

Saint Mary Magdalene: The Growth of a Legend

Any reflection on Saint Mary Magdalene must begin with the New Testament, where her elusive identity begins. “Mary,” not always specified “Magdalene,” is present at five moments. In the Latin Church “Mary” is the same person. The Greek Church distinguishes three different persons—the sinner, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and Mary Magdalene—with separate feasts in the liturgical calendar.¹ Versions of Mary’s later life differ. For Greeks, she retires to Ephesus with the Blessed Virgin; for Latins, she goes to France with Lazarus, is a significant evangelist, and spends her last thirty years in contemplation. Why do we have these stories? Many expressed the Catholic imagination of the Middle Ages that fulfilled a desire for legend.

Because my academic life is centered in English literature, my comments this morning consider texts from England, where the saint’s presence is obvious with Magdalene College, at Oxford and at Cambridge. My pronunciation is the English one; the word “maudlin”—over emotional, weeping penitent—was derived from her in the seventeenth century; it is an alternative to “magdalen” defined as “reformed prostitute.”

I begin with Anglo-Saxon Mary Magdalene in sermons, devotional poetry, and art that preceded hagiographical *Legenda Aurea*, written in Latin by Dominican Jacobus (Jacopo) de Voraigne in the thirteenth century. This compendium of legends, intended as a handbook for medieval sermons, also inspired meditations and plays. It is a primary text, translated and printed by William Caxton as *The Golden Legend* in 1483. Early modern humanists resented it, yet for Baroque poets Mary Magdalene was an archetype. Nineteenth-century moralists cited her in campaigns against “fallen women.” She

inspired Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti to paint her as a “stunner,” while his sister Christina’s poem was a feminist plea. The twentieth century saw a surge of interest, especially *The Gospel of Mary* that provoked scholarly interest, feminist criticism, novels, musicals, and films.

Mary Magdalene in the New Testament and Church Pronouncements

Before turning to legends and literary depictions it is essential to review seminal texts: the New Testament, which named Mary Magdalene on five occasions, and hierarchical responses. Only Luke specifies her as an early follower of Jesus; he also identifies her as the woman “from whom seven devils had gone out” [8:1-3]. Matthew, Mark, and John place her at the Crucifixion; Luke only implies her presence. All four Gospels report her at the burial and recount her return to the empty tomb. Only Mark and John describe Jesus’ first appearance to her after the Crucifixion.

Mark briefly tells Jesus’ appearance and Mary’s report to the disciples, “as they were mourning and weeping. And they, hearing that he was alive and had been seen by her, did not believe it” (16: 11). John introduces the ‘gardener.’ Although Mary announces her encounter to the disciples, John does not indicate their response. Instead he quickly records “that same day, the first of the week, though the doors where the disciples gathered had been closed for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them, “Peace be to you!” ... showed them his hands and his side, the disciples therefore rejoiced at the sight of the Lord ... breathed upon them, and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained’” (John 20: 19-20). John concludes with doubting Thomas

and establishing the primacy of Peter—authority for the Church. The Gospel for 22 July is John 20: 1-2 and 11-18 —reminder of Mary’s sins and forgiveness.

Other women called “Mary” are identified as Mary Magdalene: Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha who asked Jesus to raise their brother Lazarus from the dead (John 11: 1-45; 12: 1-8). Mary’s leaving domestic preparations to Martha to sit at Jesus’ feet is praised: “Mary has chosen the better part which shall not be taken from her” (Luke 10: 38-4, John 12: 2-3). Commentators identify ‘the better part’ as the contemplative life. Nevertheless, most influential is the unnamed sinner who washes Jesus’ feet at Simon the Pharisee’s banquet (Luke 7: 36-50).

Two significant texts, Pope Gregory the Great’s Latin *Homilies 33* and *25*, defined Mary Magdalene’s character. Both were preached in 591. *Homily 33* identified the unnamed sinner: “We believe that this woman whom Luke calls a female sinner, whom John calls Mary, is the same Mary from whom Mark says seven demons were cast out.”² Gregory, having defined the seven demons as the seven cardinal sins (one of which is lust), explained the ointment used by the unnamed sinner when she anointed Jesus’ feet had previously been used “to perfume the flesh in forbidden acts.” In the words of one commentator, “holy pornography.” Gregory urged Mary Magdalene’s role as penitent: “She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance.”³

Homily 25, which presented Mary Magdalene as model for the contemplative life, stressed the necessity for perseverance.⁴ It is the Second Reading for 22 July in *The Liturgy of the Hours*. Gregory calls for reflection

on Mary’s attitude and the great love she felt for Christ; for though the disciples had left the tomb, she remained. . . . the only one to see him. *For perseverance is essential to any good deed, as the voice of truth tells us: Whosoever perseveres to the end will be saved.*⁵

The ardent woman disciple persists when fearful men give up. (In charity, we acknowledge men were more at risk of being martyred.) The Latin Church promulgated Gregory's characterization for centuries, until the liturgical calendar reform of 1969.

In the interim there were changes. Vatican II gradually shifted definition of Mary from prostitute / repentant sinner to disciple. Finally, at Pope Francis's wish,

the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published a new decree, 3 June 2016, Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, by which the celebration of St. Mary Magdalene, currently obligatory memory, will be elevated in the general calendar to the level of a feast day. ... The decree will enable Mary Magdalene to be 'celebrated' liturgically like the rest of the apostles.⁶

This was in "the context of the Jubilee of Mercy to stress the importance of this woman, who shows great love for Christ and was very dear to Christ." Archbishop Arthur Roche (secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments) summarized clerical judgments and reforms. Contrasting the gardens of Paradise and of the Resurrection has "ecclesiastical importance ... a good lesson for every disciple of Jesus: do not seek human securities and worldly honours, but faith in the Living and Risen Christ." Mary Magdalene, eyewitness and "evangelist" because she announced the good news to the disciples, named by Thomas Aquinas "apostle to the apostles," deserves "the same level of festivity given to the apostles in the General Roman Calendar." And ... "the special mission of this woman [should] be highlighted, as an example and model to every woman in the Church." Sadly gender constraints linger—might not men perceive a worthy model? Is not the Church exhorting *all* to Evangelization ... a remedy to clerical failure and scandal?

Anglo-Saxon Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene was honored in Anglo-Saxon England. Bede's *Martyrology* (c.720) set July 22 as her feast day. *Old English Martyrology* (9th century) told her life as hermit. Æthelwold of Winchester's *Benedictional* (late 10th century), in contradiction to Gregory the Great, associated Mary Magdalene with the Virgin Mary, giving her virginal attributes stressed by early cults that praised feminine holiness. In Scotland (then part of Anglo-Saxon Northumbria) stands the Ruthwell Cross, a rare monument from c.700. Eighteen feet tall, richly carved stone shows the life of Christ, Evangelists, hermits, interlacing, and inscriptions. One broad side's central image is Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet; above she meets Martha (symbolizing active and contemplative life).

Eighteen long and comprehensive *Blickling Homilies* (late 10th century) were based on the liturgical cycle. "Palm Sunday" introduced Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Lazarus at Bethany, where the Saviour responds to Martha's request that her sister help domestically: "Mary hath chosen the best part." He also rebukes Judas's objection to wasteful expense; Mary "has wrought a good work ... and this gospel shall be said and preached throughout all the world, because this was done in remembrance of me." The Anglo-Saxon preacher added wryly: "The Jewish folk knew that Jesus was come to the home of Lazarus, then they proceeded thither, nevertheless, not for his (Jesus') sake, but out of a desire of curiosity on account of the miracle, and they wished to see Lazarus, whom he had previously raised from the dead."⁷ Then the homilist explained:

The evangelist has said that Martha and Mary betoken this transitory and fleeting life. Martha received Christ in her house, that she might minister unto him. What does she signify, but the holy church, that is, believing men who prepare a clean habitation in their hearts for Christ himself? ... Mary... betokeneth holy church in the future world, which shall be freed from all its labours, and shall have sight alone of the heavenly glory, and shall rest in the presence of our Lord, and shall unceasingly praise him. ... [37-38].

