**Forbidden Fruit:**
An interpretation of Giovanni Segantini's 'Le cattive madri'.

Liesbeth Grotenhuis.

When I walked through the Österreichische Galerie im Belvedère in Vienna where LE CATTIVE MADRI (The evil Mothers) (fig.1) by Italian Giovanni Segantini (1858-99) hung, I overheard a Dutch lady comment that the painting seemed to be unfinished: the left-hand side wasn't filled in.[1] This suggestion is not simply a case of 'Dutch frugality'; in reproductions, the left-hand side of the work is also often omitted, leaving the woman in the tree placed conventionality at the centre of the picture plane.[2] This amputation was of course hardly the painter's intention; the 'improvement' is clearly triggered by the uneasiness of the forbidding void conjured up by the barren snow-covered mountain landscape. This lacuna is just one of the paradoxes that make LE CATTIVE MADRI so disturbing. Before offering an interpretation of the work I will first discuss a number of extant theories. After describing the painting, I compare the *femme fatale*, with her a luxuriant tresses, to Segantini's women and the prominent female figure, imprisoned in the tree in the frozen wastes. Finally, I will consider the infant heads in relation to the tree and the woman.

[1] Segantini also gave this piece the title LE LUSSURIOSE, IL NIRVANA DELLE LUSSORIOSE or LE INFANTIFICDE. In 1896-97 the artist produced a smaller (40 x 70 cm) but almost identical work in pastel with the same title. The most striking difference is the placement of two floating female figures behind the tree.
[2] In Jean Cassou, THE CONCISE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SYMBOLISM, London 1984, p. 135. The author consistently refers to THE BAD MOTHER rather than mothers.

**WHAT IS EVIL**
Practically from its first appearance, LE CATTIVE MADRI was subject to interpretation. It was widely considered to have been inspired by the poem NIRVANA, or PANDJAVALLI, after a Buddhist saga.[3] Poet and friend of Segantini, Luigi Illica (1857-1919), insisted that he had translated the poem from the Sanskrit. LE CATTIVE MADRI is not the only work that references the poem. With the exception of the latter, the authors cited in the lecture assume this to be the case. Especially the verse reflecting on the punishment of women who reject motherhood: after their death they are condemned to dwell in abandoned glacial landscapes. If the infant finally forgave his mother, they would they dwell together in Nirvana.
In 1902, soon after its purchase by the Viennese government, Franz Servases assumed that Segantini had combined both the cause (the newborn head at the mother's breast) and effect (castigation in the frozen wastes) in a single image. The woman's pose was considered to express pain 'in the manner of a suicide'.[4]
Irma Noseda and Bernhard Wiebel interpreted the scantily clad woman as twisting her body away from the child and, with this unnatural pose, repudiating her infant child. With this richly-deserved punishment, moralises Segantini, harmony returns to the world. According to the authors, Segantini was a misogynist who believed that a woman's role was motherhood, sexual pleasures forbidden them. His work was better suppressed.[5]
Annie-Paule Quinsac saw in the torqued female body the second verse of the poem: the mother ecstatic at being reunited with her child.[6]
Only Daniele Hammer-Tugendhat denies the connection with the poem: the moralising title refers to the content, she asserts. The captive woman is, paradoxically, floating and as she does so, neither embraces the infant nor repulses it. Above all, she is an erotic-orgiastic woman in whom Segantini conjoins the biological conflict between motherhood/sexuality, freedom/captivity. The natural function of the woman as mother serves as the moral.[7]

**TREE WOMAN**
A leafless beech tree struggles skyward in a desolate landscape. A woman is entangled in its branches. In the distance to her right, floats a line of women – barely noticeable because their purple-hued gowns are one with the dark mountain tops.
The tree in the foreground is the most prominent – even more so with the unnaturally arched female torso. Not dressed for the bitter weather, the woman's

