Apostola Apostolorum

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In the gospels of the Christian New Testament, Mary Magdalene was the first person to recognize the risen Christ. He told her to tell the disciples the news of his resurrection, thus honoring her as the "apostle to the apostles." In the Gnostic Gospels she appears as a visionary disciple of Jesus. In the centuries after her life, her story was conflated with that of the sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus at a feast in the house of Simon, and Mary thus became a model of repentance. This posting discusses these and other ways in which we conceive of Mary Magdalene.

The Tower

Mary Magdalene's name likely comes from Magdala, a settlement on the Sea of Galilee during the years 300 BCE to 300 CE. Recent archeological excavations have unearthed evidence there of a synagogue, in which was found the "Magdala Stone," with carvings showing a Menorah and images of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The Aramaic word *magdala* means "tower." These may have been related to fortification towers or to towers used for the drying of fish.

Another possible reason for Mary Magdalene's name is that she was called the "Tower" for the strength of her faith in much the same way as Peter was called the "Rock" for his unwavering devotion (Valerio, 2021, pp 19-20). Saint Jerome (347-420 CE) reported that:

> Mary of Magdala received the epithet 'fortified with towers' because of her earnestness and strength of faith, and was privileged to see the rising Christ before even the apostles. (quoted in Haskins, 1993, p 58)

Noli me tangere

Mary Magdalene is specifically mentioned in the canonical gospels in connection with three events in the life of Jesus (Haskins, 1993, Chapter 1; Lupieri, 2011; Valerio, 2021, Chapter 1):

(i) During the time when Jesus was preaching and healing the sick near Capernaum, the gospel of Luke describes his entourage as consisting of the twelve disciples

> And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils,
> And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance. (*Luke* 8: 2-3)

No one knows for certain what was meant by the casting out of demons in those times. It likely represented a charismatic healing of an emotionally disturbed person. After Mary was cured of her affliction, she followed her healer, and provided him with monetary support.

(ii) Later, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were present at the crucifixion of Jesus and his subsequent burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. In the synoptic gospels, no mention is made of any of the disciples being present: they were presumably terrified of being associated with the crucified Jesus. The gospel of John reports that a beloved disciple was also there:

> Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.
> When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!
> Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! (*John,* 19:

25-27)

Though the disciple “whom he loved” is usually considered to be John, it is also possible to interpret this passage as referring to Mary Magdalene.

(iii) The final mention of Mary Magdalene is in the discovery of the empty tomb by the women who came to anoint the dead body of Jesus with spices and ointments. What then occurred is variously described in the different gospels. In most accounts, the women tell the disciples about the empty tomb, but no one understands what has happened. In one account (*Matthew*), Jesus then appears to all the women. In the clearest account (*John*), Mary Magdalene alone is the first to recognize the risen Christ:

> But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre,
> And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.
> And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.
> And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.
> Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.
> Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master.
> Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.
> Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her. (*John* 20: 11-18)

Jesus' unusual request that she touch him not (*Noli me tangere* in the Vulgate) became the subject of multiple paintings and engravings. Christ is often shown with a gardening tool or holding a banner with a red cross, signifying his resurrection. The scene is set in a garden in the soft light of morning. This new garden takes the place of that lost in Eden. Illustrated below are a fresco by Fra Angelico (1442) and a painting by Titian (1520).





By being the first to recognize the resurrected Jesus, Mary Magdalene became the *apostola apostolorum*, the apostle to the apostles, the person who first proclaimed the news of the resurrection. The Latin title allows the gender to be noted: Mary Magdalene was the female apostle who first told the male apostles about the resurrection. This was the subject of an illustration in the St Alban's psalter (circe 1140 CE), a masterpiece of English Romanesque painting (Carrasco, 1999):



Though the early church considered the Magdalene as the *apostola apostolorum*, this recognition was often given grudgingly by male priests who could not understand why such a role was granted to a woman. Mary was often related to Eve: Eve brought sin and death to man in the garden of Eden, Mary Magdalene witnessed man's salvation from sin in the garden of Arimathea. In the words of Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE): *per feminam mors, per feminam vita* ("death through woman; life through woman" quoted by Jansen, 1998).

The Beloved Companion

Mary Magdalene occurs frequently in other reports of Jesus written soon after his death. Fragments of *The Gospel of Mary* written in Coptic were discovered in 1896. This likely dates

to the mid-1st Century CE, but concerns a tradition in early Christianity going back to a devoted follower of Jesus named Mary who, though not specifically named, was probably Mary Magdalene (King, 2003; Meyer & de Boer, 2004). Other Coptic writings such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip* and *Pistis Sophia* ("Faith and Wisdom"), discovered in Nag Hammadi in 1945, also mention Mary, sometimes specifically calling her the Magdalene.

Compared to the canonical gospels, these "Gnostic" gospels are more concerned with the path from illusion to enlightenment than from repentance to salvation. Key to the Gnostic view of life is the need to seek the truth within oneself:

> When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living father. But if you do not now yourselves, then you dwell in poverty and you are poverty. (*Gospel of Thomas*, in Meyer, 2008, p 116)

In the Gnostic Gospels, Mary Magdalene is described as the beloved companion of Jesus:

> The Saviour loved Mary of Magdala more than all the disciples, and he kissed her often on her mouth. (*Gospel of Philip*, in Meyer, 2008, p 142).

Several modern novelists have considered the close relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus (reviewed in Valerio, 2021, Chapter 5). Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1951) describes how Jesus, as he is dying on the cross, had a vision of a future life wherein he and Mary raised a family. Saramago's *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* (1991) describes how the courtesan Mary introduced the young Jesus to physical love, and later left her profession to become his devoted companion. Valerio (2021, p 91) notes that that modern novelistic treatments of Jesus are concerned about the "irreconcilability of sacred and profane love" and "the

incomprehension of a God of love who paradoxically is unable to love a woman to the fullest."