This is a far cry from the repentant prostitute.

BL Cotton MS Vespasian D. XIV, early twelfth century, contained forty-nine Early English homilies. Five were about the Virgin Mary (three Assumption, one Annunciation and one Festival of); three featured Mary and Martha. This marked how these women were associated.⁸ “XVII” made the same argument as the *Blickling Homilies*. Mary and Martha betoken transitory and eternal life, contrasted as a time to help the poor and a time when there will be no such necessity. We should imitate Martha for the former and Mary for the latter. Moreover, the wisdom of Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory inspired this English rendering. “XLIII,” beginning with Luke’s account of the Saviour’s visit to Martha’s “cæstele,” recounted Jesus’ praise of Mary’s better choice. The castle / stronghold betokens the pure Virgin Mary. Martha and Mary, complementary characters, signify a life of toil and of eternal life, work and contemplation.

Saint Anselm (c.1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, sometimes called “father of scholasticism,” also “created a new kind of poetry—the poetry of intimate, personal devotion—written in the rhymed prose of the day.”⁹ His “Prayer to St Mary Magdalene” asks that “the most evil and sinful of men,” receive mercy as did she. Reflecting on the meeting after the Resurrection, Anselm queries why all-knowing Christ asks, “Woman, why are you weeping? ... Who are you looking for?” Given her suffering and grief, why did not Our Lord immediately identify Himself; did Jesus’ compassion end with His death? “But how should I, in misery and without love, / dare to describe the love of God / and the blessed friend of God?” (206). “One who has sinned against Jesus” and been “indolent” prays to our all-knowing Redeemer: “Hear me, for your love, / and for the dear merits of your beloved Mary, / and your blessed Mother, the greater Mary” (206).

The Golden Legend

An Italian Dominican priest, Jacobus (Jacopo) de Voragine (c. 1228/30—1298), wrote the essential text for Mary Magdalene's legend. Among his many writings were a commentary on St. Augustine, a collection of sermons, and a chronicle of Genoa, where he served as Archbishop. Nevertheless, his fame rests on *Legenda Sanctorum*, the Legend of the Saints. In the Middle Ages “legend” did not mean myth or fable, but “lesson” or “reading.” Emile Male, great French medievalist, named “Readings in the Lives of the Saints” as one of ten books that provide an adequate idea of medieval thought and knowledge. More than 1,000 transcripts document its dissemination; it became known as *Legenda Aurea*, *The Golden Legend*—it was worth its weight in gold! Hooray for imaginative storytelling!

The first European printing was at Basle c.1440; by 1500 there were at least seventy-four Latin editions, five French, eight Italian, fourteen Low German, three Bohemian, and three English. Most influential in English was William Caxton's *The Golden Legend* (1483), often reprinted—until faulted by Renaissance humanists and Reformation objectors. Vernacular versions attest “popular” literature, not limited to the “learned”—chiefly clergy. Predictably Early Modern humanists protested. Juan Vives (1493-1540), Spanish educational theorist and philosopher who challenged Scholasticism, urged study of outstanding Greek and Latin authors as arbiters of truth. He was a friend of Erasmus (1466-1536), Dutch humanist and theologian, and of Thomas More (1478-1535), Catholic martyr and saint. Vives, briefly at the court of Henry VIII (1523-1528), instructed Mary Tudor, daughter of Queen Catherine of Aragon. *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1524) urged study of classical literature and the

Church Fathers—but also “manual tasks.”¹⁰ The ideal princess combines Mary and Martha? Vives objected to the author of *The Golden Legend*, echoing Erasmus ‘fools’: “those who love to hear or tell feign’d Miracles and strange lyes, and are never weary of any Tale, though never so long, so it be of Ghosts, Spirits, Goblins, Devils, or the like; which the farther they are from the truth, the more readily they are believ’d and the more they tickle their itching ears.”¹¹ Here I make a public disclaimer: humanists condemned medieval romances, subject of most of my research and books.¹²

The current *Catholic Encyclopedia* poses alternatives:

If we are to judge the “Golden Legend” from an historical standpoint, we must condemn it as entirely uncritical and hence of no value, except in so far as it teaches us that the people of those times were an extremely naive and thoroughly religious people, permeated with an unshakeable belief in God’s omnipotence and His fatherly care for those who lead a saintly life.

If, on the other hand, we view the “Golden Legend” as an artistically composed book of devotion, we must admit that it is a complete success. It is admirably adapted to enhance our love and respect towards God, to foster our devotion towards His saints, and to animate us with a holy zeal to follow their example. The chief object ... was ... to write books of devotion that were adapted to the simple manners of the common people.¹³

This challenges those committed to evangelization.

Introduction to *The Golden Legend*—I cite Caxton’s translation—identified qualities for Mary Magdalene: “lighter” / light-giver, or “lighted”/ enlightened woman:

the best parts that she chose: ... penance, ... contemplation. ... heavenly glory. ... For tofore her conversion she was abiding guilty by obligation of everlasting pain. In the conversion she was garnished by armour of penance. ... after her conversion she was praised by overabundance of grace. For whereas sin abounded, grace overabounded, and was more, etc.”¹⁴

Characterization was of the repentant sinner, but not belabored.

“The Life of S. Mary Magdalene” began with “noble lineage”: parents Cyrus and Eucharis, brother Lazarus, and sister Martha—and inheritances.

Mary had the castle of Magdala, whereof she had her name Magdalene. And Lazarus ... the city of Jerusalem, and Martha ... Bethany. And when gave Mary herself to all delights of the body, and Lazarus entended all to knighthood, Martha ... administered to knights, and her servants, and to poor men, such necessities as they needed. Nevertheless, after the ascension of our Lord, they sold all these things, and brought the value thereof, and laid it at the feet of the apostles [74].

Couched in medieval terms of castle, knights, and charity, this explained who financed apostles. Medieval imagination—wish fulfillment?—enriched.

Mary “shone in beauty greatly, and in riches, so much the more she submitted her body to delight, and therefore lost her right name, and was called customably a sinner.”

But she listens to Jesus preach, is inspired by the Holy Ghost, goes to Simon’s house, washes the Lord’s feet with her tears and anoints them with “precious ointments” (74).

The Lord “reproved” the Pharisee for his “presumption” in objecting and

forgave the woman all her sins. And this is she, that same Mary Magdalene to whom our Lord gave so many great gifts. And showed so great signs of love, that he took from her seven devils. He embraced her all in his love, and made her right familiar with him. He would that she would be his hostess, and his procuress on his journey, and he oftentimes excused her sweetly; ... against the Pharisee which said that she was not clean, and unto her sister that said she was idle, unto Judas, who said that she was a wastresse of goods. And when he saw her weep he could not withhold his tears. And for love of her he raised Lazarus which had been four days dead; and healed her sister from the flux of blood which had held her seven years. And by the merits of her he made Martelle, chamberer of her sister Martha, to say that sweet word: Blessed be the womb that bare thee, and the paps that gave thee suck. But, after S. Ambrose, it was Martha that said so, and this was her chamberer [75].

