ideas of female sensuality as signalled by the profane breast. The profane breast is hidden as the locus of immorality and sin, whereas the sacred breast is revealed and elevated to a higher, transcendental realm as the site of love and generosity. The giving breast indicates the site of an altruistic state for women as ascribed through inspirational narratives; those that assume perfect womanhood means devotion and dedication to others. While these paradigms infer diverse cultural values, it has been argued that ‘perfected’ womanhood indicated by the benevolent mother figure, is not devoid of sensuality although powerful attempts are made to subsume it.

This analysis has attempted to highlight how contemporary naked charity continues and develops cultural themes to resonate iconic secular and religious charitable standards for women. In a twist of convention, however, coy nudity in naked charity is juxtaposed with female benevolence. And although it signals female sexuality within the context of humorous pin-up calendars, female desire and individuality is thwarted in a constrictive maternal matrix. In a reconfiguration of conventional symbolism, naked charity presents both nudity *and* charity functioning within the bounds of social acceptance. At the same time, naked charity is located within a popular neoliberal context. While it often presents non-idealised amateur models as its protagonists, they perform a style of exhibitionistic self-expression to imply a kind of liberation. This aesthetic functions in tandem with the gestures of more glamorous, sexually assertive maternity projected, for example, by the yummy mummy figure evident in much popular media. In either instance, though, popular postfeminist restyling of femininity

upholds conventions of female identity through a form of limited ‘freedom’. And while naked charity employs a strategy in which a woman assumes the identity of a liberated woman, it presupposes that her empowerment is located in her bold actions. Simultaneously, the nudity in naked charity is approved of by way of its presentation of subdued, domesticated figures fetishised through the maternal stereotype. Thus, by taking up the cause, cultural encoding evident in the narratives do not threaten the social status quo which devalues holistic female identity. If anything it enhances it. Despite good intentions, naked charity has inadvertently employed a double-edged sword, in the sense that juxtaposing caring with coy, comical nudity simply indicates an unusual dimension to gender tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2000 the Rylstone branch of the Women’s Institute in England provided a very early (though not the first) example of a naked charity calendar. It is, however, perhaps the most famous project as it is both the inspiration and subject matter for the film *Calendar Girls*. It is also likely to be the most financially successful having raised in excess of £1,000,000. Not all naked charity is this fruitful.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘A Special Type of Choice of Object made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I)’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XI: Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, (1910), pp. 163-176.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Turton-Turner, ‘The Role of Ridicule in Naked Charity Calendars’, in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, (21) 2007, 419-432. This analysis of the role of the comic in naked charity utilised Umberto Eco’s (1984) semiological theory of *humour*, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) theory of *carnival*, to explore how naked charity, although transgressive within the neo-classic context of a pin-up calendar, reinforces, rather than subverts, patriarchal logic through its use of clichés that send up the bodies of women in strategic role reversals.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Turton-Turner, ‘The Code and the Message of Naked Charity Calendars’, (doctoral thesis, University of Tasmania, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> *Men of Batavia Rotary Club Calendar* 2005. <<http://www.bataviarotarycalendar.com/>> [accessed 29 April, 2005].

<sup>6</sup> *Men at War and Peace Calendar* in Wilson, Neil 7 Aug. 2006, ‘Privates on parade fishing for a lure’, in the *Herald-Sun* newspaper, p. 3. This project featured Australian ex-military men from the Vietnam war. The calendar was produced to raise money for Vietnam veterans’ groups, and the Vietnam War Museum at San Remo, Victoria.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase *phallus* is employed in Lacan’s (1955) terms. It represents paternal power, and refers to the master signifier. Lacan’s focus is on symbolic-cultural meanings embedded in language, whereby the concept of the *symbolic order* is accounted for through linguistic operations, in which identity and one’s location in the symbolic order is established in subjective terms as being powerful, or not, as in having or *not* having the *phallus*. Phallic power refers to civic power and is associated with cultural tools, including weapons which, in reality, both men and women can possess.