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[3] In: Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, 'ZUR AMBIVALENZ VON THEMATIEK UND DARSTELLUNGSWEISE AM BEISPIEL VON SEGANTINI'S "DIE BÖSEN MÜTTER"', KRITISCHE BERICHTE 13 no.3 (1985),p. 16; Deborah Meijers, DE VROUW EEN GODIN, DE KUNST EEN GOD: OVER VROUWENSTUDIES EN HET SYMBOLISTIES [SIC] VROUWBEELD Amsterdam 1980,p. 57; Franzero Arcangeli and Maria Gozzoli, L'OPERA COMPLETA DI SEGANTINI Milaan 1973,pp. 114, 117; Patrick Bade, FEMME FATALE: IMAGES OF EVIL AND FASCINATING WOMEN London 1979,p. 19. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (184-1900) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) brought the poem to wide public attention in the West.
[4] Franz Servaes, GIOVANNI SEGANTINI, SEIN LEBEN UND SEIN WERK 1902, 139; mentioned in Hammer-Tugendhat, op.cit.3,p. 16-17.
[5] Irma Noseda and Bernhard Wiebel, SEGANTINI, EIN VERLORENES PARADIES? Zurich 1976-77, 75, 100; referred to in Hammer-Tugendhat, op.cit.3,p. 17.
[6] Annie-Paule Quinsac in an catalouge on the oeuvre of Segantini, from 1982; referred to in Hammer-Tugendhat, op.cit.3,p. 17. Meijers, op.cit.3,pp. 5, 71, shares this view
[7] Hammer-Tugendhat, op.cit.3.

thin and somewhat transparent robe does not fully conceal her round belly, and leaves her breasts exposed. To her right, an infant's head is a rhythmic repetition of her breast.
The woman's head – turned to us, bent over backwards – presents closed eyes and parted lips. Her hair and dress are entangled in the tree's branches, and of an almost identical colour. But precisely how she is bound to the tree is unclear: her feet do not seem to touch the trunk and her right hand does not clasp the branch above her. It is the tree that has captured the woman, binding her to it by her hair.
Interestingly, the two main branches in the tree create a curve that mimics the woman's body. More accurately, even, it mirrors her contours as though the tree has devoured her. Projecting from the middle of her swollen belly, this phantom woman has a branch that seems to double as umbilical cord. Looking more closely at the baby's head, we now see that it has no body: it is an offshoot of the tree. Analogue to the umbilical cord of the 'contour woman' the twig with infant head can be read as an umbilicus, also explaining the unnatural spiral in which the 'branch' has curled.
The icy wastes are walled in by a phalanx of mountains: the green-yellow peaks on the right are bathed in the low rays of the setting sun. To the left, the prominent purple-blue mountain chain is deep in shadow. And it is from here that a line of female figures is proceeding, clad in the same robes as the tree woman, their hair similarly unbound. The first woman has found the clutches of a tree, and is caught in the same arched position, also accompanied by infants' heads. One issues from a branch, but a stem is also working its way out from beneath her skirt, culminating in a human face. The tiny branches shooting out around it give the creature the appearance of a scorpion. The position of the branch underlines the suggestion of a cord between embryo and placenta. The women are clearly *femmes fatales*.

## The femme fatale

The *femme fatale* has a number of specific characteristics: subtle draperies erotically enhance rather than cover the front of the torso. Victorian morality, prevalent in the fin-de-siècle, repressed open sexuality, specifically in an era when venereal diseases – and syphilis in particular – literally spelled death. Artists portrayed suppressed sexuality as a demon: seductive yet deadly. The fatal woman came to be depicted in poses that expressed power and control; frontally, with the head slightly lowered, she casts the viewer a challenging glance through half-closed eyes. Not only the pose Segantini presents his women in, but their bare breasts, imply lechery. Hammer-Tugendhat interprets the torso torqued towards us as the woman offering the viewer her left breast.[8] Ironically, on the woman's other side the child suckles on the milk-distended breast. The woman turns from the child, further repelling contact with her outstretched right hand, her closed eyes and facial expression warding off further intimacy. We are now directly involved in the woman's choice: she turns to us.

[8] Hammer-Tugendhat, op.cit.3, p. 20.

fig.2 Henry Füsseli (1741-1825), Die Nachtmahr, 1781, oil on canvas, 101 x 127 cm. The Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit

Arced backwards, the woman's upper body makes an unnatural sixty-degree turn. The pose is reminiscent of the sleeping woman in Fuseli's (1741-1825) THE NIGHTMARE (1781)(fig.2). When this woman makes a quarter turn to the left, the similarity is striking, particularly the upper body, shoulders and angling of the head with spreading hair. The facial expressions also correspond: closed eyes and parted lips. Segantini has arranged the arms differently, a logical consequence of placing the woman in the tree. Virginia Mae Allen points out that Fuseli drew on images from classical antiquity for his subject: maenads, furious women who were Dionysus' ecstatic dancers.[9] This inspiration seems even more apt for Segantini's wicked mothers given that, in addition to the pose, the pleated chitons strongly echo the garments of classical Greece. The woman in the tree has certainly been arranged in such a position, but it is the foremost woman in the line who recalls an ecstatic bacchantes, reinforced by her closed eyes and half-open mouth. The women of Greek mythology stand for tantalising eroticism and unbounded sensuality.