A summary of Gospel references followed this remarkable assimilation of disparate details. To Mary Magdalene Christ “appeared first after his resurrection, and was *fellow to the apostles*, and made of our Lord *apostlesse of the apostles*” (italics mine 75). In my edition these events fill four pages; the next fourteen pages relate what happened “after his ascension.”

The confluence of scriptural moments was creative; legends are imaginative, albeit given context by geography and monuments. Legends answer the question ‘What happened to Mary Magdalene?’ and indeed to other women? Acts detail activities of male apostles and followers; *The Golden Legend* tells Mary Magdalene’s later life.

Fourteen years after the Ascension

S. Maximin, Mary Magdalene, and Lazarus her brother, Martha her sister, Marcelle, chamberer to Martha, ... and many other christian men ... put into a ship in the sea without any tackle or rudder, for to be drowned. But by the purveyance of Almighty God they all came to Marseilles [76].

The apostles went east, they went west. Seeing the pagan people come to their temple to sacrifice to idols,

blessed Mary Magdalen ... arose up peaceably with a glad visage, a discreet tongue and well speaking, and began to preach the faith and law of Jesu Christ ... Then were they amarvelled of the beauty, of the reason, and of the fair speaking of her. And it was no marvel that the mouth that had kissed the feet of our Lord so debonairly and so goodly, should be inspired with the word of God more than the other [76].

This episode dramatized Mary Magdalene’s role as skillful preacher; moreover, it recalled her unique closeness to Jesus.

Jacobus continued with his richest example of her as evangelist. When the prince of the province and his wife sacrificed to their idols to have a child, “Mary Magdalene *preached* to them Jesu Christ and forbade them those sacrifices” (italics mine). In two visions to the wife, she warns about her husband’s neglect of the poor. The third vision comes to husband and wife. Mary, “with a frowning and angry visage,” excoriates—“tyrant ... father the devil ... serpent thy wife ... enemy of the cross”—guilty of gluttony while “the holy saints of our Lord” perish with hunger, clothed in silk while others lack. Not surprisingly the couple “sigh and tremble”; it is “more profitable for us to obey her, than to run into the ire of her God, whom she *preacheth*” (italics mine). She prays, and

the wife conceives. Still skeptical, the husband / prince “would go to S. Peter for to wit it were true that Mary Magdalene had *preached* of Jesu Christ” (italics mine). After Mary makes the sign of the cross on their shoulders, the “pilgrims” sail in a well-provisioned ship. In the midst of a violent storm, the wife gives birth to a son and dies. Frightened mariners insist her body be cast into the sea, lest the storm never stop. The grieving husband asks time to be certain his wife is not “aswoon of the pain” of childbirth. The mariners agree to bury her on a nearby mountain, but the rock is so hard they simply cover the body with a mantle. With no one to nurture the newborn, the prince places the child on his mother’s breast. He questions “Why?” but continues to S. Peter, who urges consolation in the might of God, who gives and takes life. Peter then provides a tour of Jerusalem’s sacred places and teaches the faith. People in the Middle Ages—as today—in the words of Chaucer “longed to go on pilgrimages.”

After two years the prince sails for Marseilles and passes the mountain. He goes ashore—and discovers a toddler, “whom Mary Magdalene had kept.” The prince declares belief in Mary Magdalene’s efficacy; she kept his son alive; he prays she will restore his wife. The wife “respired, and took life, and said, like as she had been waked of her sleep: O blessed Mary Magdalene thou art of great merit and glorious” (81). Mary Magdalene took her on the pilgrimage with S. Peter. The family sail home to Marseilles, where “they found the blessed Mary Magdalene *preaching with her disciples*” (italics mine). They destroy “temples of idols” and preach as far as Aix, where Maximin becomes bishop.

At this point Mary Magdalene, “desirous of sovereign contemplation,” enters the final stage of her life (82)—five pages in Caxton’s translation. In a place “ordained by the angel of God,” she spends thirty years with no bodily comforts. At every “canonical

hour” she hears “the glorious song of the heavenly companies with her bodily ears” and is fed before being returned, “with no need of corporal nourishing,” to her “proper place.”

A hermit priest, seeing this vision, approaches the cave that he soon realizes is “a secret celestial place” (83). After he prays three times to Jesus for understanding, Mary Magdalene explains “the celestial company” heard and fed her. Because the Lord has showed the hour of her death, she asks the priest to tell S. Maximin to go at matins to his oratory. There he

saw the blessed Mary Magdalene standing in the quire or choir yet among angels that brought her, and was lift up from the earth the space of two or three cubits [3 or 4 feet]. And praying to our Lord she held up her hands, and when S. Maximin saw her, he was afraid ... [after she reassures him, he approaches] and, as it is read in the books of the said S. Maximin, for the customable vision that she had of angels every day, the cheer and visage of her shone as clear as it had been the rays of the sun ... [S. Maximin summons all the clerks and priests; Mary Magdalene receives the Eucharist] with great abundance of tears, and after stretched her body tofore the altar, and her right blessed soul departed from the body and went to our Lord [85].

For seven days “sweet-smelling odour”— sign of sanctity—comes from her body. S. Maximin anoints the body, buries it “honourably,” and instructs he is to be buried beside her. Jacobus cited authority; “Hegesippus, with other books of Josephus accord enough with the said story” (85).¹⁵

After detailing removal of relics and miracles, Jacobus mused: “Some say that S. Mary Magdalene was wedded to S. John the Evangelist when Christ called him from the wedding.” His loss led her to a life of sin. To prevent “the calling of S. John” being “occasion of her damnation, ... our Lord converted her mercifully to penance,” replacing “sovereign delight in the flesh ... with sovereign delight spiritual ... the love of God. And it is said that he ennobled S. John tofore all other with the sweetness of his familiarity, because he had taken him from the delight aforesaid” (87-88).

The medieval imagination was not shy about sexuality. Witness all those paintings of St. Joseph as gray-haired. Jacobus offered an alternative: “Certain authors relate . . . But this is held to be a false and frivolous tale: and Friar Albert, in his preface to the Gospel of Saint John, declares the espoused wife whom the apostle left behind to follow Jesus remained a virgin all her life, and later lived in the company of the Blessed Virgin.”¹⁶

Mary Magdalene also had a part in “The Life of Saint Martha,” assigned to July 29. Life in Gaul was filled with wonders! Martha confronts “a great dragon, half beast and half fish, greater than an ox, longer than a horse, having teeth sharp as a sword, and horned on either side, head like a lion, tail like a serpent, and defended himself with two wings on either side.” Martha “cast on him holy water, and showed him the cross, and standing still as a sheep, she bound him with her own girdle, and then was slain with spears and glaives of the people” (136). Medieval heroic action is exciting—as are current imitations.

Like Mary Magdalene, Martha knows the time of her death. She summons “all the convent of brethren and of sisters” and bids them rejoice: “for I see the fellowship of angels bear the soul of my sister Mary unto heaven. O most sweet and fair sister, thou livest now with thy master and my guest in the blessed seat in heaven.” At night after a wind extinguished candles, Martha “saw her sister coming to her, holding a brand in her hand, and lighted the tapers and lamps, and as each of them called other by name, Christ came to them saying: Come, my well-beloved hostess, for where I am thou shalt be with me” (139). “The Life of St. Martha” also noted. “Martilla, her servant, wrote her life, which after went to Sclavonia, and there *preached the gospel of Christ*, and after ten years from the death of Martha, she rested in our Lord” (italics mine 140).

