

GEORGES DE LA TOUR'S *FLEA-CATCHER* AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF
THE FLEA-HUNT
IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BAROQUE ART

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Abstract

This essay performs a comprehensive investigation of the thematic possibilities for Georges de La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* (1630s-1640s) based on related artworks, religion, and emblematic, literary, and pseudo-scientific texts that may have had a bearing on it. The results of my research are grouped into two categories that embrace the range of interpretations for the work: religion and sexuality.

While religious iconography characterizes most of La Tour's extant creations, the hypothetically religious content of his *Flea-Catcher* is difficult to discern. However, it is possible to analyze the iconography, as well as some of the ancillary motifs found in La Tour's painting, in relation to the various strains of Catholicism, including Jansenism, Franciscanism, Quietism, and the cult of Mary Magdalen, that ran through Lorraine in the early seventeenth century. The work seems to reflect the general tone of spiritual thought—one of passivity and bodily transcendence—prominent in La Tour's Lorraine.

An examination of the popular understanding of fleas during La Tour's lifetime is particularly enlightening in the investigation of the iconography of the *Flea-Catcher*. The parasites made numerous appearances in contemporary poetry of an erotic nature. Moreover, the linguistic similarity between the French words for "flea" and "virginity," as well as the dominance of archaic natural science, which declared the pest to be a lustful beast, may have inspired the insect's amatory connotations. Read in conjunction with the presence of the sexually charged flea, the emblematic meaning of the flea-catcher's burned-down candle and her wretched and swollen form might indicate the demoralizing consequences of prostitution or of illegitimate pregnancy.

La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* reveals a thematic density that is not necessarily characteristic of the rest of his works, which prove to be more straightforward in content. There is no reason to commit to only one interpretation of the painting, as the suggestions proposed by this essay are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the themes interweave in the painting, endowing it with multiple layers of possible meanings.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Most of Georges de La Tour's extant artistic output consists of religious themes and genre subjects common to either French art¹ (as in the case of his beggars and hurdy-gurdy players, which were treated by fellow Lorrainers Jacques Bellange and Jacques Callot) or Caravaggesque art (for example, his *Card Players* and *Fortune-Teller*). His *Flea-Catcher* (fig. 1), however, appears to be unique in contemporary French art, and it does not figure in the oeuvre of Caravaggio or his immediate followers. It would seem that he borrowed the theme from contemporary Dutch artists, who treated the subject of flea- and louse-hunts surprisingly often, as I will demonstrate below.² Yet, La Tour's canvas is different. Whereas the Dutch works range in tone from erotic or rustic to fastidious and familial, La Tour's meditative study of the *Flea-Catcher* presents a female figure in an intense moment of self-absorption. Characteristic of La Tour's late works, his *Flea-Catcher* (*La femme à la puce*) offers few anecdotal details; rather, it is quite spare in both form and symbol. Mystery pervades the work, as no convincing interpretation has come to light. Until some unknown document outlining the deeper meaning of the flea-hunt (such as an emblem book or sermon specific to seventeenth-century Lorraine) surfaces, one can only speculate about La Tour's motivation for the execution of this painting. Therefore, the goal of this essay is to perform a comprehensive investigation of the thematic possibilities for La Tour's flea-hunt based on related artworks, religion, and emblematic, literary, and pseudo-scientific texts that may have had a bearing on it.

¹ I use the term "French" here loosely, as Lorraine was not technically part of the French kingdom until Louis XIII officially took over in 1633.

² No distinction was drawn between fleas and lice in the seventeenth century. Leonard J. Slatkes, "Georges de La Tour and the Netherlandish Followers of Caravaggio," in *Georges de La Tour and His World*, ed. Phillip Consibee (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996), 215-216, n. 53.



1. Georges de La Tour, *The Flea-Catcher*, Nancy, Musée Lorrain.

The results of my research are grouped into two categories that embrace the range of interpretations of the work: religion and sexuality. Before exploring these two themes, I will continue my introduction with a brief summary of La Tour's biography and oeuvre, followed by a survey of Dutch flea-hunts.

Georges de La Tour, 1593-1652

La Tour was born in Vic-sur-Seille in Lorraine in 1593.³ While his father was a baker, there is some tenuous evidence that La Tour's mother was at least partly of noble blood,⁴ a biographical detail that some have used to explain La Tour's apparent social ambition in becoming a painter. As a baker, his father held a humble but respectable vocation; a successful artist, on the other hand, could enjoy the benefits of direct noble and royal patronage. Indeed, our painter of middle-class origins would one day become *peintre ordinaire du roi*, but as a teen, La Tour likely served as an artist's apprentice, which was the norm for those not born into a family of artists. Because no contract of apprenticeship has surfaced, we simply cannot know the particulars of his training, such as the identity of his master or the location of his apprenticeship. He may have stayed in Vic under the tutelage of the local master Claude Dogoz, or he may have moved to the capital of the duchy, Nancy, to study under Bellange, or even have relocated to the French kingdom to learn from a Parisian master.⁵

There are no records of La Tour's whereabouts between his own baptism in 1593 and his participation in his godchild's baptism in October of 1616, leaving scholars to speculate over whether or not he took the requisite trip to Italy made by most young European artists of this period. Opinions on this matter seem to be split between anglophone and francophone art historians, with the latter in favor of the journey and the

³ For more information on La Tour's life, career, and oeuvre, consult Phillip Conisbee, "An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour," in *Georges de La Tour and His World*, 13-147; Benedict Nicolson and Christopher Wright, *Georges de La Tour* (London: Phaidon, 1974), 1-63; Pierre Rosenberg and François Macé de L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour: vie et oeuvre* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Office du livre, 1973), 14-80; and Pierre Rosenberg and Jacques Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour: Orangerie des Tuileries* (Paris: Éditions des Musées Nationaux, 1972), 59-113.

⁴ Henri Tribout de Morembert's suggestion that La Tour's mother may have been the progeny of nobility is discussed in Jacques Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, trans. Fabia Claris (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 19.

⁵ For an elaboration of the problem of identifying La Tour's teacher, see *ibid.*, 23-25, and Conisbee, "An Introduction," 15-23.

former against it. Jacques Thuillier, for example, declares La Tour's earliest works to be positively Caravaggesque—an indication of a trip across the Alps.⁶ Conversely, Anthony Blunt contends that he would not have had enough time to complete an apprenticeship and move to Rome before 1616; if he did find inspiration in Caravaggio, it was probably through the Italian's followers in Lorraine, France, or even the Low Countries.⁷

In 1617, La Tour married Diane Le Nerf, a woman from a family of minor nobility. The two moved to Lunéville, Diane's native city, with their first child in 1620. Lunéville likely had no competing artists, so the move was advantageous. Moreover, Diane's family's social status there, superior to La Tour's own, would enhance the chances of his artistic success, as it put him into contact with potential patrons. Before moving there, La Tour petitioned for and was granted by Duke Henri II a lifetime exemption from taxes as the artist-in-residence of Lunéville. Immediately upon arrival, La Tour enlisted the service of an apprentice and thus began his career. La Tour, along with his family, seems to have remained in Lunéville for the rest of his life, except for a brief stay with a friend in Nancy from 1639 to 1640. During this time, the La Tours sought protection from the harsh conditions at home caused by French occupation during and after the Thirty Years' War; however, they apparently returned to Lunéville by

⁶ Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 28.

⁷ Anthony Blunt, "Georges de La Tour at the Orangerie," *The Burlington Magazine* 114 (1972): 516-520. On the subject of a hypothetical trip to the Netherlands, see Slatkes, "Georges de La Tour," 201-217, and Jean-Pierre Cuzin, "La Tour Seen from the North: Observations on La Tour's Style and the Chronology of His Works," in *Georges de La Tour and His World*, 183-199. Conisbee gives further reason to doubt a Roman sojourn by explaining that La Tour would have mentioned any travels to Italy in his petition to Duke Henri II to work in Lunéville but that the painter did no such thing ("An Introduction," 25). The question of Netherlandish influence on La Tour will be further discussed, albeit briefly, in conjunction with the discussion of the Dutch tradition of the flea-hunt below.

February of 1641.⁸ Documents from around this period show that La Tour was making trips to Paris, undoubtedly for obligations attached to his official title of *peintre ordinaire du roi*, a designation that allowed him to sell works in Paris without interference from the guild. Indeed, La Tour is known to have presented paintings as gifts to both Louis XIII and Richelieu—quite a triumph for the son of a baker.⁹ Yet, La Tour never relocated to Paris, opting to spend the rest of his life in Lunéville. In 1652, just days after his wife’s passing, La Tour died, leaving one surviving son, Étienne.



2. Simon Vouet, *Presentation at the Temple*, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

La Tour’s Oeuvre

Seventeenth-century French painting is popularly characterized by its affinity for architectonic form, classical motifs, sculptural figures, and pale tonalities. During La Tour’s career, French painting was dominated by the artist Simon Vouet, who rejected his own early Caravaggesque tendencies for a more classicizing and structured style. His *Presentation at the Temple* of 1641 (fig. 2), for example, typifies the contemporary French proclivity for sculptural figures, silvery tones, and classicizing

⁸ Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 107-108. For a description of the political upheavals and situations of Lorraine and France during La Tour’s lifetime, see Patricia Behre Miskimin, “Lorraine in the Time of Georges de La Tour,” in *Georges de La Tour and His World*, 219-231.

⁹ Nicolson and Wright, *Georges de La Tour*, 5-6; Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 109-110. Apparently, La Tour did not share the obstinate loyalty to his duchy exhibited by fellow Lorrainer Jacques Callot, who was loath to pledge allegiance to the French king, much less to solicit the title of *peintre ordinaire du roi*. According to Félibien, when asked by Louis XIII and Richelieu to commemorate their capture of Nancy in a print, Callot responded that he would rather chop off his thumb. See Howard Daniel, ed., *Callot’s Etchings: 338 Prints* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), xxii-xxiv.

drapery and columns. French esthetes particularly lionized another contemporary of La Tour, Nicolas Poussin, as the champion of Baroque classicism even decades after his death. Poussin eschewed the sensual potential of painting in favor of a highly intellectual approach, which led to paintings of controlled line and symmetry, particularly in his

mature period. A work like his *Judgment of Solomon* of 1649 (fig. 3) exemplifies his characteristic formal restraint.