<sup>8</sup> By ‘success’ I mean naked charity which is sanctioned as ethically acceptable according to prevailing codes of public decency, rather than in monetary terms. There have been ‘unsuccessful’ versions as well, those that portray women as being more personally confident through full exposure of their bodies to reveal pubes and/or nipples, but where this exposure is deemed as obscene and an affront to public morality. Two examples are the

*Matildas* soccer fund-raiser in Australia in 2000, and *Spin and Bare It*, a calendar produced by the East Grinstead Spinners and Weavers Guild in 2004 in England.

<sup>9</sup> *Warwick Rowers Calendar* 2014. <<http://www.warwickrowers.org/>> [accessed 25 January, 2015].

<sup>10</sup> *Warwick Rowers - Women's Naked Rowing Calendar* 2015. <<http://warwickrowing.org/onlinepurchasing.php?Doc=nakedcalendar>> [accessed 25 January, 2015]

<sup>11</sup> *Game Birds Calendar* 2013. <<http://www.gamebirdscalendar.co.uk/>> [accessed 26 January, 2015]. Also: <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2208317/Country-girls-strip-naked-charity-calendar-honour-male-friend-died-car-crash.html>> [accessed 25 January, 2015]

<sup>12</sup> Angela McRobbie. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender Culture and Social Change*. (London: Sage Publications, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> Jo Littler, J. 'The Rise of the "Yummy Mummy": Popular Conservatism and the Neoliberal Maternal in Contemporary British Culture'. In: *Communication, Culture & Critique* (6) 2013, pp. 227–243 (International Communication Association). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>14</sup> At least 650 nude fund-raising calendars produced between 1996 and 2008 were catalogued by Daniel Taylor (2007), but the list is not exhaustive. Projects were divided into several categories: *men, women, co-ed, undefined*. At the time of writing, naked charity remains as a popular fund-raising medium with an undertermined number of projects.

<sup>15</sup> Anton C. Pegis, (ed. and annotated, with an introduction by), 'The Summa Theologica', in *Basic Writing of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, (2) (New York: Random House, 1945).

<sup>16</sup> F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>17</sup> *Dorcas Dishes* 18-month calendar (Maine, USA: Dorcas Society of Hollis & Buxton, 2005-6). Image available at <<http://www.dorcassocietymaine.org/calendar.html>> [accessed 8 January, 2007]. This image was also used to promote the 2009 calendar available at the same site [accessed 7 May, 2014].

<sup>18</sup> Trevor Millum, in Daniel Chandler, 'Notes on "The Gaze"' (1998). <<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/gaze/gaze11.html>> [accessed 7 May, 2014].

<sup>19</sup> Golda Balass, *The Female Breast as a Source of Charity: Artistic Depictions of Caritas Romana*. (Dec. 2006) <<http://www.hit.ac.il/staff/boazT/balaseseng.htm>> [accessed 7 May, 2014].

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Chandler, 'Notes on "The Gaze"' <<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/documents/gaze.html>> [accessed 14 August, 2002]. According to Chandler, *intra-diegetic* refers to the direct engagement between figures in a picture. He writes that '[...] the intra-diegetic gaze: [is] a gaze of one depicted person at another (or at an animal or an object) within the world of the text [...].'

<sup>21</sup> *Breast of Canada*, original calendar (Canada: Sue Richards in partnership with the Canadian Breast Cancer Network, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Rosenblum, 'Caritas Romana after 1760: Some Romantic Lactations', in *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art 1730-1970*, ed. Thomas B Hess and Linda Nochlin (New York: Newsweek Inc., 1972, pp. 43-63). Rosenblum (p. 49) notes that Perrin in 1791, and Garner in 1801, exhibited versions of Roman Charity at the Salon, where the mother represented the parent. The father/daughter theme is the most common version to which I am referring.

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