The Golden Legend, like the Gospels, recorded miracles. Caxton's stress on feminine beauty and pious devotion combined with intellectual toughness and preaching eloquence enthralled countless English readers—but disconcerted some because he introduced new material and omitted that deemed unsuitable, including Jacobus's occasional expressions of doubt. *The Golden Legend* was “based more firmly on narrative and moral than that of any of his predecessors; it is simpler and less questioning.”¹⁷ Woodcuts greatly enhanced the book's appeal.¹⁸

“God's Plenty”

Preaching, which often employed legends, occasioned intense responses in fourteenth-century England. A Poetry Appendix in *The Liturgy of the Hours* quotes Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340-1400) and William Langland (1330-1400). Chaucer's portrait of the Parish Priest is the ideal, “rich of holy thought and work ... a learned man ... / That Christes gospel truly would preach.”¹⁹ His *Parson's Tale*, a sermon on the Seven Deadly Sins, had two references to Mary Magdalene. One example of Envy is Simon the Pharisee who bore a grudge against her when she ‘wept at Jesus' feet for her sins’ (X. 502-504). A long section on woman's chastity illustrated Lechery. Widows who lead a clean life are praised as ‘the vessels / containers of the blessed Magdalene, that fulfilleth holy church of good odor’ (X. 947). The sweet perfume she brought fills “the whole church.” Among Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* were various clerics and five tales identifiable as sermons. The Friar, mendicant preacher and rival to local priests, was subject of Chaucer's longest portrait. Most challenging is the brilliant Pardoner, who declares, “I preach for nothing but for greed of gain” and describes his technique:

‘Well, then I give examples thick and fast
From bygone times, old stories from the past;
A yokel mind loves stories from of old,
Being the kind it can repeat and hold.’²⁰

He further asserts, “‘For though I am a wholly vicious man / Don’t think I can’t tell moral tales. I can’” (260). One wonders whether he told of Mary Magdalene. The Shipman who sails to France has a boat named *Maudelayne* (I (A) 410). On the roof of the magnificent tomb of Chaucer’s granddaughter Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk (c.1440-1475) in Ewelme is an image of Mary Magdalene.

Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, a poem that cries for social justice, attacked preachers: “clerics ... tell perhaps a tale or two of the Trinity ... drivell from the dais that the deity is known to them”—and ignore the poor. “Clerics and other conditions converse of God readily, / And have him much in the mouth, but mean men in their hearts.”

Medieval people expected preachers to tell stories. John Mirk’s *Festial* (late 1380s), a collection of sixty-eight sermons, began with Advent. Lenten sermons were most elaborate; six additional ones were for weddings, burials, etc.²¹ Survival of twenty-one perfect and nineteen partial manuscripts, with different dialects, shows widespread use. Caxton printed *Festial* in 1483, the same year as *The Golden Legend*; in the 1490s there were ten editions by six printers. The last was in 1519, the eve of the Reformation.

Mirk began by acknowledging his source—*The Golden Legend*. An Augustinian canon, he also wrote *Instructions for Parish Priests*, urging knowledge of, devotion, and prayer to the saints.²² Mindful of his audience, Mirk used a colloquial style, yet was orthodox. He insisted priest and Church were to be obeyed and opposed Lollardy by defending images and rarely using allegory.

Six sermons were for the Virgin Mary and five for women saints, including a “brief” one for Mary Magdalene

she was so holy that oure Lorde Ihesu Cchriste aftur hys moduer he loudid hir moste of alle women. Wherefore ye schal comyn to the chyrch that day to worchep God and this holy woman. For she was the furste in tyme of grace that dud penaunce for hyr synnes and so recouered ageyne grace ... scheo hadde loste be luste of the flesse and so[re] synnyng, the wyche is made a myrroure to alle sinful to schewon how alle that wolden leuon [leave off] hur [their] synne and done penaunce for hur trespace thei schul recoure [recover] grace ageyn [1: 184].

Mirk described her washing Christ’s feet at Simon the Pharisee’s house, after which Christ ‘cleansed her of seven fiends’ and forgave her guilt of sin. Mary Magdalene has ‘such a tender love’ for Christ that she follows and ‘so fervent love’ that she remains at his Passion, whereas his disciples leave for fear of death. Others stay away because of ‘armed knights’ at the tomb, but she goes with ointments because ‘she loved Christ both living and dead.’ He cured her sister of seven years’ ‘red flux’ and raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. Mirk contradicted the Gospels by eliminating *Noli me tangere*: “And whan he rosse from deth to lyfe, he aperud to hur bodily furste of alle othyr and suffred hur to touché hym an cussyn hys fette” (1:185).

Moreover, Mirk explained why Mary Magdalene and company were banished: ‘the Jews knew that Christ showed her so many signs of love before many others’; they put them in an old ship hoping they would drown (1:185). Here *Festial* followed Jacobus for events after the Ascension. At Marseilles the pagan prince desists because ‘Magdaleyne was so full of grace of the Holy Ghost that she *by her gracious words* turned the people against him’ (italics mine 1:186). Mirk related miracles of the childless lord and lady who returned to France, where they found ‘Magdaleyne *preaching* to the people.’ They fell before her in gratitude, and the ‘land was turned to Christian faith.’

Mirk did not include other miracles from *The Golden Legend*; French stories were less likely to please English hearers. The sermon ended with Mary Magdalene's thirty years as a contemplative and an abbreviated account of her death and tomb, engraved with the story of her life, 'worshipping God that did so graciously by her, and in honor of her, and all in high comfort to all sinful. Wherefore you shall all kneel down and pray, etc.'

(1:188). Mary Magdalene was the repentant sinner but also a preacher and "most loved woman."²³

Mary Magdalene Performed

Preaching was the basic but not the only means of bringing the Good News to medieval people, many of whom could not read. Having suppressed Roman 'drama' / spectacle (gladiators and lions killing Christians), the Church initiated a Catholic tradition that began as Latin liturgical drama, simple enactment at Easter in church. Anglo-Saxon Bishop Ethelwold's *Regularis Concordia* (c.965) gave directions for costumes, movement, and chant for performance at Winchester. The trope was a short paraphrase from the Bible:

Angel: "Whom seek ye in the sepulchre, O Christians?"
 Women's response: "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, O angel."
 Angel: "He is not here, He has arisen as He foretold:
 Go, announce that He has arisen from the grave."²⁴

One monk in alb represented the Angel, three in chasubles the Three Marys.

Over time elaborations, many hearty and ribald, developed. Thus plays were moved outside to the front of the church and finally into the marketplace. Not clerics, but guilds became responsible, financing and creatively presenting cycles of 'mysteries' that flourished between 1375 and 1450; some persisted after being suppressed by Protestants

in 1569. As a boy Shakespeare could have seen a mystery play at Coventry; today's young adult novels featuring Shakespeare often include this event.

Cycles dramatized the Bible from *Creation* to *Doomsday*—with ancillary material. Christ was at the center, and thus so was the first witness to the Resurrection. Only two of four cycles dramatized Mary Magdalene's repentance: *Chester* and *Ludus Coventriae*. Apparently *York* and *Towneley* (Wakefield)—located in Northern England, stronghold of recusants—considered the *Woman taken in Adultery* (a play in all four cycles) adequate showing of woman's sexual sins. Incidentally, it and *The Raising of Lazarus* epitomized Christ's miracles.