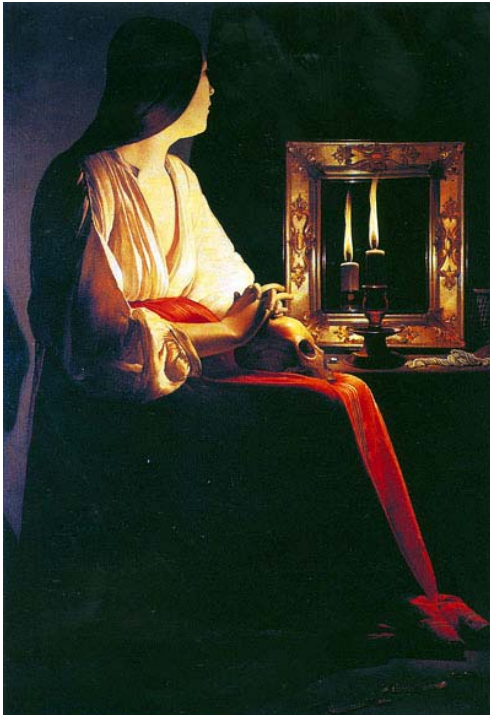
Meanwhile, La Tour's paintings retained the dark tonalities, substantial figures, and neutral backgrounds popularized by



3. Nicolas Poussin, *The Judgment of Solomon*, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Caravaggio. Although the works of Vouet and Poussin suggest that Caravaggism was passé, La Tour nevertheless enjoyed a very respectable level of patronage, which included Louis XIII and Richelieu. While the French classicists produced scenes of multiple figures with marble-like flesh, La Tour executed paintings of solitary figures, like the Albi apostles (c. 1620s) and his various renderings of *Mary Magdalen* (c. 1640) (figs. 4 and 5), that communicate the respective coarseness or softness of real flesh. Some works contain more than one figure, but usually no more than five. The individuals in these multi-figure works are rarely portrayed at more than three-quarter length; thus, La Tour's paintings retain a sense of intimacy lacking in the works of Vouet or Poussin. A large portion of his work, particularly from the latter half of his career, consists of nocturnes dramatically lit by candlelight, like our *Flea-Catcher*. The resulting

chiaroscuro effects, which imbue La Tour's paintings with an air of mystery or spirituality, are nowhere to be found in the washed-out tones of French classicism.



4. Georges de La Tour, *Mary Magdalen with Two Flames*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



5. Georges de La Tour, *The Penitent Magdalen*, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Moreover, La Tour only sparingly articulated his backgrounds, thereby focusing viewers' attention on the human element. The classicists, in contrast, often set their dramas and allegories on temple steps amidst colonnades. The human presence, deep shadows, and stripped down compositions of La Tour mark his art as somewhat against the stylistic grain of the period.

His choice of iconography is common enough—martyrs, biblical scenes, and genre paintings. Yet, his treatments are distinctive. For example, the subject matter of his *Fortune-Teller* (early 1630s) (fig. 6) was certainly not without antecedents; both Caravaggio (fig. 7) and Vouet (fig. 8) had portrayed the theme. However, La Tour's



6. Georges de La Tour, *The Fortune-Teller*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



7. Caravaggio, *The Fortune-Teller*, Rome, Museo Capitolino.



8. Simon Vouet, *The Fortune-Teller*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada.

Fortune-Teller carries a spirit alien to their versions. Benedict Nicolson and Christopher Wright observe, for instance, that Caravaggio's figures are "earthy" creatures while La

Tour's seem "otherworldly."¹⁰ His young dupe and the white gypsy eye each other coolly with sidelong glances while the fortune-teller seems to enter into a trance. Hence, La Tour's characters exude an intensity of expression at odds with the natural presence of Caravaggio's *Fortune-Teller* and the rather comical quality of Vouet's. La Tour's version also differs in that his eponymous character is a wrinkled crone, while Caravaggio's and Vouet's are exotic and youthful.



9. Georges de La Tour, *The Newborn*, Rennes, Musée des beaux-arts.

Some of La Tour's iconography is to be read only intuitively, as he does not always include the sanctified signifiers of certain narratives or biblical characters. Neither his so-called *Newborn* (c. 1650) (fig. 9) nor his *Joseph and the Angel* (c. 1635-40) give tangible evidence of the figures' divine identities,

such as angel's wings or haloes; yet, the viewer perceives the holiness of the scenes, largely through La Tour's use of candlelight. So, while La Tour's choice of iconography was not in itself unusual, his rhetoric often was.

Although almost none of La Tour's paintings can be incontestably dated, art historians have created hypothetical chronologies of his works.¹¹ Scholars may disagree

¹⁰ Nicolson and Wright, *Georges de La Tour*, 19.

¹¹ Phillip Conisbee, "Catalogue of the Exhibition," in *Georges de La Tour and His World*, 259-284; Nicolson and Wright, *Georges de La Tour*, 14-57; Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 282-295; Rosenberg and Thuillier, *Orangerie*, 236-264.

on some particulars, but they have all come to the same basic conclusion—that his works became darker, more meditative, and minimalistic with time. His oeuvre is generally divided into two phases: the early daylight scenes and the late nocturnes.¹² Of course, the word “daylight” is somewhat misleading, for it implies abundant natural light and perhaps even a hint of levity. The diurnal pictures, however, are starkly lit scenes, usually with half-length saints or beggars. One might detect something comical in the San Francisco pendant paintings of the seemingly overbearing *Old Woman* and her humble counterpart the *Old Man* (c. 1618-20), but the rest of the early works vary from contemplative, such as the Albi Apostles and *St. Thomas* (late 1620s) (fig. 10), to harsh, as in *The Musicians’ Brawl* (c. 1620s) (fig. 11) and his depictions of *The Blind Hurdy-Gurdy Player* (1620).



10. Georges de La Tour, *St. Thomas*, Paris, Musée du Louvre.



11. Georges de La Tour, *The Musicians’ Brawl*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum.

For all the intensity and gravity exhibited by these early paintings, they do not quite compare in solemnity to his mature work—characterized by deep reds, an almost geometric sense of form, and the presence of artificial light—which

dates from circa 1640 until his death. Paintings like *The Newborn* (c. 1650) (fig. 9), *The*

¹² The distinction between an early, diurnal phase and a later nocturnal one is not absolute, of course, as demonstrated by *The Payment of Taxes* in the Lvov Museum. Although a nocturne, it is often dated at the beginning of La Tour’s career. Conisbee, “Catalogue,” 260; Nicolson and Wright, *Georges de La Tour*, 15-17; Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 285.

Adoration of the Shepherds (1640s), and his *Mary Magdalens* (figs. 4 and 5) express a profound serenity enhanced by warm, penetrating tones created by candlelight. A comparison between his *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene* from the late 1630s (fig. 12) and his treatments of the same subject around a decade later (fig. 13)¹³ reveals La Tour's increasing rarefication of form during the latter period. Granted, the earlier *St. Sebastian* may actually be a copy after a lost original; nevertheless, it displays more anecdotal detail than the later paintings. The bodies and drapery of the figures in the latter works are smooth and stripped down to their barest, most lucid forms. Yet, La Tour's figures retain their sense of humanity and, thus, do not conform to the prerogatives of cool French classicism. He somehow managed to introduce warmth even into the polished flesh of his late figures.



12. Georges de La Tour, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum.



13. Georges de La Tour, *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene*, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

It is to this later, nocturnal phase of La Tour's career that our *Flea-Catcher* likely belongs. His characteristically late preference for red tones, rarefication of form, and his use of artificial light are evident in the painting. Whether La Tour executed the work

¹³ A second version of fig. 13 is housed at the Staatliche Museen in Berlin.

during a transitional point in his career—that is from the daylight to the night scenes—or during the last decade of his life is undeterminable. Like the debate over his hypothetical trip to Italy, the question of dating is divided between English- and French-speaking scholars, with the former in favor of a date in the 1630s and the latter in the 1640s.¹⁴

We do not know the circumstances surrounding the creation of the picture, since no extant documents refer to it. The precise dating of the work might give a clue to its patronage and therefore to its meaning. If completed in the 1630s, it would have likely gone to a ducal courtier, perhaps someone from within the elevated circle of Diane Le Nerf's family or acquaintances in Lunéville. On the other hand, if painted in the following decade, by which time Louis XIII had quashed Lorraine, La Tour may have intended it for a Parisian collector. Ironically, its execution—whether in the '30s or '40s—coincided with several instances of the plague in Lorraine as the movement of troops through the region during and after the Thirty Years' War succeeded in spreading the disease; however, this phenomenon would not have instigated La Tour's choice of iconography, since fleas were not yet known to be the carriers of infection.¹⁵ As it stands, we have no solid proof regarding its contemporary significance or ownership.

The work came to international attention only about half a century ago. It had been purchased in Orléans by a general named Aubrey sometime before his death in 1929. The painting stayed in Rennes until it was discovered in a private collection in 1955 by Mademoiselle Berhaut. That same year, François-Georges Pariset published the

¹⁴ Conisbee, "Catalogue," 270; Nicolson and Wright, *Georges de La Tour*, 30-31; Rosenberg and Thuillier, *Orangerie*, 180; Rosenberg and De L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour*, 152.

¹⁵ Images of St. Sebastian, on the other hand, were inspired by the occurrence of plague, as he was venerated as a protector against the epidemic. Regarding incidents of plague in Lorraine, see Miskimin, "Lorraine," 226, and Conisbee, "An Introduction," 88-89.

work in *La revue des arts* under the title *La servante à la puce*,¹⁶ and the Musée Lorrain in Nancy quickly purchased it.

The Dutch Flea-Hunt Tradition

The *Flea-Catcher* has been unanimously accepted as an original La Tour since its emergence in 1955; but, interestingly, when it came into General Aubrey's possession, it was attributed to the seventeenth-century painter from Utrecht, Gerrit van Honthorst. Today, it is difficult to conceive how a painting by La Tour could be mistaken for the work of the Dutch artist, whose figural style was quite different. However, La Tour's picture certainly bears some of the marks of a Dutch painting—namely, his use of candlelight, a favorite device of Honthorst's, and the very choice of flea iconography.