**ASPHYXIATING HAIR**

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[9] Virginia Mae Allen, THE FEMME FATALE: A STUDY OF THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT IN MIDNINETEENTH CENTURY POETRY AND PAINTING Boston (diss.) 1979, p. 59.

But the most telling outward indication of woman's fatal nature was her long hair: she is almost always pictured with long wild tresses that literally entrap and asphyxiate her victim, the man. Munch portrays himself as Salome's prey. The hair of Segantini's woman seems fitting of a femme fatale.
Hair is a curious thing: it is part of the human body but can be manipulated (and removed) like a piece of clothing. Berg refers to this phenomenon in his psychoanalytical study THE UNCONSCIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF HAIR.[10] Based on dreams, folklore and anthropological study, the author concludes that the hair of the head serves as a metaphor for pubic hair and, by extension, the genitals. Hair is connected to sexual activity (hormones), which is witnessed by the development of hair in the rest of the body during sexual maturation. Men usually wear their hair short, while monks shave it off (read: castration). Women supposedly compensate for their lack of phallus by growing their hair long, asserts the psychoanalyst. It serves as a rival to the phallus, particularly hair that stands upright or curls; remember the snaky locks of the gorgon. Portraits indeed show that the hair fashions of the fin-de-siècle dictated piling the hair on top of the head, and hiding it beneath a small, coquettish piece of millinery, likewise illustrating the rigid sexual mores of the day. But not the *femme fatale*; her hair is unbound, standing for her sexual role and threatening nature.

Hair colour also possesses symbolic meaning: where blonde stands for innocence and later stupidity, smart women are brunettes at the very least. Berg compares the dark pigmentation of the skin of the sexual organs to the sexual energy of brunette women. The author describes black hair as a symbol of the unconscious. But the favourite hair colour by a long chalk is red. Berg initially refers to it as meaning 'barminess' before going on to attribute its fame in the fin-de-siècle as follows: "*The popular interest in red hair is revealed by the dream associations of analysands to be due to the closer resemblance of a head-top of this colour to the glans [sic], penis or vulva [...] hair is a genital symbol.*" [11] The darker pigmentation and colour of the genitals are ideally expressed by red hair.

The abovementioned moreover clarifies the point that the longer the hair, the greater its sexual potency, especially worn loose. The red hair of Segantini's woman is straight rather than curly. Tangled in the tree, it stands out in a corona about her head. Dishevelled hair means lack of control: Bergs equates it with hair in places it doesn't belong: the face and underarms. The hair is the woman herself; she is only in control of herself when her hair is 'tamed'. And the wicked mother is bound to the tree by her own long tresses.

## FITTING PUNISHMENT

Both hair and pose give the evil mother the guise of a *femme fatale.* But the infant suckling her breast clearly implies she is not one of them: the mother is the antithesis of the whore. Moreover, captured by the tree, she is no threat to the

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[10] Charles Berg, THE UNCONSIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF HAIR 1951, p. 100; Berg defines symbols as: "Substitutionals of sexual objects and aims by apparently non-sexual ones. On analysis the latter are discovered to stand for, or to symbolize the former."
[11] Berg, op.cit.10,p. 68.

(male) viewer. Her pose may seem ecstatic but she has no freedom of movement to actually perform her dance. And her hair – her most powerful feminine weapon – is ineffectual. Women who reject woman's most ancient function – motherhood – are thus castigated by Segantini following the thoughts expressed in the poem PANDJAVALLI. And his own experience, since his mother died at his early age of seven years.

fig.3. Giovanni Segantini (1858-99), L'angelo della vita (The angel of life), 1894, oil on canvas, 276 x 212 cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan

That Segantini depicts an indubitable punishment is even clearer in the pendant work THE ANGEL OF LIFE (fig.3). Again, we see a woman with child in a tree, but with an entirely different character. Neatly placed in the centre of the picture plane, a gnarled beech rises up against a green meadow, a mountain lake in the background. The branches are a comfortable throne for the blonde woman who cradles a large pink infant (in its physical entirety). In IL FRUTTO DELL'AMORE the ethereal, hovering woman becomes a salt-of-the-earth apple-cheeked peasant wife with a rosy, laughing child.