York, largest cycle with forty-eight plays, was performed on Corpus Christi, a date for theological affirmation—and likely good weather. XXVIII *Resurrection* eliminated Peter and John's going to the tomb. *York* was the only cycle with a separate Mary Magdalene play, XXXIX. *Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection*.²⁵ Alone and sorrowing she laments, "Alas," describes her grief, and prays, "Nowe, helpe me God in personnes three ... to haue a sight / Of my lorde" (16, 19-20). Jesus the gardener bids her not to weep, "faithful fere [friend], / He is full nere [th]at mankynde bought" (32-33). Perhaps the audience recognized Jesus before He says, "Marie, of mourning amende thy moode" (62), and details His Crucifixion so that she cries, "A! Rabony." When Mary Magdalene would clasp him, Jesus refuses her touch but in a lovely way offers comfort, "speke now with me" and stay sorrow (79). With her address to "comely conquerour," dialogue shifted to devotional allegory: Christ's wounds are "Myne armour riche and goode" to fight the devil, turning suffering into triumph, His blood spilt 'for any sinner' (125). The play ended with Jesus' recognition of the apostle to

the apostles: ‘You will go to Galilee, “Marie, my doughtir dere,” to ‘tell my *fearful* brothers you spoke to me; blessings on thee’ (italics mine 142-149). Mary Magdalene’s meeting the Resurrected Christ—exquisite like Fra Angelico’s painting at San Marco—was vastly superior to XL. *Travellers to Emmaus* and XLII. *Incredulity of Thomas*.

Mary Magdalene’s appeal did not stop with ‘Mysteries’ End’; she inspired an extraordinary eclectic play devoted entirely to her. Preserved in a lone Bodleian manuscript Digby 133, it was written about the time of Caxton’s editions (1483-1527).²⁶ *Mary Magdalene* was a product of East Anglian devotion to her and the Virgin Mary, whose shrine was at Walsingham.²⁷ Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) in *Revelations of Divine Love* No. 38 writes of sinners: “David and countless others in the Old Testament, and of Mary Magdalene, Peter and Paul, and Thomas, in the New.” God reminds Julian “how the church on earth knows them to have been sinners, yet they are not despised for that reason, but rather these things have in some way turned out to their honour.”²⁸ Mary Magdalene attests Julian’s spiritual longings.

In 1436 on “the day next after Mary Magdalene” a priest began writing down, for an illiterate mystic, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.²⁹ Margery (c.1373-1438) is sometimes compared to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath because of her robust character, sexual nature, and penchant for pilgrimages. Dame Julian rejoiced in Our Lord’s goodness in appearing to Margery, counseled trust in God and a virtuous life. Margery’s visions culminate when Our Lord, speaking to her on Trinity Sunday, recognizes her alter ego:

‘how thou callest Mary Magdalene into thy soul to welcome me, for, daughter, I know well enough what thou thinkest. Thou thinketh she is the worthiest, in thy soul, and thou trusteth most to her prayers, next to My Mother, and so thou mayest, right well, daughter, for she is a right great mediator to Me for thee in bliss of Heaven’ (Ch. 86, p. 277).³⁰

Triumph on stage came in the morality play *Mary Magdalene*, a remarkable compendium of theatrical tradition and legends.³¹ *The Golden Legend* was the principal source, but the play drew on cycle plays, Scripture, archetypal Seven Deadly Sins, Satan, devils, angels, and stock characters. Sometimes described as “exuberant and unruly” it had fifty-two actions (scenes) performed on scaffolds around a *platea* (place)—medieval theatre in the round. Mary Magdalene’s life was told in two parts: the sinner and the forgiven disciple of Christ who after His Resurrection preached, converted others, performed miracles, and spent her last thirty years as a contemplative. The play combined broad comedy with tragedy, ‘the medieval heritage,’ as in Shakespeare’s tragedies.

Part I was richly comic. It exploited the bombast of braggart Herod, a stock character that Chaucer alluded to in *The Miller’s Tale*. The play featured braggarts: tyrant Emperor Tiberius Caesar, ‘obey my gods or die!’ and Herod, ‘ye dastards! ye dogges! the dylfe mote yow draw!’ (187). Braggarts provided contrast to Cyrus of Bethany, dying father of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Scene 7 introduced the opposition: King of the World, vividly enacted Seven Deadly Sins, and Satan who has plans for Mary—Lechery is to seduce her. The audience observes Mary Magdalene’s fall. In a Tavern she meets a Gallant (Curiosity) who flatters and woos; they dance, and she is smitten. Bad Angel reports success to devils. In brief scenes Mary Magdalene thinks of her “valentynes,” Simon the Leper wants the Prophet to come to his dinner, Good Angel wants “on-stabyll” Mary (588) to seek healing of her soul, and—immediately she laments her sin and resolves to seek the Prophet, “welle of perfyth charyte” (610). Time on stage for the “prostitute” was vivid but brief. Scene 14 at Simon’s house staged the New Testament with explicit directions: Mary washes Jesus’ feet, dries them with her hair, and anoints

Him with precious ointment (640). The Prophet justifies forgiving the greatest sinners—including Simon for faulting Mary—by telling the parable of the debtors. When Jesus forgives Mary Magdalene, the devils leave her—vivid action! Bad Angel joins devils to “enter into hell with thondyr”—a scene both comic and terrifying (691). Good Angel asks “Holy god, hyst of omnipotency” to enlighten their ignorance. After serious teaching the play again turned riotous when King of the Devils hears the “harlot” has been forgiven. Six remaining scenes of Part I (16-21) told Christ’s life (Virgin birth and Crucifixion to come) and ministry (raising Lazarus from the dead).

Part II dramatized events from *The Golden Legend*. Scene 22 introduced the King of Marcyll, ‘highest head of Heathenness,’ another bragging tyrant, later a major character. A shrieking devil reports Christ’s Harrowing of Hell. Then Mary proceeds to her essential role: she laments Jesus’ death and with Mary Jacobe and Mary Salome goes to the tomb, where two Angels say ‘He is risen.’ Mary Magdalene reports to John and Peter, who laments, “I for-sok him in hys turmentry [torments]; / I toke no hede to his techyng and exortacyon” (1045-1046). Failure of male disciples as compared with Mary Magdalene’s faith, loyalty, and bravery was a major theme. In an early pointing of the efficacy of her tears Jesus explained why He appeared as the gardener:

Mannys hart is my gardyn here;
 Ther-In I sow sedys of vertu all there;
 The fowle wedes and wycys [vices], I reynd vp be the rote,
 whan that gardyn is watteryd with terys clere,
 than spryng vertuus, and smelle full sote [sweet] [1081-1085].

Christ meets and blesses the other Maries, and bids all three—broadening woman’s role as announcer of the Resurrection—go to the disciples and tell them they will see Him bodily returned.

Again interlacing scripture and legend, Scene 27 returned to King Marcyll who will offer sacrifice to his gods. His queen specifies “Mahound” (1140), the standard medieval reference here enhanced by a frantic and mocking scene of a pagan priest with his Boy in a service including showing Mahomet’s relic—a neck bone. Rome provided parallel non-belief. Pilate inquires, informs Herod, and sends a letter to the Emperor reporting Jesus’ body has been stolen. The Emperor observes, “crafty was ther connyng, the soth to seyn ... [I will] chronicle” the event (1327, 1329). Mary Magdalene briefly recalls Christ’s death and Resurrection, reports Pentecost and that the disciples have gone to diverse countries to preach.