As mentioned at the outset of this essay, flea and louse iconography rarely, if ever, appeared in seventeenth-century French art. The so-called Candlelight Master produced a work contemporary to La Tour's, *A Girl Catching Fleas* (fig. 14) (c. 1630), which may be the only other known example of a French flea-hunt, as some scholars identify the Master as Trophime Bigot. However, the identification of Bigot as the Candlelight Master is highly contested, leaving the possibility that La Tour's work truly is the only extant French version of the theme.¹⁷ Incidentally, of all the flea and louse paintings



14. The Candlelight Master, *A Girl Catching Fleas*, Rome, Palazzo Doria Pamphili.

¹⁶ François-Georges Pariset, "La servante à la puce par Georges de La Tour," *La revue des arts* 5 (1955): 91-94.

known from the seventeenth century, the Candlelight's Master's work probably has the closest affinity with La Tour's. They are both nocturnal scenes of self-absorbed, solitary young women defleaing their garments. Unfortunately, even less information exists about the Candlelight Master's painting than exists about La Tour's.

The Dutch were masters of genre painting, which embraced many elements of quotidian life—including the daily bodily search for parasites. La Tour very well could have gotten the idea for his flea-hunt from Dutch examples; indeed, some of his other paintings indicate an acquaintance with Netherlandish art. For example, he utilized another Dutch genre subject in his *Payment of Taxes* (1618-20). Furthermore, La Tour often included in his night scenes a candle with an eclipsed flame, a signature mark of Honthorst's work. The parallels are tantalizing, if not conclusive. They simply offer circumstantial evidence that La Tour was familiar with Dutch art and, in all probability, its tradition of painted flea-hunts.

Yet, the problem remains that La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* is quite different from the flea- and lice-hunts produced by his contemporaries in the Low Countries. One of Honthorst's most celebrated works is his *Merry Flea Hunt* (c. 1620) (fig. 15), a depiction of a young, bare-breasted woman engaged in the nightly ritual of the flea-hunt with the

¹⁷ In 1978, a group of confirmed works by Bigot was published and subsequently compared to paintings by the so-called Candlelight Master. The two groups of works were strikingly different, thereby leading some scholars, such as Jean-Pierre Cuzin, to drop the attribution of the Master's paintings to Bigot. Since then, a 1634 document from the church of Sta. Maria in Aquiro in Rome surfaced, identifying the artist responsible for three of its paintings formerly attributed to the Candlelight Master as "Jacomio," indicating that he may have been Italian. Carlo del Bravo, "Quadri a lume di notte: Georges de La Tour e Sant' Agostino," *Artibus et Historiae* 6 (1985): 10. It could be that Jacomio and the Master are two different artists altogether and that the original attribution of the Roman paintings to the latter was a mistake. According to Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., the Italians found the subject of flea- and louse-hunts distasteful (*Gerard ter Borch* [Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2004], 90), thus weakening del Bravo's implication that the Candlelight Master, author of *A Girl Catching Fleas*, was the Italian "Jacomio." Nevertheless, the Museo Civico in Fossombrone possesses one Italian example of a seventeenth-century flea-hunt by Giovan Francesco Guerrieri. See Sergio Anselmi, Andrea Emiliani, and Giovanni Saporì, *Giovan Francesco Guerrieri: dipinti e disegni—un accostamento all'opera* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1988), 88-89.

assistance of an aged maid. The two figures smile gaily as a couple of male voyeurs peek in from behind the bed. The erotic connotations are blatant. Presumably, whoever originally attributed La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* to Honthorst had this



15. Gerrit van Honthorst, *Merry Flea Hunt*, Dayton (Ohio), Dayton Art Institute.

particular picture in mind. Although La Tour's young woman, too, exposes her bosom, her lack of playful gesture or expression and her questionable beauty dissociates the French work from the Dutch one. Nevertheless, chapter three will further consider the possibility of sexual content in La Tour's painting.



16. Adriaen Brouwer, *Woman Fleaing a Dog*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Other flea and louse paintings from the Low Countries range in tone from crude to allegorical. Adriaen Brouwer, a Flemish painter known for his lowlife scenes, who studied in Holland, treated the theme at least three times (1620s-1630s) (fig. 16).¹⁸ La Tour's young woman *à la puce* could very well be a part of the lower class inhabited by Brouwer's unrefined characters. However, despite her heavy body and ungraceful pose, she seems somehow more dignified than the coarse men and women of Brouwer's world.

¹⁸ Also, see his *Louse-Cracker* in the Landesgalerie in Hannover (reproduced in *Die holländischen und flämischen Gemälde des 17. Jahrhunderts: kritischer Katalog mit Abbildungen aller Werke* [Hannover: Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, 2000], 102, fig. 21), and *The Louse-Catcher* in the J.C.H. Heldring Collection in Oosterbeek, Holland (reproduced in Gerard Knuttel, *Adriaen Brouwer*, trans J.G. Talma-Schilthuis and R. Wheaton [The Hague: L.J.C. Boucher, 1962]), 102, fig. 59.

Dutch artist Dirck Hals used an image of a young girl defleaing her blouse as an allegory for “touch” in his series of five tondos representing the senses (1636) (fig. 17).¹⁹ Nicolson proposed that La Tour’s painting was also intended to suggest the sense of touch.²⁰ But as the work lacks the necessary counterparts (i.e. extant paintings illustrating the other four senses), Nicolson’s theory is hardly tenable.



17. Dirck Hals, *Touch*, from *The Five Senses*, The Hague, Mauritshuis.

Dutch artists also used flea and louse imagery to communicate some of the values of their country. Artists like Gerard ter Borch and Michael Sweerts depicted mothers of all classes inspecting their children’s heads for nits (fig. 18).²¹ A contemporary proverb emphasized the importance of *moederzorg*, or maternal care, in the Dutch Republic by declaring, “Een slacke moeder, luyzige hoofden,” or “Lazy mother, lousy heads.”²² Thus, the allegorical meaning of



18. Michael Sweerts, *Woman Searching for Lice*, Strasbourg, Musée des beaux-arts.

the flea or louse motif expressed more than the universal concept of touch; it symbolized a nation proud of its dutiful women and immaculate cleanliness. Indeed, the Dutch were known for their hygiene, and women held the major responsibility for keeping the home

¹⁹ All five tondos reside in the Mauritshuis, The Hague (reproduced in Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals* [New York: Phaidon, 1970], 79, fig. 57). The flea motif was similarly used in another series (now destroyed) of allegories of the senses, formerly in the Schloß Haag, Geldern. See Rolf Kultzen, *Michael Sweerts: Brussels 1618-Goa 1664*, trans. Diane L. Webb (Doornspijk, the Netherlands: Davaco, 1996), 138.

²⁰ Benedict Nicolson, “In the Margin of the Catalogue,” *The Burlington Magazine* 100 (1958): 101, n. 13.

²¹ Some of ter Borch’s works on the nit-picking theme include *Woman Combing a Child’s Head* (1652-53) in the Mauritshuis, The Hague (reproduced in Wheelock, *Gerard ter Borch*, cat. 19), and *The Family of the Stone Grinder* (1653-55) in the Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (reproduced in Jane Iandola Watkins, ed., *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* [Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984], pl. 67). The relationship between boy and animal in his *Boy Caring for a Dog* (1655) in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich (reproduced in Wheelock, *Gerard ter Borch*, cat. 28), shows a sentiment similar to the Dutch *moederzorg*, as the child dutifully rids his pet of fleas.

²² Wheelock, *Gerard ter Borch*, 90.

and its denizens clean. Simon Schama aptly calls the Dutch mother the “moral laundress” of her household,²³ for spiritual purity starts with a spotless body. Ter Borch’s and Sweerts’s virtuous mothers upheld the maxim “cleanliness is next to godliness,” thereby taking pride in the Dutch reputation for obsessive hygiene. So, in a way, the *moederzorg* paintings projected a patriotic message as well as a moral one.

Because the national imperative for cleanliness was specific to the Netherlands, La Tour’s *Flea-Catcher* would not have carried the same patriotic import as ter Borch’s mothers. Although French artists were not obligated to cloak their moralistic messages in secular terms as the Calvinist Dutch were, it is quite possible that La Tour’s young woman bears a moral about spiritual and bodily cleanliness via her search for fleas. Her concentration on the task at hand certainly mirrors the intense focus of the Dutch mothers on their maternal duty. However, in the context of seventeenth-century Lorraine and France, many other interpretations of the flea-hunt are possible. A consideration of the prominence of Jansenism, Franciscanism, and the cult of Mary Magdalen, as well as French poetry, language, and emblems, may suggest interpretations more appropriate to La Tour’s nationality.

²³ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 400.

Chapter 2: The *Flea-Catcher* and Catholic Iconography

According to Raymond Picard, every painting in La Tour's oeuvre contains a religious fervor, even if it is not always obvious.¹ Certainly, religious iconography characterizes most of La Tour's extant creations. Meanwhile, works like *The Dice Players* (c. 1650), *The Fortune-Teller* (fig. 6), and *The Card Players* (early 1630s) (fig. 19), all ostensibly secular in content, can be read as instances of vice that led to the downfall of the Prodigal Son.

Might *La femme à la puce* have religious underpinnings, too? Catholicism dominated much of the art produced in France and Lorraine in La Tour's time, unlike in Holland where Calvinism shunned such work as



19. Georges de La Tour, *The Card Players*, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum.

idolatrous. The religious disparity between the countries might hold the key to the difference between La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* and its Netherlandish counterparts.