In fin-de-siècle painting, women are frequently depicted seated in trees. As a fertility symbol, the tree belongs to the feminine realm, inhabited by tree nymphs and dryads. The shape itself represents the male principle; Dijkstra interprets women's desire to 'jump' into trees as the desire to be impregnated.[12] But in Segantini's LE CATTIVE MADRI, the tree is sinister, an instrument of torture. And there are further contradictions with THE ANGEL OF LIFE.

**STEELY STERILITY**

In the fin-de-siècle, woman was commonly linked to nature, for instance as mother earth. Enveloped by flowers or fruits, she nurtures infants. Painters gradually began creating series representing parts of the day, months or seasons. Coronets of seasonal flowers crown female allegories, with winter represented in all its treachery. Segantini similarly uses nature to invest a number of works with particular meaning. LE CATTIVE MADRI is possibly situated above the tree line. Precisely what does this chilly landscape denote?

Virginia Mea Allen links sterility with the *femme fatale.*[13] And winter is of course the season traditionally associated with infertility. Segantini believed that the woman who rejects her duty of motherhood is sinful, and has her punished by the unrelenting, wintry face of nature. There is no greenery growing around a mountain glacier. With a child languishing at her breast, the woman is suspended in a tree which, conventionally a symbol of fertility is barren here.

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[12] Bram Dijkstra, IDOLS OF PERVERSITY: FANTASIES OF FEMININE EVIL IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE CULTURE San Diego 1986, p. 96.

[13] Allen, op.cit.9, pp. 11, 122. Certainly in a Roman Catholic country like Italy, sterility was considered a sin.

fig.4 Giovanni Segantini (1858-99), La vanita, 1897, oil on canvas, 78 x 125,5 cm. Private collection, Milan

Segantini's use of water and springs also references fecundity. In L'ANGELO DELLA VITA a pool of water – a source of life – is visible in the grassy meadow behind the blonde woman. As she bends towards the water at her feet, the naked woman in LA VANITA holds up her hair, the better to examine her reflection. The monster recumbent on its back in the water clearly signals the evil nature of her narcissism. The woman, with light auburn hair, abandons herself to lust in a place where the bad mothers have already sinned. Misused in this way, the pool freezes over and is useless.

That the painting offers not the slightest redemption is apparent from the woman's slightly defensive attitude. Nothing – no burgeoning snowdrop, no ray of sun – hints at a reversal of the present situation. The glacier is bathed in shadow; in the distance, light illumines green meadows. The frozen plain is lifeless, even in the summer.

**A BAD APPLE NEVER FALLS FAR FROM THE TREE**

Unearthly creatures (clearly no ordinary women[14]) hover half-naked over glacial mountainsides, as is the habit of mountain creatures. The floating women clad in gossamer-thin robes are again reminiscent of ancient Greek nymphs, in this case Oreads or mountain nymphs.

Interestingly, the authors join in attributing a certain unearthliness to the mothers, while considering the infants decidedly real. At most, the babies are referred to as

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[14] Dijkstra, op.cit.13,p. 87. Floating in midair, the woman form a decorative undulating visual device.

'unborn'.[15] However, the children's blue-tinged faces and closed eyes strongly suggest that the infants are not alive. Hammer-Tugendhat figuratively dubs the child a vampire at the breast. Given Segantini's darling babies we should, in my opinion, read this literally. What is more, positioned at the tip of the contorted twig, the head of the dead suckling more closely resembles a maggot-like sphinx. While authors may refer to the twig as an umbilicus, the child's communion with the tree must signify more. The baby's head sprouts from the tree, and is thus the fruit of it. Segantini clarifies this in a letter, commenting "A rotten tree cannot bear healthy fruit, but this is the fault of the tree, not the fruit. How can it be otherwise?"[16] Ergo: the infant cannot be blamed for degenerating into a phantasmagoria. Blame rests with the tree: forbidden fruit can only bring forth a tree of evil. And this produces only rotten fruit: a tree is known by its fruit.

The tree is a direct product of the mother, demonstrates Segantini. Not one but two babies' heads keep company with the first woman in the row. One of them is even positioned in the tree, like a fruit. The other juts from underneath her skirts, protruding from an umbilicus/branch. But is it a branch? This head is different to the two others, both in shape and placement. Seeming to crawl over the earth we can read it as a root. A tree similar to the one in the foreground, is struggling to implant itself in the ground, and grow.