Then Heaven opens. Jesus praises his mother Mary and explains He is sending Raphael to Mary Magdalene to tell her to go to King Marcyll’s land and convert it—a direct commission—and a parallel to the Annunciation. The angel identifies Mary Magdalene’s role: “an holy apostylesse” (1381). She readily agrees and seeks a ship. A comic scene between Shipman and Boy ends when agreement to sail is reached; Mary Magdalene prays, “lord! Gravnt me vyctore a-yens the fyndes flame, / And yn that lawys gfy this pepyll cedens” (1448-1449). When she preaches the Biblical story of Creation, King Marcyll says *his* gods created. Dramatic action in his temple resolves conflict; Mary Magdalene prays for a miracle. The idol quakes, the Temple burns, priest and clerk sink below. Marcyll will convert—if Mary Magdalene prays and his wife conceives a child. Weakened by her efforts—a nice mundane detail, she prays to Christ for sustenance. He sends Angels to feed her; they reiterate His bidding that she persevere. In procession Mary and Angels go to the King’s bed; he wakes to tell of “a mervelows shewyng [dream]” also had by his wife. Marcyll gives his goods to Mary Magdalene,

and the couple sail for the Holy Land to be baptized and instructed by Peter. Several scenes completed their story as told in *The Golden Legend*.

Remaining scenes (45-52) showed Mary Magdalene's final years. She preaches to "dere fryndes," urging them to be steadfast and patient in bearing adversity, citing the Beatitudes, and declaring those who destroy sin are "chyldyren of lyfe" (1924-1939). Marcyll and his Queen will guide the people and build churches after she goes into the "wyldyrnesse" (1972) to live in humility, chastity, and abstinence—fed by food from heaven. At Jesus' bidding Angels draw Mary up and feed her with manna—three times a day! To a hermit priest she explains her thirty years as a contemplative. Since Angel foretold her coming death, the priest is to bring her the Eucharist. She receives, commends her soul, and dies. Angels will receive her in heaven; the Bishop will bury her. The priest declares the play is done! All are to sing *Te deum*. Forgive the play's faults!

Only two English saint plays survived, both in the Digby MS; *The Conversion of St. Paul*, was an interesting parallel: parity of sin, reformed life, and apostolic mission.³²

Baroque Emotion

In spite of sixteenth-century humanists' condemnation of her legend and attacks on Catholicism with the growth of Protestantism, Mary Magdalene was a popular subject for seventeenth-century artists. Counter Reformation advocates, fixated on the sensual sinner / weeping penitent, obscured the medieval woman disciple, preacher, and contemplative. It is hard to think of a great Baroque painter—Catholics on the Continent—who did not thus imagine Mary Magdalene. In contrast, English poets discreetly viewed the forgiven sinner as a way to express their own sense of sin. The

seventeenth century was a time of religious uncertainty and turmoil when many recognized failings in institutional Church—Anglican as well as Roman Catholic and Puritan. Mary Magdalene inspired “Metaphysical Poets” who struggled to discern a way of life, experiencing tension between worldly success / court favor and priestly vocation.

John Donne (1572-1631) vacillated between Roman and Anglo Catholic, ultimately becoming Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, where his tomb bears a remarkable effigy. Young Donne wrote love poetry, older Donne *Divine Poems* and sermons. His compliment to the noble woman named for her reflected on Mary Magdalene’s identity:

An active faith so highly did advance,
 That she once knew, more than the Church did know.
 The Resurrection; so much good there is
 Deliver’d of her, that some Fathers be
 Loth to believe one Woman could do thus;
 But, think these Magdalens were two or three.

Donne’s poem addressed Lady Magdalen Herbert, the mother of George Herbert (1593-1633), who has been called the “most skillful and important British devotional lyricist of this or any other time.”³³ Herbert struggled to find his way, to eschew worldly wealth and noble connections to serve God.³⁴ *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* was published posthumously. Spiritual conflict characterized Herbert’s self-scrutiny; *The Temple* began with Easter Week, His death, and how followers live. Although Herbert rarely named saints, he responded to washing Christ’s feet with tears.

MARIE MAGDALENE

When blessèd Marie wip’d her Saviour’s feet—
 Whose precepts she had trampled on before—
 And wore them for a jewell on her head,
 Shewing His Steps should be the street
 Wherein she thenceforth evermore
 With pensive humblenesse would live and tread;

She being stain'd herself, why did she strive
 To make Him clean Who could not be defil'd?
 Why kept she not her tears for her own faults,
 And not His feet? Though we could dive
 In tears like seas, our sinnes are pil'd
 Deeper than they in words, and works, and thoughts.

Deare soul, she knew Who did vouchsafe and deigne
 To bear her filth, and that her sinnes did dash
 Ev'n God Himself: wherefore she was not loth,
 As she had brought wherewithal to stain,
 So to bring in wherewith to wash:
 And yet in washing one she washèd both.

Richard Crashaw (1612?-1649), son of an anti-papal preacher, was an Anglican cleric before going to Paris when Puritan Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector. Crashaw converted to Roman Catholicism, served as private secretary to Cardinal Pallotto, governor of Rome, and was appointed to a benefice at the basilica Our Lady of Loreto just before his death. Echoing Herbert, Crashaw called his collection of poems *Steps to the Temple* (1646). His many poems about women—Virgin Mary, Teresa of Avila, and Mary Magdalene—lead critics to identify a ‘feminine sensibility.’ Crashaw’s art was part of the Counter Reformation, most fluent in Spain and Italy—especially exotic representations of women saints whose mystical experiences were exploited as sexuality. Prime examples are Alessandro Algardi’s sensuous sculpture *Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy* (1634) atop an urn with her relics in St. Maximin Basilica and Bernini’s famous *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1652) in Santa Maria della Vittorio in Rome.

Crashaw’s title “The Weeper” characterized his poem’s key image:

Hail sister springs,
 Parents of silver-footed rills!
 Ever bubbling things!
 Thawing crystal! Snowy hills!
 Still spending, never spent: I mean
 Thy fair eyes, sweet Magdalene.

Exaggerated exclamations fill almost two hundred lines. Even following Jesus uses tears imagery: “He’s follow’d by two faithful fountains; / Two walking baths: two weeping motions; / Portable and compendious oceans.” Beginning with an introductory couplet—“Loe where a Wounded Heart with Bleeding Eyes conspire, / Is she a Flaming Fountain, or a Weeping fire?”—Crashaw’s virtuosity sustained imagery of weeping until final lines declare for tears, “We go to meet / A worthy object, Our Lord’s feet.”

Reason and Romance

In the eighteenth century Age of Reason Mary Magdalene was unlikely to inspire praise, certainly not as a preacher. Samuel Johnson (1709-1780) expressed a pervasive attitude when he observed of a Quaker: a woman preaching was like a dog standing on its hind legs, not whether well done but that it was done at all. Alexander Pope (1688-1744), a Catholic, commented on sexual morality in the Church by writing *Eloisa to Abelard*.

Victorians, obsessed with morality, especially harms of prostitution, attacked society’s great evil. They named homes for fallen women “Mary Magdalene.” Artists sustained legends. William Morris’s Kelmscott Press printed *The Golden Legend* with illustrations by Edward Burne-Jones in 1893. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) pictured *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* (1858) as a voluptuous ‘Pre-Raphaelite stunner’ with musicians and revellers.³⁵ His accompanying sonnet “Why wilt thou cast the roses from thine hair?” celebrated the reformed sinner, a favorite subject as in Holman Hunt’s *Awakening Conscience* (1848). Rossetti also painted *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849). The model was his sister Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), a poet with an extraordinary lyric gift.