In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church held the Council of Trent, whose final session, which took place in 1563, outlined guidelines for artistic production. According to the Council's orders, religious art should be powerful but clear, simple, and intelligible; any viewer should be able to interpret easily a painting's Catholic message. Although La Tour worked decades after the Council ended, its artistic rules

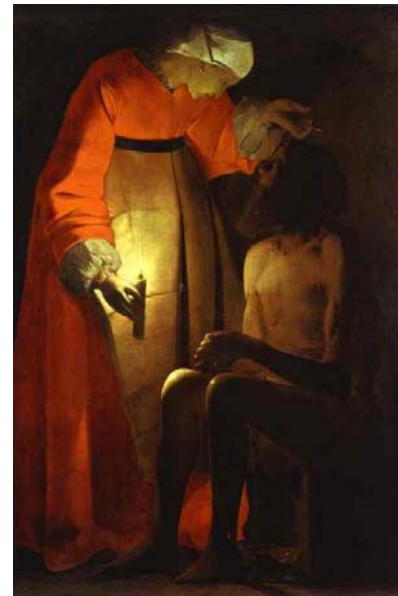
¹ Raymond Picard, "L'unité spirituelle de Georges de La Tour," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 80 (1972): 213-218.

still applied, as Christian factions were always at odds, the Thirty Years' War being the main stage for the battle of ideologies.

As Lorraine was strongly Catholic, La Tour would have undoubtedly adhered to the tenets of the Council of Trent.² Yet, to modern eyes, the hypothetically religious content of his *Flea-Catcher* is difficult to discern. No emblem book or other primary source explains the contemporary significance of the flea- or louse-hunt. However, it is still possible to analyze the iconography, as well as some of the ancillary motifs found in La Tour's painting, in relation to the various strains of Catholicism that ran through Lorraine in the early seventeenth century.

Jansenism, Franciscanism, and Quietism

The esotericism of the painting might recall one of the teachings of St. Augustine: that which is obtained with difficulty is most rewarding.³ Augustinian symbolism appealed to the mind and required reflection. This ideal seems to contradict the Council of Trent; nevertheless, Augustinian doctrine had a strong presence in Lorraine. Jansenism, a popular Catholic faction that hoped to erase the years of corruption and growing moral laxity exhibited by the Church, solicited the writings of Augustine in an attempt to revive the primitive, untainted



20. Georges de La Tour, *Job Mocked by His Wife*, Epinal, Musée départemental des Vosges.

² Paulette Choné, *Emblèmes et pensée symbolique en Lorraine, 1525-1633: "comme un jardin au coeur de la chrétienté"* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), 499-503; Conisbee, "An Introduction," 49, 72-73.

³ Choné, *Emblèmes*, 493, n. 333, and 500-501.

Church.⁴ In fact, Carlo del Bravo insists that La Tour's use of candlelight was inspired by Augustine's metaphorical equation of light and divinely inspired knowledge.⁵

Viewed from a Jansenist perspective, the artificial light that illuminates the faces of Mary Magdalen (figs. 4 and 5) and Job (fig. 20) is the emanation of divine wisdom that dissolves the shadows of earthly experience. Thus, the Magdalen rejects her sensuality, and Job remains spiritually faithful although in the depths of human misery, thanks to the grace of God.

The ability to repress the senses was a God-given gift for the chosen only, as predestination was an important element of Jansenism. So, what does it mean that the flea-catcher is bathed in the same candlelight as the Magdalen or Job while tending to her earthly body? Perhaps the candlelight is meant to interrupt her vain attempt at bodily comfort, a conceit strictly admonished by the Jansenists. It could be that, despite her attention to the body, she is in the process of receiving holy enlightenment and will soon adopt the ascetic lifestyle endorsed by Augustine and the Jansenists. The Abbott of Saint-Cyran, the primary champion of Jansenism other than its founder, Cornelius Jansen, at the Port-Royal convent wrote: "The first streak of light we call day, although the shades of night are not all dispersed; so the first spark of light wherewith God illumines the soul is called grace, although it be still encompassed by the shadows of sin."⁶ The *Flea-Catcher* could then be a picture of spiritual progress, if we accept a Jansenist reading of the work. Indeed, Jansenism was popular among the elite, who appreciated its exclusive character; those who believed themselves "chosen" were part of a privileged

⁴ For more information on the rise and fall of Jansenism in France and Lorraine, see René Taveneaux, *Le jansénisme en Lorraine* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1960), and Robin Briggs, *Early Modern France: 1560-1715* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 176-183.

⁵ Del Bravo, "Quadri di lume a notte," 9-22.

⁶ Marguerite Tollemache, *French Jansenists* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., 1893), 10.

coterie. La Tour's elevated social circle may have included some of the religious sect's noble adherents. But until we have some documentation of the painting's patron or purpose, its original viewers, or the social space in which it was hung, this is only speculation.

Even if the candle does not signify a specifically Jansenist perspective on salvation, light has commonly been equated with the Holy Spirit or Christian truth.⁷ The Franciscan friar André de l'Auge wrote that the hope of martyrs is "like a clear, brown light that assures them their future immortality."⁸ Interestingly, the Cordelier's colorful metaphor recalls La Tour's own palette.⁹ It is not impossible that La Tour would have been familiar with the sermons L'Auge gave in Nancy from 1619 to 1624. Although written for the ducal court, they were disseminated through the convents and cultivated circles of Lorraine and therefore could, presumably, have reached La Tour's elite associates.¹⁰



21. Georges de La Tour, *The Ecstasy of St. Francis*, Le Mans, Musée de Tessé.

In fact, Franciscanism was quite prominent during the Counter Reformation in Lorraine in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Confraternities of Franciscan origin, especially Capuchin, multiplied as the popularity of the cult intensified.¹¹ The sect promoted a life of

⁷ Choné, *Emblèmes*, 528.

⁸ "Comme une lumière claire brune qui les rend certains de leur immortalité future." Ibid., 515.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 516.

¹¹ Taveneaux, *Le jansénisme*, 73-74.

passive devotion and spiritual transcendence. The Franciscans felt that contemplation was the path to God. It is tempting to relate La Tour's entire oeuvre to the ideals of the Franciscans, since almost all of his works, particularly the nocturnes, are marked by a contemplative tone, and, indeed, it is quite possible that his patrons belonged to Franciscan confraternities. Alas, we lack the proof to support this, but we do know that La Tour had at least some connection to the Order because he left part of his fortune to the Capuchins of Lunéville.¹² Moreover, he executed at least two works honoring St. Francis: *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* (c. 1640-45) (fig. 21) and *St. Francis Meditating* (after 1640).¹³

If La Tour or his patrons did in fact have strong sympathies for or involvement with Franciscanism, that might explain his predilection for nocturnes. According to Paulette Choné, darkness was not just a necessary foil for candlelight; *la nuit* had a symbolic meaning of its own that was important to the Franciscan model of meditation.¹⁴ Nighttime should not always be associated with the shadows of evil, for it provides the opportunity for the most intense spiritual contemplation. It can be a time of sorrow, as it was for Mary Magdalen and Job; however, their anguish led to deliverance.¹⁵ Moreover, it was during the night that Christ came into the world, and, as André de l'Auge wrote, "this night was more luminous than the day."¹⁶ Thus, it was at night that the savior was born, and it is at night that salvation can be attained.

¹² Rosenberg and De L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour*, 128.

¹³ The latter work exists only in an engraved copy (reproduced in Conisbee, "Catalogue," cat. 34).

¹⁴ Choné, *Emblèmes*, 511-520, gives a detailed literary history of *la nuit* and its appearance in poetry, sermons, and other religious discourses. Conisbee, too, points out the popularity of darkness as a literary emblem, particularly in the poetry of Henry Humbert in the 1620s ("An Introduction," 41-42.)

¹⁵ Choné, *Emblèmes*, 512.

¹⁶ "Ce fut en la nuict qu'il nacquit, mais ceste nuict fut plus lumineuse que le jour." Ibid., 515.

La Tour's paintings like *The Newborn* (fig. 9), *The Ecstasy of St. Francis* (fig. 21), his images of *Mary Magdalen* (figs. 4 and 5), and *Job Mocked by his Wife* (1630s) (fig. 20) all seem to communicate the Franciscan solemnification of the night as the time for spiritual fulfillment, repentance, unswerving faith, and the very birth of Christ. The *Flea-Catcher* does not present a clearly identifiable Christian subject like these works do, but it certainly shares their sober mood. The young woman concentrates intently on her task by the still light of her candle. Her chore is a form of meditation in itself.

The quiet intensity of La Tour's paintings might reflect not only the Franciscan ethic but also the popular Quietist movement, based in Spain but led in France by the hermit Pierre Séguin, who lived in Nancy from 1605 until his death in 1636. His brand of mysticism was similar to that of the Franciscans, who condoned his doctrine of self-annihilation before God.¹⁷ Séguin proposed a faith of passive virtue and silent devotion and inspired his followers to embrace what he called "la nuit de l'âme," a state of complete mental and physical abandon that led to "perpétuelle paix."¹⁸ His metaphorical conception of *la nuit de l'âme* seems to find its plastic realization in La Tour's nocturnes. The *Flea-Catcher's* introspective mood echoes the trend for contemplative devotion and asceticism that swept through Lorraine during La Tour's lifetime, whatever brand of Catholic faith may have inspired its execution.¹⁹

¹⁷ Taveneaux, *Le jansénisme*, 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84. See also Choné, *Emblèmes*, 756-758.

¹⁹ Choné issues the caveat that a Franciscan reading of La Tour's contemplative nocturnes may be too simplistic, as many cults at this time similarly promoted ardent spiritual meditation (*ibid.*, 503-505). I would also add that Honthorst had specialized in the candlelit nocturnes before La Tour even began his career and may well have influenced the painter from Lunéville, if the latter did indeed make a trip to the Netherlands. If he did not make the journey himself, another artist—Jean LeClerc, for example—could have imported the Honthorstian nocturne into Lorraine. Nevertheless, even if the Franciscans or similar sects did not inspire the creation of the nocturne, their ideology probably fueled its popularity in Lorraine.

The Flea-Catcher as Mary Magdalen

The general movement toward spiritual meditation inspired by the Franciscans and Quietists found a kindred spirit in the cult of Mary Magdalen, who was venerated as a representative of the contemplative life. Her association with passive devotion grew out of the story of the sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany in the gospel of Luke.²⁰ According to this narrative, the sisters received Jesus into their home. During his visit, the elder Martha busied herself around the house in an effort to serve her guest properly; Mary, on the other hand, sat quietly at Jesus' feet, ready to absorb his wisdom. When Martha reproached her younger sister for her idleness, Jesus defended her. He explained that, while Martha demonstrated her love through her actions, Mary showed her devotion by giving Jesus her undivided attention. Luke never actually identified Mary of Bethany as the Magdalen; rather, the histories of the two Marys were compounded early on in Christian history.²¹ As a result, Mary Magdalen became the model of passive devotion while her "sister" Martha came to symbolize active piety.