**AN INTERPRETATION**

What is Segantini's point? The women reference Greek antiquity in their attitudes, their ecstatic (facial) expression an echo of dancing maenads. Their habit of hovering over mountain groves is reminiscent of mountain nymphs, while their arrangement in the tree evokes associations with dryads. Every one of these mythical women stands for seduction and lust which, at first sight, also seems applicable to Segantini's women. Despite their outward appearance they are not, however, *femmes fatales*. The prominent woman in the foreground is not free, but is the captive of the gnarled tree, fettered by her hair, the sexual emblem *sans pareil* of the painted ladies of the fin-de-siècle.

This paradox engendered numerous interpretations based on the poem PANDJAVALLI. All the authors sidestep the question of what exactly has happened to the child. Is it alive – and if so, why the corpse-like face and closed eyes? Yet more disconcerting is the tree branch from which the child's head appears to grow. The infant is not lifeless; it is a phantom, a worm-like creature. That the tree brings forth such fruit is a consequence of the rotten tree – which was brought forth by the woman herself. She froze her amniotic fluid and, in her ensnarement in the tree, her mien and her hair – even while undergoing castigation – betray the cause: her lasciviousness. By surrendering to lust, she was indifferent to her task of mother. The punishment is a fitting expression of her behaviour: twisting her body to confront the viewer with her voluptuous flesh while clamped to the other side of her is that which she denies: the child.

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[15] Bade, op.cit.3, p. 19.

[16] Segantini in a letter to Italian writer Neera. Translated by and quoted in Meijers, op.cit.3, p. 56.

I believe that Segantini's message here is a moralising one: a woman's role in life is motherhood. Her biggest mistake is to forsake her maternal role to indulge her sensual appetites, using her body, honed for conception and birth, for selfish lusts. In portraying this, Segantini paints the woman with all the attributes of the *femme fatale*, an image that abounded during his lifetime. In this painting, the woman has abandoned her attempts to seduce and destroy, imprisoned in a tree in a barren mountain plain. Which brings us back to where we started, the apparently off-kilter composition. Segantini stages the scene in the most unfruitful environment nature has to offer: a glacier. There, a leafless tree has ensnared a sinful woman, one born of the forbidden fruit. The frozen wastes suggest perpetual punishment, overlooked by distant unattainable grassy swathes basking in the sun. The void is ominous but is the immutable consequence of her lascivious life.

> Dort oben in den unendlichen Räumen des Himmels
> strahlt Nirwana
> dort, hinter den strengen Bergen mit grauen Zacken
> scheint Nirwana!
> […]
> So die böse Mutter im eisigen Tal
> durch ewige Gletscher
> wo kein Ast grünt und keine Blume blüht
> schwebt umher.
> Kein Lächeln, keinen Kuß bekam dein Sohn
> o unnütze Mutter?
> So wird das Schweigen dich quälen
> schlagen und stoßen
> eisige Larve in den Augen Tränen
> aus Eis gemacht!
> Seht sie an! Mühsam wankt sie
> wie ein Blatt! …
> Und um ihren Schmerz ist nur Schweigen;
> die Dinge schweigen.
> Jetzt aus dem eisigen Tal
> erscheinen Bäume!
> Dort aus jedem Ast ruft laut eine Seele
> die leidet und liebt;
> und das Schweigen ist besiegt und die so menschliche
> Stimme sagt:
> „Komm! Komm zu mir o Mutter! gib mir die Brust, das Leben, ich habe vergeben!…"
> Das Phantasma zu dem süßen Ruf
> fliegend eilt und bietet dem zitternden Ast
> die Brust, die Seele,
> oh Wunder! Sieh! Dem Ast schlägt ein Herz! Der Ast hat Leben!
> Nun! Es ist das Gesicht eines Kindes, das an der Brust saugt
> gierig und küßt…![17]

[17] Beat Sulzer, Roland Wäspe, GIOVANNI SEGANTINI. Ostfildern 1999, p.51.

Figures:

fig.1 Giovanni Segantini (1858-99), Le cattive madri, 1894, 120 x 225 cm. oil, Österreichische Galerie im Belvedère, Vienna

fig.2 Henry Füsseli (1741-1825), Die Nachtmahr, 1781, oil on canvas, 101 x 127 cm. The Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit

fig.3. Giovanni Segantini (1858-99), L'angelo della vita, 1894, oil on canvas, 276 x 212 cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan

fig.4 Giovanni Segantini (1858-99), La vanita, 1897, oil on canvas, 78 x 125,5 cm. Private collection, Milan

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