Religion dominated Christina Rossetti's life and work. She wrote volumes of devotional prose, influenced by the Tractarian Movement—Oxford academics, Anglicans who attacked current weaknesses in the established church, including John Henry Newman (1801-1890).³⁶ Half her poems were devotional, frequently regarded as “over scrupulous and excessively restrained.” The most famous *Goblin Market* (1862), which has qualities of fairy tale, featured two sisters—one guilty of an unspecified ‘failing’—suggesting Mary Magdalene? Her only poem about a saint was

MARY MAGDALEN AND THE OTHER MARY
A Song for all Maries

Our Master lies asleep and is at rest:
His Heart has ceased to bleed, His Eye to weep
The sun ashamed has dropt down in the west:
Our Master lies asleep.

Now we are they who weep, and trembling keep
Vigil, with wrung heart in a sighing breast,
While slow time creeps, and slow the shadows creep.

Renew Thy youth, as eagle from the nest;
O Master, who hast sown, arise to reap:—
No cock-crow yet, no flush on eastern crest:
Our Master lies asleep.

Christina Rossetti honored that women were first to seek the Risen Lord, remained faithful, and waited. She also claimed affinity—“Now we are they who weep, and trembling keep / Vigil with them”—in a poem easily read as feminist assertion. The title “Mary Magdalen and the Other Mary” juxtaposed the two most famous and honored Christian women. The subtitle “A Song for all Maries” universalized concern and compassion. In 1859 Christina Rossetti served them as a volunteer worker at St. Mary Magdalen Penitentiary in Highgate, London.

Twentieth-century Creations

Discovery in 1896 of a well-preserved ancient codex, a fragmentary *Gospel of Mary*, enriched her legend as the missing pages tantalized. Two world wars delayed its publication until 1955, but extensive commentary—theological, artistic, and social—has followed. It is placed among Gnostic Scriptures. I am not qualified to evaluate it theologically.³⁷ However, reading the *Gospel of Mary* as a literary critic and as a Catholic woman I am fascinated by Mary Magdalene's role, how male disciples treat her, and by likeness to “legendary material”—which frequently records events not ‘established by history,’ i. e., what the victors preserve. Mary's is the only Gospel named for a woman; moreover, as prophet and moral conscience of male disciples she is a challenge to apostolic authority. By the end of the second century men like Irenaeus and Tertullian had succeeded in dismissing Gnostic heresy; bishops, priests, and deacons were Christianity's male hierarchy.

In the *Gospel of Mary* male disciples' response to the Teacher's urging them to announce the Gospel is sorrow, tears, fear that unbelievers who did not spare Him, will kill them. In contrast, Mary is confident, relying on and praising his Grace (#9, p. 29). Peter says, “Sister, we know that the Teacher loved you differently from other women. Tell us what you remember of any words he told you which we have not yet heard” (#10, p. 31). Mary describes her vision. Andrew refuses to believe the Teacher thus spoke, “These ideas are too different from those we have known.” Peter goes farther: “How is it possible that the Teacher talked in this manner with a woman about secrets of which we ourselves are ignorant? Must we change our custom and listen to this woman? Did he really choose her, and prefer her to us?” (#17, p. 37). The crux is conflict between

personal inspiration (prophetic) and institutional church (tradition and hierarchy)—and, of course, female intuitiveness and male rationalism. Mary weeps and answers, “My brother Peter, what are you thinking? Do you believe that this is just my own imagination, that I invented this vision? Or do you think that I would lie about our Teacher?” *The Gospel of Mary* ended with a rebuke and apologia from Levi (Matthew), who charges Peter with being “hot-tempered” and “repudiating a woman, just as our adversaries do. Yet if the Teacher held her worthy who are you to reject her? Surely the Teacher knew her very well, for he loved her more than us. Therefore let us atone ... grow ... and walk forth to spread the gospel” (1-21, p. 39).³⁸

Most who write about *The Gospel of Mary* are women, a corollary of the intensity of feminism, especially in the last quarter of the twentieth-century. In the twenty-first century they continue to open out stereotypical archetypes of prostitute and virgin to companion with apostolic vocation. Very different were three men’s successful artistic creations of Mary Magdalene—a woman of post Sixties Sexual Revolution. In *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), a rock musical by Andrew Lloyd Weber (b.1948) and Tim Rice (b. 1944), Mary Magdalene has the hit number, a torch song: “I don’t know how to love him ... He’s just a man, and I’ve had so many men before ... I want him so ... I love him so.” Is this eros or agape? The BBC banned the show as sacrilegious. But American Norman Jewison’s film (1973) reached a large audience. In 1988 Martin Scorsese filmed Nikos Kazantzakis’s novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955) with its notorious dream sequence in which Jesus makes love to a naked Mary Magdalene. Outrage was ecumenical; the Vatican declared it immoral, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority urged boycott, and objectors in Paris bombed a cinema showing the film. Eclipsing these is Dan

Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, the mystery thriller (2003) made into an international blockbuster film (2006) starring Tom Hanks and directed by Ron Howard. In France descendants of Mary Magdalene and Jesus—the dream of liaison is now reality—perform rituals and challenge Catholic authority in a world peopled by corrupt churchmen and an albino monk who scourges himself.³⁹ The story ends near Edinburgh, at Rosslyn, a fascinating chapel, once quiet and peaceful but now a tourist attraction. Although faulted for historical inaccuracy and wild attacks on the Catholic Church (and Christianity) book and film have intrigued millions and made millions. One wonders what the next Mary Magdalene legend will be!

Velma Bourgeois Richmond

NOTES

¹ Victor Saxer, “Les saintes Marie Madeleine et Marie de Béthanie dans la tradition liturgique et homilétique orientale,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 32 (1958), 27-237, cited by Kathrine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35. Jansen’s historical survey is the most comprehensively researched, especially church documents.

² *Homilia 33 in Homiliarum in evangelica*, Lib. II, PL 76, 1239, cited in Katherine Ludwig Jansen, 33.

³ See Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, “Investigating Mary Magdalen,”

<http://arthistoryresources.net/investigating-mary-magdalen/mm-gregory-homily-33.html>.

⁴ *Homilia 25 in Homiliarum in evangelica*, Lib. II, PL 76, 1196, cited in Katherine Ludwig Jansen, 34.

⁵ *The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1975), III: 1544

⁶ <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastamps/en/bollettino/publico/2016/06/10/160610c.html>

⁷ *The Blickling Homilies, translated R(ichard) Morris* (Cambridge, Ontario: Old English Series, 2000), www.yorku.ca/inpar/Blickling-Morris.pdf.

⁸ Rubie D-N. Warner, *Early English Homilies from the Twelfth Century MS. VESP. D. XIV*, Early English Text Society, O.S. 152 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1917).

⁹ R. W. Southern, “Foreword” in Benedicta Ward, S. L. G., trans. , *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), 9.

¹⁰ Useful discussions are: Ricardo Marín Ibáñez, “Juan Luis Vives,” *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), XXIV, 743-759) available www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/vives/ and “Juan Vives (1493-1540)”

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/vives/>

¹¹ “Foreword,” *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. and adapted from Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Arno Press A Publishing and Library Service of the New York Times, 1969), vii.

¹² Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975) and “The Humanist Rejection of Romance,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, (1978), 296-306. A memorable example is Roger Ascham: “In our forefathers time, when Papists, as a standyng poole, couered and ouerflowed all England, fewe bookes were read in our tong, sauing certaine bookes Cheualrie, as they sayd, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in Monasteries, by idle Monkes or wanton Chanons: as one for example, Morte Arthure the whole pleasure of which booke standeth in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter and bold bawdrye” *The Scholemaster* (1570), Edward Arber, *Englsh Reprints* (London, 1869), 80.