Although she lacks the typical identifying attributes, some have interpreted the *Flea-Catcher* as Mary Magdalen.²² Certainly, La Tour did not always obligate himself to include anecdotal details in his works. For instance, his *Newborn* (fig. 9) gives no tangible evidence that the infant is Jesus; the viewer is left to intuit the figures' identities. A lack of identifiers marks some of his other works, too, like *Joseph and the Angel* and

²⁰ Luke 10:38-42.

²¹ For an explanation of the conflation of Magdalen and Mary of Bethany, see Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 20-23.

²² Picard, "L'unité spirituelle," 214; Thérèse Charpentier, "Peut-on toujours parler de la servante à la puce?," *Le pays lorrain* 54 (1973): 101-108; Hélène Adhémar, "La Tour et les couvents lorrains," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 80 (1972): 219-222.

Job Mocked by his Wife (fig. 20).²³ On the other hand, all of La Tour's other extant *Magdalens* bear the signs of the *belle pécheresse*—her long hair, discarded jewels, and *vanitas* emblems. Picard argues that, even if he did not explicitly illustrate Mary Magdalen in the *Flea-Catcher*, he at least intended to evoke her personality, as La Tour often made no clear distinction between the sacred and profane in his works.²⁴ Meanwhile, Pierre Rosenberg and François Macé de L'Épinay date *La femme à la puce* close to the *Penitent Magdalen* in the Louvre (fig. 5) and suggest that the two were actually meant as pendants, a proposition based on similarities in style and size.²⁵

The identification of the *Flea-Catcher* with Mary Magdalen is not as arbitrary as it initially seems. *La Madeleine* had a strong cult following in Lorraine in the first half of the seventeenth century, which probably explains the relatively large number of canvases La Tour dedicated to her image.²⁶ The saint was associated with various elements of Catholic devotion in addition to spiritual contemplation, namely repentance and platonic love. An investigation of the traditional literary and artistic forms of these two concepts indicates that the *Flea-Catcher* could indeed have an affinity with Mary Magdalen.

The Church cast the Magdalen in the role of “repentant whore,” as a model of penitence and renewal. In La Tour's paintings of her, we see her just as she has renounced her life of prostitution. The presence of a skull reminds the viewer of the inevitability of death. Just as quickly as an exhalation of breath can extinguish the flame of the Magdalen's candle, death can arrive at any moment, and when it does, the vain

²³ The iconography of *Job Mocked by his Wife* was identified as such in 1935 by Jean Lafond and Dr. Ronot by virtue of the broken pottery at Job's feet. Job used a potsherd to scratch his boils; however, as Rosenberg and De L'Épinay point out, there are no boils visible on Job's body (*Georges de La Tour*, 41).

²⁴ Picard, “L'unité spirituelle,” 213-214. Picard proposes that all of La Tour's works deliver a *vanitas* theme via the asceticism of his own restrained, minimalistic style.

²⁵ Rosenberg and De L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour*, 78.

²⁶ Taveaux, *Le jansénisme*, 84, n. 56.

pursuits of beauty—indicated by the jewelry and mirror (fig. 4)—and of earthly knowledge—symbolized by books (fig. 5)—will come to nothing. La Tour’s *Magdalens* struggle through Séguin’s *nuit de l’âme* as they ruminate on the fragility of life on earth and the error of past sins.

La femme à la puce, on the other hand, does not exhibit the traditional *vanitas* symbols associated with the repentant Magdalen, except for the burning candle. Moreover, she does not possess the long, silky brown hair characteristic of La Tour’s *Magdalen* paintings.²⁷ Thérèse Charpentier suggests that the *Flea-Catcher* actually depicts a later stage of *la Madeleine*’s conversion, after she has completely discarded any evidence of her former life of sensual pleasure.²⁸ Part of this conversion would have involved cutting or hiding her hair, as hair was considered a feminine attribute of sexual temptation.²⁹ Indeed, Jean Michel’s play *Mystère de la Passion* of 1486 includes an



22. Orazio Gentileschi, *The Penitent Magdalen*, New York, Richard L. Feigen Collection.

episode in which Mary Magdalen adorns herself in the hope of seducing Jesus, but when she encounters him preaching in the marketplace, his words lead her to repent. She immediately covers her hair and goes to the house of Simon the Pharisee.³⁰ Admittedly, the usual image of *la Madeleine* depicts her with her hair down, even though

²⁷ In addition to La Tour’s paintings of *Mary Magdalen* illustrated here, see also *Mary Magdalen at the Mirror* (c. 1640) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington and *The Repentant Magdalen with a Document* from a private collection.

²⁸ Charpentier, “Peut-on toujours parler,” 104.

²⁹ Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 153-154.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

she probably would have hidden it after her conversion; however, La Tour did not always commit himself to standard religious iconography. For example, at a time when conventional images of Magdalen depicted her in a grotto (fig. 22), he set her in a completely unarticulated interior.³¹ Thus, he may well have introduced a new detail to the image of the Magdalen, hiding her hair under a modest snood to show the progression of her conversion from a sensually-driven being to a religious devotee.

Hélène Adhémar proposes that all of La Tour's *Magdalens* along with his *Flea-Catcher* constitute a series of illustrations of repentance as modeled by the *belle pécheresse*. She suggests that the paintings were intended to celebrate the good works of the convent of Notre Dame du Refuge in Nancy, founded in 1624.³² A hospice for young, often troubled women, the Refuge divided its inhabitants into three levels: first, the most important *filles d'honneur*, who directed the rest of the convent's residents; second, the young penitents, who were headed for religious vocations; and third, the wayward girls, many of whom arrived pregnant.³³ She sees in *Mary Magdalen with Two Flames* (fig. 4) an image of the Refuge's founder or a *fille d'honneur* because of her finer clothes and upright posture. The Louvre *Penitent Magdalen* (fig. 5) seems more reflective and sorrowful; thus, she is aligned with the penitents of the second level of the Refuge. Her shabbier costume, complete with a rope belt, signifies her humbleness. Finally, Adhémar correlates the flea-catcher with the most wretched third level of the convent. She explains the swollen belly of the *femme à la puce* as evidence of illegitimate pregnancy, so common among the lowest rank of girls in the Refuge.

³¹ Ibid, 248.

³² Adhémar, "La Tour," 219-221. She explains that a donor to the convent might have commissioned such works.

³³ Ibid., 219.

Furthermore, Adhémar posits that the flea-catcher is not hunting fleas at all but rather saying a rosary as part of her penance, a theory shared by Charpentier, who contrasts La Tour's relatively ambiguous canvas with the more explicit depiction of *A Girl Catching Fleas* by the Candlelight Master (fig. 14).³⁴ In the latter work, the young woman's actions are clear, as she inspects her garment by candlelight, the flame of which would have served to attract the insects. When the fleas hop toward the light, they inevitably land in the water-filled pipkin below and promptly drown. Several dead fleas can be discerned in the bowl in the Candlelight Master's painting. La Tour's so-called *Flea-Catcher* includes no comparable apparatus to confirm the legitimacy of the painting's conventional title. While other scholars claim to have observed a tiny black dot between her fingers and thumbs, as well as the more easily discerned spot on her belly (indicating the presence of fleas),³⁵ Adhémar and Charpentier have not acknowledged such. On the other hand, they are the only scholars to offer an explanation for the discolored areas under the woman's left hand. They interpret the mysteriously darkened streak as the bottom of a crucifix (which would be attached to the end of a rosary), accompanied by its shadow below.³⁶ However, this supposed shadow is not consistent with the light source, which is uncharacteristic of La Tour.

Leonard Slatkes proposes that La Tour may have deliberately conflated the act of defleaing with the saying of the rosary, in the Dutch tradition of equating cleanliness of the body with spiritual purity. He cites a painting from the Museum Bredius in The

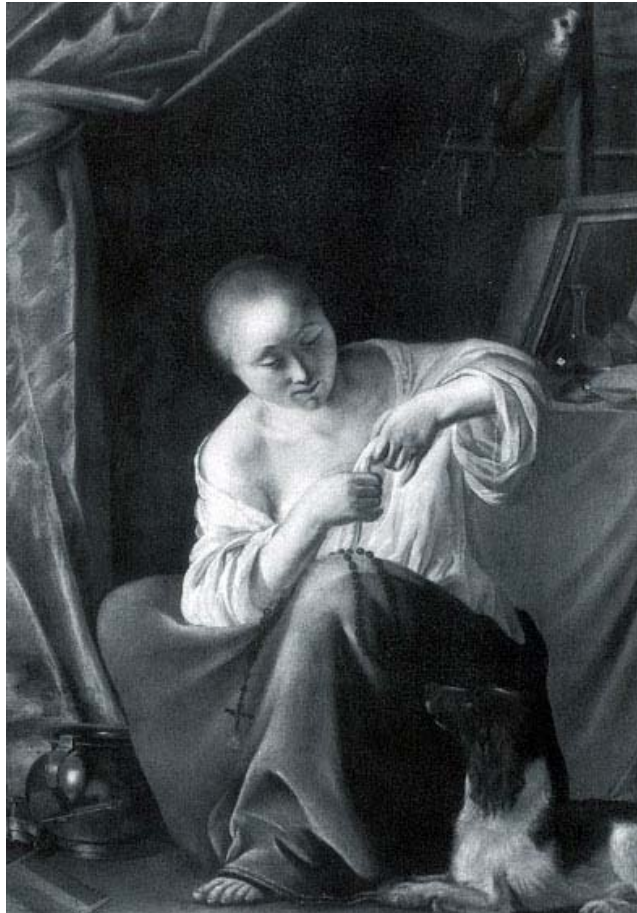
³⁴ Charpentier, "Peut-on toujours parler," 101-103.

³⁵ Rosenberg and De L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour*, 152; Rosenberg and Thuillier, *Orangerie*, 179; Barry Wind, "Close Encounters of the Baroque Kind: Amatory Paintings by Terbrugghen, Baburen, and La Tour," *Studies in Iconography* 4 (1978): 119.

³⁶ The remainder of the rosary would presumably be hidden inside the penitent's hands. Adhémar has even staged a photograph of a young woman holding her rosary in a pose mimicking the woman in La Tour's painting ("La Tour," 221, figs. 4-5).

Hague, *Young Woman Searching for Fleas* (fig. 23) (16??), as a possible parallel to La Tour's hypothetical connection between the flea-hunt and prayer.³⁷ In the Bredius work, the young woman has laid her rosary down on her knee so she can pick at a flea on her blouse. Even if La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* does not explicitly depict the penitent Magdalen or her imitators at the Refuge, its exhortation of spiritual cleansing might evoke the act of repentance itself.

Another feature of the *Flea-Catcher* that aligns her with Mary Magdalen is her half-dressed state. La Tour employed female nudity sparingly in his works, and, in fact, the only other instances of such in his oeuvre appear in two paintings of the Magdalen. The woman in his



23. Jacob van Campen/ Paulus Bor(?), *Young Woman Searching for Fleas*, The Hague, Museum Bredius.

Repentant Magdalen with a Document (c. 1640) is nude from the waist up, her breasts remaining concealed by her arm. In 1976, Rosenberg published another *Repentant*

³⁷ Slatkes, "Georges de La Tour," 208-209. Slatkes attributes the work to Paulus Bor; however, it is considered to be by Jacob van Campen in Albert Blankert, *Museum Bredius: catalogus van de schilderijen en tekeningen* (The Hague: Museum Bredius, 1991), 59.

Magdalen, thought to be a copy after an original La Tour (fig. 24),³⁸ in which the blouse falls open, exposing her left breast in much the same manner as the *Flea-Catcher*. La Tour's hesitancy to exhibit nudity in his paintings suggests that he would not have portrayed the female body gratuitously. His inclusion of nudity in the *Flea-Catcher* was surely deliberate and meaningful.



24. After Georges de La Tour, *Repentant Magdalen*, France, private collection.

It was quite common to depict Mary Magdalen nude in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century art (fig. 22). Her nudity belied her vulnerability in repentance and symbolized the world of sensuality she had left behind in search of holy enlightenment.³⁹

In the tradition of equating the feminine body with platonic concepts of *eros*, the nude Magdalen became the embodiment of sacred, rather than profane, love.

Although her sexuality probably underlay the popularity of her naked image, ostensibly she was

venerated as an emblem of spiritual passion—a Christianized Venus. The Quietists, for example, were particularly moved by the profundity of her devotion to Jesus, which inspired Séguin's doctrine of pure love.⁴⁰ The exposed breast of the flea-catcher alone, of course, does not conclusively establish her as a Magdalen figure. However, a consideration of La Tour's use of nudity in his other works and his predilection for the

³⁸ Pierre Rosenberg, "Review of Nicolson and Wright's *Georges de La Tour*," *The Art Bulletin* 58 (1976): 453-454.

³⁹ For a discussion of the Venus-Magdalen figure, see Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 229-248.

⁴⁰ Taveneaux, *Le jansénisme*, 83-84, n. 56.

theme of the contemplative and repentant Magdalen suggests an affinity between the flea-catcher and the *belle pécheresse*.

Rather than pull the *Flea-Catcher* in different directions, elements of Jansenism, Franciscanism, Quietism, and the cult of Mary Magdalen all intersect in the painting. The light of divine wisdom exhorted by the Jansenists is fundamentally the same light that guides the Franciscan in meditation and counsels the Quietist in the *nuit de l'âme*; it presides over the Magdalen's repentance and illuminates her role as a symbol for sacred love. In reality, La Tour would have had only one patron to satisfy and, therefore, would not necessarily have intended to represent multiple strains of Catholicism in the one painting. Nevertheless, the work seems to reflect the general tone of spiritual thought—one of passivity and bodily transcendence—prominent in La Tour's Lorraine.

Chapter 3: Sexual Connotations of the Flea in Word and Image

An examination of the popular understanding of fleas during La Tour's lifetime is particularly enlightening in our investigation of the iconography of the *Flea-Catcher*. The seventeenth-century perspective on the pests was rather lighthearted, as they were not yet identified as the bearers of the plague. In fact, the parasites made numerous appearances in literature of an erotic nature. A combination of factors could have induced writers and poets to appropriate the beasts for their sexually charged written caprices. For instance, the trend coincided with a revival of the classical tradition of paradoxical poetry, in which the authors dedicated entire poems to animals and insects generally deemed too trivial to appear in respectable literature.¹ The linguistic similarity between the French words for "flea" and "virginity," as well as the dominance of archaic natural science during La Tour's lifetime, may have also inspired the amatory associations attached to the insect. La Tour certainly would have been aware of the linguistic and literary traditions, if not pseudo-scientific thought, of *la puce* and may have had them in mind when he executed his *Flea-Catcher*.

The Erotics of Flea-Lore

The popular French idiom "avoir la puce à oreille"—literally, "to have a flea in one's ear"—dates back at least to the fourteenth century.² Today, it can mean to have a tidbit of interesting or important information; however, in the seventeenth century, its primary meaning was to have an amorous itch, so to speak. In the French language, ears

¹ For an elaboration on the late Renaissance revival of paradoxical poetry, see Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 107-108.

² For the history of this expression, see Claude Duneton, *La puce à l'oreille: les expressions populaires et leurs origines* (Paris: Balland, 1985), 58-63, esp. 60-63.

have traditionally been conflated with shells—demonstrated by the names of some mollusks, such as “oreilles-de-mer” and “oreilles-de-Vénus”—and shells with female genitalia.³ Therefore, by extrapolation, to have a flea irritating one’s ear is to have an “itch” in one’s genital region or to have amatory longings. La Fontaine wrote, “One will say, a girl who thinks of her absent lover/ All night has a flea in her ear.”⁴ Also, *Le Parnasse des Muses* of 1627 reads in part: “I have had a flea in my ear/ For three or four days./ I awaken a hundred times a night/ Thinking of my love affairs.”⁵ The idiomatic employment of *la puce* turns it into an agent of lust.

The pest appears as a master of sexual pursuits in a slew of erotic flea-poetry in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In these poems, the narrators admire the tiny insect for its privileged access to the female anatomy, and some even long to metamorphose into the lucky bug. The authors of these works legitimized the prurient content of their poems by claiming their participation in an Ovidian tradition of flea-poetry rooted in antiquity.⁶ In reality, Ovid’s oeuvre does not include any amorous flea-men; however, a long poem called *Elegy About the Flea* has been attributed to a minor medieval, neo-Latin poet, Ofilius Sergianus.⁷ In it, the narrator reproaches the “disagreeable pest” for its brashness as it navigates the female body, “daring to broach even the passionate parts, and to taste the pleasures born in those places.”⁸ Except for the *Elegy*, the erotic

³ Duneton gives examples of the conflation of shells and female genitalia from three seventeenth-century texts in *ibid.*, 61.

⁴ “Fille qui pense à son amant absent/ Toute la nuit, dit-on, a la puce à l’oreille.” *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵ “J’ai bien la puce à l’oreille/ Depuis trois ou quatre jours/ Cent fois la nuit je m’éveille/ Pour penser à mes amours.” Albert Fournier, *En cherchant la petite bête* (Paris: Editions Jeheber, 1955), 139.

⁶ John F. Moffitt, “*La Femme à la puce*: The Textual Background of Seventeenth-Century Painted ‘Flea-Hunts,’” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 110 (1987): 103.

⁷ H. David Brumble III, “John Donne’s ‘The Flea’: Some Implications of the Encyclopedic and Poetic Flea Traditions,” *Critical Quarterly* 15 (1973): 148; Marcel Françon, “Un motif de la poésie amoureuse au XVIe siècle,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 56 (1941): 313.

⁸ The English translation is taken from Brumble, “John Donne’s ‘The Flea,’” 148.

potential of the flea seems to have remained untapped through the Middle Ages. During the late Renaissance, the theme was apparently rediscovered and employed into the seventeenth century.⁹

Ronsard provided the earliest extant French example of the literary flea motif with his sonnet from *Folastrie IV* of 1553, which reads, “If only I were a flea! Always kissing her, everyday I would bite her beautiful nipples, but at night I would want to change back into a man, if I could.”¹⁰ Ronsard’s narrator, wishing to hide his masculinity under the guise of an innocent flea, skips the proverbial ear and goes straight for his lover’s breasts. He then describes a day of foreplay that will culminate in his sexual conquest that night.

The collection of poems called *La puce de Madame Desroches* records the inspired proceedings of the salon of Madeleine Desroches and her daughter Catherine in 1579. When a flea happened to alight on the bosom of the latter Desroches, a competition commenced to see who could write the most creative poem about the happy situation of *la puce* on the maiden’s beautiful breast.¹¹ One of the participants, Étienne Pasquier, who first published the anthology in 1582, made full use of the potential for *jeux de mots* in his contribution to the contest for, by accident of the French language, the word for flea, *puce*, is found within a range of words dealing with virginity and the loss thereof. For example, the French word *pucelle* means maiden, *pucelage* translates as maidenhead, and *dépuceler* means to deflower.¹² An excerpt from Pasquier’s poem

⁹ Moffitt, “*La Femme*,” 101.

¹⁰ “Hé, que ne sui-je puce! La baisotant, tous les jours je mordrois ses beaux tétins, mais la nuit je voudrais que rechanger en homme je me pusse.” Ibid.; Françon, “Un motif,” 310.

¹¹ For an analysis of the poetic proceedings of “Les Grands Jours de Poitiers” of 1579, which provided the occasion for the literary competition, see Ann Rosalind Jones, “Contentious Readings: Urban Humanism and Gender Difference in *La Puce de Madame Desroches* (1582),” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995): 109-128.