¹³ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08262b.htm>

¹⁴ *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints Englished by William Caxton* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1900), 4: 72-73. All quotations are from this edition with page references given in parentheses, 72-89. For the first English translation (1438) from French Jean de Vignay’s *Légende dorée* (c. 1333-40), see Richard Hamer assisted by Virginia Russell, ed. , *Gilte Legende*, 3 vols. , Early English Text Society, O. S. 327, 328, 339 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 2007, 2012)

¹⁵ St. Hegesippus, second-century author of *Memoirs*, wrote about “the true Apostolic preaching” against heresies of Gnostics and of Marcia, and was an “orthodox Catholic,” whose work survived as fragments, recognized in The Roman Martyrology. 7 April. John Chapman, “St. Hegesippus,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07194a.htm>

¹⁶ *The Golden Legend* translated and adapted by Granger and Ripperger, 363.

¹⁷ N. F. Blake, *Caxton and His World* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969), 120. For detailed analysis see 117-118, 121-122, 128-129, 146-147.

¹⁸ N. F. Blake, *Caxton England’s First Publisher* (London: Osprey, 1976) details technical details and business practice. The Bodleian commemorated the 500th anniversary of England’s first printed book with a small exhibition in 1975.

¹⁹ *The Liturgy of the Hours*, 3: 1969-1972.

²⁰ Nevill Coghill, trans. , *The Canterbury Tales*, 1952 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 260.

²¹ Susan Powell, ed., *John Mirk's Festial, from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A. II*, Early English Text Society, O. S. 334 & 335 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 and 2011). I have eliminated medieval letters and included translation where it seemed helpful.

²² Edward Peacock, ed. *Instructions for Parish Priests by John Myrc*, Early English Text Society O. S. 31 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & CO., 1902), reprinted (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1969).

²³ A striking contrast is afforded by a late fifteenth-century Dominican sermon cycle, probably written in the East Midlands; it survived in seven manuscripts. Of sixty-nine sermons, forty-six were based on gospel readings, fifteen on epistolary, and eight with no text. About half were general moral discourse; usually avoiding controversy (Lollardy). Religious authorities were frequently cited, saints rarely. Nevertheless, in three sermons Mary Magdalene exemplified the cycle's dominant theme, the mercy of God. "23. Passion Sunday" and "55. Trinity Sunday" identified her as primary example of a lifelong sinner who repents and "afterward be Goddis mercy ther was no woman that mygte do more with Criste then sche, except his moder Mary" (2: 324). "31. Easter" expanded the meaning of Christ's appearing first to Mary Magdalene "that he dyed for synfull man. And rygte as a wiman, Eve, was messangere of dethe, rygt so a woman, Magdalen, sholde be messangere of lyfe" (1:181). See Stephen Morrison, *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominican Sermon Cycle*, Early English Text Society, O. S. 337 & 338 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 for 2011).

²⁴ E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Drama*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903) is the seminal study. See also Harold C. Gardiner, SJ, *Mysteries' End* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946); Eleanor Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays: A Reevaluation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961); V. A. Kolve, *The Play called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966); Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972). You Tube has a performance of *Quem quaeritis* with commentary by Harold Mantel. Brief descriptions are: Faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/quem_quaeritis_trope.htm and <https://reginajeffers.b.pg2017/04/13/the-quem-ququerir=twat-trope-the-roots-of-liturgical-drama>.

²⁵ Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed., *York Plays: The Plays performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the Day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries*, 1885 repr. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963). See Richard J. Collier, *Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play* (Hamden, CT: Archon Press, 1977) and Pamela M. King, *The York Mystery Plays and the Worshippers of the City* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2006); <https://www.bl.uk/collections/the-york-plays>.

²⁶ The copy (c.1513-30) is known as *The Digby Plays*—named for Kenelm Digby (1800-1880), author of *The Broadstone of Honour* (1822 / 1877), antiquarian collector and influential ardent Catholic apologist, writing before the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.

²⁷ On East Anglia devotion and the play, see Teresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Coletti's short account is <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/coletti-the-digby-mary-magdalene-introduction>.

²⁸ Clifton Wolters, trans., *Julian of Norwich Revelations of Divine Love* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 119.

²⁹ *The Book of Margery Kempe; A Modern Version by W. Butler Bowdon*, 1936, World's Classics (London and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1954), 88.

³⁰ In 1521 Henry Pepwell printed "A Short Treatise of Contemplation taught by Our Lord Jesu Christ, or taken out of the Book of Margery Kempe, Ancess of Lynn." One of seven pieces, it tells how Christ praised her devotion and especially thanked her "for the charity that thou hast to all lecherous men and women," praying and weeping He "should deliver them out of sin, and be as gracious to them as I was to Mary Magdalene, that they might have as much grace to love Me as Mary Magdalene had" (56). Margery Kempe, sexual sinner like Mary Magdalene, was with "that Glorious Virgin and Spouse of Our Lorde, Saint Katherine of Seenes"—and Richard of St. Victor and Walter Hilton, mystical writers of the spiritual life. See Edmund G. Gardner, ed., *The Cell of Knowledge seven Early English Mystical Treatises printed by Henry Pepwell mdxxi* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1925).

³¹ F. J. Furnivall, ed., *The Digby Plays with an Incomplete 'Morality' of Wisdom, who is Christ*, 1896, Early English Text Society, E. S. 70 repr. (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967). Numbers for lines are given in parentheses.

³² *Wisdom* (incomplete); and two plays for special feasts, *Herod's Killing of the Children* (Childermas, Dec. 28) and *Purification in the Temple* (Candlemas Day, Feb. 2, 1512).

³³ For an excellent analysis see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/geprge-herbert>.

³⁴ Arthur Waugh, "Introduction," *The Poems of George Herbert* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1907). Poems are cited from this edition. *The Country Parson* (1632) described Herbert's life as parish priest in Bemerton.

³⁵ Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 1993), 348-351, illustration 82.

³⁶ Newman, after writing the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1840) converted to Roman Catholicism (1845) and became England's greatest Catholic apologist. He wrote tirelessly and brilliantly: lectures, *The Idea of a University* (1852) that led to his being Rector in Ireland. *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864) was his greatest Catholic contribution to the national literature. Newman's appointment as Cardinal marked Rome's recognition of England's Catholic Church; he will soon be proclaimed a saint.

³⁷ See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Jean-Yves Leloup, trans. and commentary, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene with English translation and Notes* by Joseph Rowe (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002); Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, Harvard Theological Studies 51 (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003); Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003); Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004). Quotations from the *Gospel of Mary* are from Leloup / Rowe.

³⁸ *The Gospel of Mary* is not the only record of this conflict in the early Church. In *Pistis Sophia* (3rd century) Peter complains that Jesus privileges Mary: "My Lord, we are not able to suffer this woman who takes the opportunity from us, and does not allow anyone of us to speak, but she speaks many times." This archetypal denigration of woman's "idle talk"—note Noah's wife in cycle plays, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, or Margery Kemp—is serious, as present day analyses of gender difference in manner and time spent speaking indicate. Mary's response is not tears but alarm: "I am afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and he hates our race [sex]." Cited by Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, p. 25.

³⁹ Among many interpretations are: Michel Baigent, Richard Leigh, Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, 1984 (New York: Dell, 2004); Margaret Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail* (Bear and Co., Rochester, VT: 1993) and *Mary Magdalene, Bride in Exile* (Bear and Co., Rochester, VT, 2005); Cybthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Shambhala, 2010); Jack Angelo, *The Healing Wisdom of Mary Magdalen: Esoteric Secrets of the Fourth Gospel* (Bear and Co., Rochester, VT, 2015).