¹² David B. Wilson, “*La Puce de Madame Desroches* and Donne’s ‘The Flea,’” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): 298; Moffitt, “*La Femme*,” 101. Wilson reasons that the French must have been

illustrates his employment of puns. In the following quote, Pasquier, addressing *la puce*, explains that the victim of the flea's bite, feeling exposed by the creature's wanderlust, finds her honor (or maidenhood) in danger. The original French reads: "Tu la piques, et.../ Ell' craint, pour ne rien celer,/ Que c'est la dépuceler,/ Et bannir à jamais d'elle/ Ce cruel nom de pucelle."¹³

Pasquier continues in the tradition, established by Ofilius Sergianus and resumed by Ronsard, of outlining a wish list of bodily destinations for the man who longs to metamorphose into a flea. He professes, "If only God permitted me/ I'd myself become a flea./ I'd take flight immediately/ To the best spot on your neck,/ Or else, in sweet larceny,/ I would suck upon your breast,/ Or else, slowly, step by step,/ I would slide still further down,/ And with a wanton muzzle/ I'd commit flea idolatry,/ Nipping I will not say what,/ Which I love far more than myself."¹⁴ He concludes his poem by thanking the adventurous flea for stimulating the defenseless maiden with his light touch: "Oh, Flea.../ Thanks to you Madame/ Is aroused for me/ For me she is aroused/ And has a Flea in her ear."¹⁵

In 1605, the English poet Peter Woodhouse composed his ode to the flea entitled *Democritus, his Dream, or the Contention betweene the Elephant and the Flea*, thereby demonstrating that the French were not the only ones to recognize the liberties afforded

responsible for the flowering of erotic flea-poetry because "French poetry alone has this tendency to pun on *puce*, *pucelage*, and *dépuceler*" (*La puce*, 300).

¹³ Wilson, "La Puce," 298.

¹⁴ "Pleust or à Dieu que je pusse/ Seulement devinir Puce:/ Tantost je prenois mon vol/ Tout au plus beau de ton col/ Ou d'une douce rapine, Je suçerois ta poitrine,/ Ou lentement pas à pas/ Je me glisserois plus bas,/ Et d'un muselin folastre, Je serois Puce idolatre/ Pinçottant je ne sçay quoy/ Que j'ayme trop plus que moy." The English translation, as well as the original French, is taken from Jones, "Contentious Readings," 122-123.

¹⁵ "O Puce.../ C'est que Madame par toy/ Se puisse esveiller pour moy,/ Que pour moy elle s'esveille/ Et ayt la Puce en l'oreille." Wilson, "La Puce," 298.

to the minuscule beast.¹⁶ In Woodhouse's work, the insect puts to rest the boastings of the pachyderm when he rhymes, "[...] men envying my prosperitie,/ Have wisht to be transformed into Fleas,/ That so they better might their fancie please./ The coyest dames in Citie or in Court,/ Affoord the Flea free scope him selfe to sport/ In their soft bosomes: and without denay,/ At his best pleasure he may lower stray."¹⁷

In another poem, this one from the anonymous French anthology *Divers insectes* (1645), the narrator again envies the flea for his coveted position on the bosom of a woman. He contrasts the satiety of the pest with the erotic hunger suffered by men. While the human male is denied access to the areas of the female body he craves most, the fortunate insect luxuriates between her breasts, dining freely on her blood.¹⁸

Indeed, the flea's thirst for blood played into the development of the insect's sexualized personality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Based on Aristotelian natural science, coitus was defined as the mingling of the participants' blood.¹⁹ Therefore, when a flea feasts on a man and a woman in succession, the subsequent sanguinary mixing within the parasite's body replicates the sexual act. In another poem from *Divers insectes*, a young man captures a flea he finds on the chest of his beloved. She, in turn, seizes the flea from him and relocates it to his flesh so their bloods will mingle within the creature.²⁰ Thus, in the imaginations of the poet and reader, the beast's tiny body presented a safe venue for vicarious fornication.

¹⁶ Other non-French examples of flea-poetry include works by William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) (quoted in Moffitt, "La Femme," 102) and Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, who would become Pope Pius II (1405-1464) (quoted in Françon, "Un motif," 314).

¹⁷ Françon, "Un motif," 327.

¹⁸ "...[E]n son flanc la beste la resserre./ L'homme de celle-cy fait l'objet de sa faim,/ La puce se repaist du plus pur sang humain." Moffitt, "La Femme," 101; Françon, "Un motif," 313.

¹⁹ Moffitt quotes Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, in "La Femme," 100-101.

²⁰ Fournier, *En cherchant*, 73.

The eponymous insect of John Donne's famous poem "The Flea" (1633) also functions as an ersatz marital bed for the eager narrator and his beloved. The hopeful lover tries to coerce a maiden into having intercourse with him by equating the sexual act to the mixing of bloods within a flea, thereby trivializing it. He explains to the woman: "Mee [the flea] suck'd first and now sucks thee,/ And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;/ Confesse it, this cannot be said/ A sinne, or shame, or losse of maidenhead."²¹ He goes on to say that the flea "swells with one blood made of two,/ And this, alas, is more then we would doe," implying that the woman need not fear the "swelling" of pregnancy.²²

The flea could be seen as a champion of this sort of barren love, not only for its sterilized simulation of coitus via the union of bloods, but also due to the pseudo-scientific understanding of the vermin in the seventeenth century. In 1682, the Dutchman Antony van Leeuwenhoek used his "flea-glass" to identify the insect's sexual organs and to determine the true nature of its reproductive method; however, until and even after he made his discoveries, people continued to yield to the conclusions of the ancient scholars, who declared that, although they do copulate, fleas generate spontaneously.²³ Aristotle contended that they are born of putrefying liquids, while Pliny proposed that they "are generated out of the dirt by the rays of the sun."²⁴ Therefore, according to the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century mindset, the flea's sex life had nothing to do with

²¹ Brumble, "John Donne's 'The Flea,'" 149.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For more information on the development of optical devices in the seventeenth century and its effect on entomology, see Edward G. Reustow, *The Microscope in the Dutch Republic: the Shaping of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 204-205, 208-209.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943), 47. He goes on to argue that the larval form of newborn fleas is further proof of their spontaneous generation, for they would resemble their parents if created from semen (*ibid.*, 67). Pliny's observation is quoted in Brumble, "John Donne's 'The Flea,'" 148. Brumble explains that Pliny's conclusion accounts for the Latin word for fleas, *pulices*, which is derived from the word for dust, *pulvis* (*ibid.*).

procreation, leaving lust as the only impetus for copulation. Therefore, the flea's body became a safe and sympathetic haven for fornication. Lascivious puns and idiomatic expressions involving *la puce* only emphasized the insect's potential for sexual rhetoric, and the rich tradition of erotic flea-poetry solidified the parasite's role as amatory accomplice.

Sexual Content in La Tour's Flea-Catcher

La Tour's sophisticated circle undoubtedly would have taken notice of the trend for erotic flea-literature, making his acquaintance with the popular poetic theme likely. The relevant question is whether or not he intended his *Flea-Catcher* as a painted translation of the literary motif. The intimate view of the female body enjoyed by the flea certainly finds a counterpart in La Tour's voyeuristic scene. Furthermore, the young woman cracks a flea at her bosom, which led Barry Wind to suggest that the work refers to the glorious death of Pasquier's flea between the breasts of Catherine Desroches.²⁵

On the other hand, La Tour's tableau hardly reproduces the male fantasies described in the poetry of Ronsard, Pasquier, and the like. First of all, the painted flea-catcher probably did not resemble the average reader's image of the temptingly beautiful woman violated by the lusty flea. Her substantial body lacks grace or delicacy of proportion, and her hair, a sign of femininity, remains hidden.²⁶ Moreover, while the poems are diverting and cavalier in attitude, the painting seems more somber in tone. If the presence of fleas in the painting implies a sexual significance, what did La Tour intend to communicate?

²⁵ Wind, "Close Encounters," 121.

²⁶ Naturally, eroticism is subjective. Wind, for example, believes that "La Tour's languorous and torpidly sensual figure [does suggest] erotic content" (ibid.).

If read in conjunction with the young woman's lack of beauty and grace, the theme of sexuality represented by the fleas might place the *Flea-Catcher* under the rubric of moralistic paintings, in which improper sexual conduct and its repercussions are illustrated for educational purposes. According to the emblem book *Emblemata Amatoria* (1615), the burned-down candle symbolizes the degeneration of a life consumed by love's dangerous flames.²⁷ The flea-catcher's rather short candle along with her worn appearance might, then, indicate the demoralizing consequences of prostitution or of illegitimate pregnancy.

Mathurin Regnier, a writer in the late sixteenth century, reported that many prostitutes actually made business transactions in the backs of candle shops, leading them to adopt the moniker, "courtesans of the candle."²⁸ The burning candle in the painting may serve a dual purpose: to signify the flea-catcher's profession and to reflect the deterioration of the young woman who lives in amatory servitude. Her clients, like the fleas she hunts, have eaten away at her vitality. Here, there is none of the joy in promiscuity promised by the authors of flea-poetry, at least not for the woman. Furthermore, the kinship of the *femme à la puce* with Mary Magdalen, discussed above, reiterates the flea-catcher's possible identification with prostitution. Wind also notes a resemblance between her jet bracelet and a similar ornament worn by a courtesan in a work by La Tour's Lorraine contemporary Georges Lallemand.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid., 122; Choné, *Emblèmes*, 529, n. 492.

²⁸ "Courtisanes à la chandelle" in the original French. Wind, "Close Encounters," 122.

²⁹ Ibid. However, as we will see below, the jet bracelet has also been associated with the flea-catcher's potential identification as a servant.

When Pariset initially published the *Flea-Catcher* in 1955, he suggested that the woman in the painting might be pregnant.³⁰ Charpentier argues that her swollen stomach is simply an archaic convention for depicting nubile females, and we need only look to La Tour's other painted women to see their similarly bloated forms.³¹ Alain Larcan, on the other hand, cleverly points out that La Tour's flea-catcher is the only extant nude female in his oeuvre and that his other women owe their distended bellies to the contemporary mode of dress, which called for elaborate undergarments and thick fabrics. Pregnancy is the only explanation for the flea-catcher's stout silhouette.³²

While Rosenberg and De L'Épinay propose that she could be one of the many "servantes grosses" described in the Old Testament,³³ Larcan specifically identifies her as Hagar, mistress to Abraham.³⁴ The story goes that Abraham's sterile wife, Sarah, coerced Hagar, the servant, into Abraham's bed in the hope of giving him a son. However, when Sarah miraculously became pregnant herself, she ejected Hagar, who was already impregnated by Abraham, from her home. Larcan contends that the flea-catcher's dark complexion, turban, and jet bracelet signify Hagar's Egyptian ethnicity and that the painting depicts the pregnant servant "stripped" of all assets and morale.³⁵

Larcan's evidence is tenuous, as the turban appears on non-Egyptians in other works by La Tour, such as *The Card Players* (fig. 19) and *The Adoration of the*

³⁰ Pariset writes that the young woman "peut-être n'est-ce plus une jeune fille et pas encore une jeune mère" (*La servante*, 94).

³¹ Charpentier, "Peut-on toujours parler," 101, n. 5.

³² Alain Larcan, "A propos du tableau de Georges de La Tour du Musée Lorrain dit *La femme à la puce*," *Le pays lorrain* 57 (1976): 160-161. Christopher Wright identifies the flea-catcher as none other than the Virgin Mary herself, "isolated by Joseph when he discovers that she is with child, the candle thus symbolizing the forthcoming Christ as the Light of the World" (*French Painters of the Seventeenth Century* [London: Orbis, 1985], 46). However, it is hard to imagine the Virgin being depicted in such an indecorous manner during the seventeenth century.

³³ Rosenberg and De L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour*, 152.

³⁴ Larcan, "A propos."

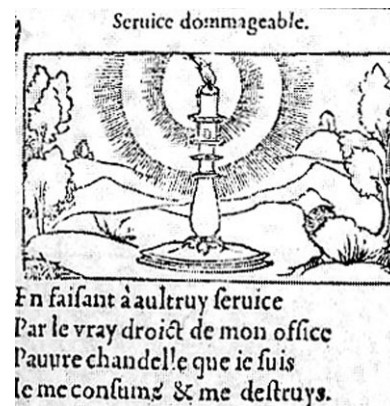
³⁵ *Ibid.*, 161. "[L]a nudité suggère le dénuement matériel et moral" (*ibid.*, 162).

Shepherds. Also, compared to the certifiable gypsies in his *Fortune-Teller* (fig. 6), the flea-catcher's complexion looks positively Caucasian. On the other hand, La Tour's predilection for religious painting makes it quite possible that the flea-catcher could be a biblical figure. Indeed, Rosenberg and De L'Épinay have chosen to refer to the painting as *Scène biblique* rather than the conventional title of *La femme à la puce*, thereby indicating their conviction that she is one of the "servantes grosses," if not specifically Hagar.³⁶

The flea-catcher's hypothetical pregnancy may illustrate an anonymous girl, if not a biblical character, perhaps a resident at Notre Dame du Refuge or some other unfortunate young mother. The search for fleas might symbolize her desire to purge herself of her sexual sins like Mary Magdalen. Or, in the spirit of Pasquier's pun on *puce-pucelle-pucelage-dépuceler*, the cracking of the insect could denote the breaking of her maidenhead, which led to her swollen condition.

Yet, the painting is not strikingly admonitory in tone. Rather than being didactic, La Tour's painting could quite simply be a scene of humanity at its most raw and pitiable. Gilles Corrozet's emblem book *Hécatomgraphie*, published in Paris in 1540, includes an image of a burned-down candle as symbolic of debasing servitude (fig. 25).³⁷ Its text reads, in part:

"In servicing others/ In the true duty of my office,/ Poor candle that I am,/ I consume myself and destroy myself."³⁸ La Tour may have shared the *Hécatomgraphie*'s pathos



25. Gilles Corrozet, "Service dommageable," from *Hécatomgraphie*.

³⁶ Rosenberg and De L'Épinay, *Georges de La Tour*, 152.

³⁷ Choné, *Emblèmes*, 529, n. 491.

for the self-sacrificing servant. The emblem book continues by saying that, under the employment of a bad master, the servant, “only learns about sin and vice,/ And acquires too often nothing but lice.”³⁹ The potential pregnancy of the flea (louse?)-catcher⁴⁰ might exemplify the “sin and vice” of the piteous servant described by Corrozet, as well as the effects of the perilous flames of love’s candle found in the *Emblemata Amatoria*, but without an attitude of reproach.

Only three or four decades before La Tour executed the *Flea-Catcher*, a young servant woman, embroiled in a ruinous love affair, reportedly committed suicide in Nancy. Before her death, a fellow servant urged her to repent her sins, for even the Magdalen earned God’s forgiveness, but to no avail.⁴¹ Interestingly, a jet bracelet, probably much like the one worn on the flea-catcher’s wrist, is listed in the inventory of her possessions.⁴² It is tempting to imagine the *Flea-Catcher* as a picture of the wretched servant woman before her suicide, since both her story and the painting combine themes of illicit love and servitude. It is not impossible that La Tour heard of the suicide (he was around fourteen years old at the time of its occurrence); but the only tangible connection between the report and the flea-catcher is the jet bracelet, and according to Choné, women of modest resources commonly possessed jet jewelry.⁴³ Undoubtedly, many young women of small means found themselves in similar predicaments, and La Tour (or perhaps his patron) could have found inspiration in and empathy for their collective story,

³⁸ “En faisant à aultruy service/ Par le vray droict de mon office,/ Pauvre chandelle que je suis,/ Je me consume & me destruy.” Gilles Corrozet, *Hécatomgraphie* (Paris: H. Champion, 1905), 126.

³⁹ “On n’y apprend que tout péché & vice,/ Et n’acquiert ou maintessoys que des poulx.” Ibid., 127. The English translation is taken from Conisbee, “An Introduction,” 97.

⁴⁰ Let us recall that the seventeenth century made no distinction between fleas and lice. See n. 2 of this essay.

⁴¹ The young servant reportedly replied to her friend’s concern by saying that “she did not care” (“elle ne s’en souciat pas”) (Choné, *Emblèmes*, 510, n. 413).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

making *la femme à la puce* the embodiment of dejected and imperfect humanity. Her proposed sexual indiscretions, then, take on tragic proportions unforeseen by the rapturously happy flea-poets.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

There is always the danger of over-analysis in iconographical studies, particularly where little concrete evidence is available. That said, perceived religious and sexual subtexts could cloud the basic humanity inherent in La Tour's *Flea-Catcher*. At the same time, we should remember that art has not always assumed the liberties it does today and that artists operated under certain restrictions and conventions prescribed by institutional bodies during La Tour's lifetime. Hence, examinations of contemporary religion, literature, science, and other manifestations of culture and power provide helpful information for iconographical exegeses of the most esoteric works. The mysterious *Flea-Catcher*, so different from the rest of La Tour's oeuvre and also from the other works of France and Lorraine during the seventeenth century, requires such interpretive support.

A comparison between La Tour's painting and the Dutch flea-hunts yields some information, but nothing conclusive. La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* seems at once distantly removed from the Netherlandish tradition of flea-paintings and inextricably linked to it. It does not fit neatly into any of the Dutch categories of flea-painting; yet, it has a kinship with each. For example, the flea-catcher as the repentant and contemplative Mary Magdalen purifies her soul just as the Dutch mother cleanses her child's body and spirit. Furthermore, if considered in relation to the tradition of flea-poetry, the insect appears as sexual agent in *La femme à la puce*, just as it does in Honthorst's composition. Lastly, the implications of servitude, amatory or otherwise, in La Tour's painting and its presentation of a scene from quotidian life align it with the lowlife genre espoused by Brouwer. Further research on the possibility of a journey to the Netherlands for La Tour

may illuminate the significance of the similarities between the *Flea-Catcher* and the painted flea-hunts of the Low Countries. Until further discoveries are made on the subject, we are left to analyze it within its own national context.

The intense Catholicity of Lorraine provided an immediate source of inspiration for the majority of La Tour's artistic output, and it is difficult to imagine that the *Flea-Catcher* would depart so far from the rest of his oeuvre as to eliminate Catholic iconography altogether. Chapter two demonstrated how the work subtly braids different strands of Catholicism like Jansenism, Franciscanism, Quietism, and the cult of the Magdalen without conflict. History has not yet revealed the precise religious meaning of the flea, if one exists; however, ancillary features of the painting—such as candlelight and darkness—provide for an intensely spiritual reading in line with the dominant religious factions of Lorraine.

Language, literature, and pseudo-science, on the other hand, bestow the insect with a lively, sexualized personality. The pest's presence in the painting should not negate the possibility of a pious Catholic interpretation, however. *La femme à la puce* may have grown from the same erotic *topos* that instigated the merry flea-poems of Ronsard, Pasquier, and Donne, but La Tour's handling of the subject is anything but playful. Whether or not La Tour intended to admonish or empathize with the unfortunate victim of sexual misdeed remains undeterminable. Nevertheless, the implications of the negative effects of sexual servitude and illegitimate pregnancy do not deviate from the teachings of Christianity.

La Tour's *Flea-Catcher* reveals a thematic density that is not necessarily characteristic of the rest of his works, which prove to be more straightforward in content.

There is no reason to commit to only one interpretation of the painting, as the suggestions proposed by this essay are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the themes interweave in the painting, endowing it with multiple layers of possible meanings. In the final analysis, we must ask if knowing La Tour's original intention is truly desirable when so much can be gleaned from the process of investigation. A conclusive answer would eternally immobilize the iconographic fluidity of *La femme à la puce*.

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Vita

Crissy Bergeron, a native of Houston, Texas, has made Louisiana her home since 1993. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2001 from the Louisiana Scholars' College at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, where she majored in the liberal arts and sciences with an emphasis in the humanities and social thought and a minor in French. While there, she completed an undergraduate thesis entitled, "Hyperconscious Minds: The Schizophrenic Tendencies in the Visual Art of European Modernism." Upon graduation, she worked in television and radio advertising for three and a half years before enrolling in the graduate program for art history at Louisiana State University, where she studied seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European painting under Professors Mark J. Zucker and Darius Spieth. She will receive her master's degree in May 2007. She currently works as the Education Associate at the Louisiana State Museum-Baton Rouge.