Many have speculated that Mary might have been married to Jesus. In 2012, this idea was brought into prominence by the discovery of a ancient papyrus fragment containing the words "Jesus said to them, 'my wife…' " Unfortunately, this was later determined to be a forgery (Sabar 2020).

Whatever their relationship, Mary Magdalene was privy to teachings of Jesus of which the other disciples were unaware:

> Peter said to Mary, 'Sister, we know that the Saviour loved you mor than all other women. Tell us the words of the Saviour that you remember, the things you know that we don't because we have not heard them.' Mary responded, 'I will teach you about what is hidden from you.' (*Gospel of Mary*, in Meyer 2008, p 640)

In later fragments of the *Gospel of Mary*, the Magdalene describes the ascent of the soul away from darkness, desire, ignorance and wrath, until it is finally set loose from the world and attains rest (Meyer, 2008, p 642).

In several of the Gnostic Gospels, the male disciples, Peter in particular, complain about Mary's special status and dispute her reports of Jesus and his teachings. Over the time that these gospels were written, orthodox beliefs were consolidating around the idea that women were inferior to men and could not serve as Christian priests. And these priests desired that believers should be taught the truth by the church rather than seek it within themselves.

Beata Peccatrix

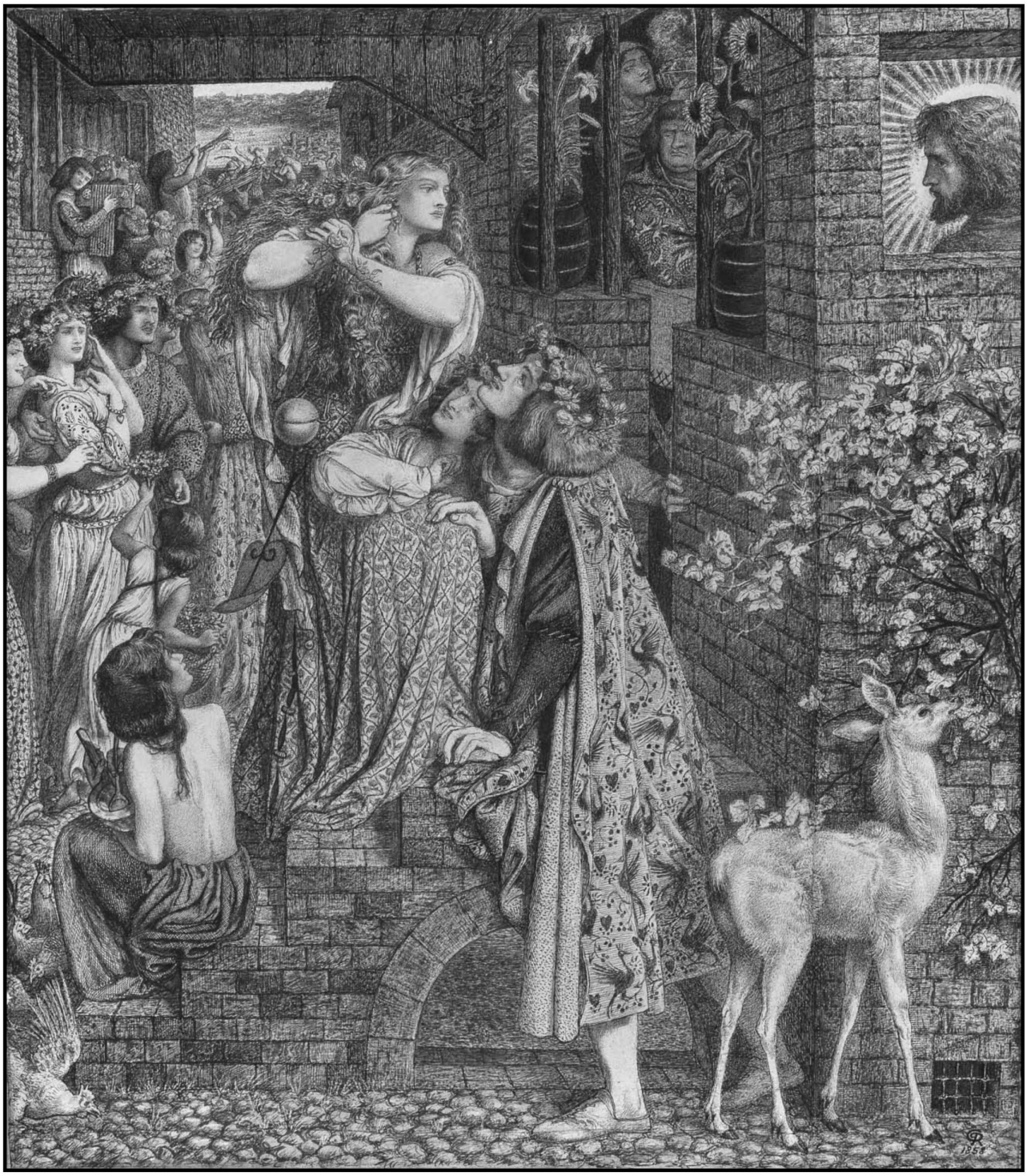
Mary, deriving from the Hebrew "Miriam," the sister of Moses, was a common name in Palestine at the time of Jesus. The many women named Mary in the gospels are difficult to distinguish and are often conflated into one person. In 591 CE, Pope

Gregory the Great proposed that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene were one and the same person (discussed by Haskins, 1993, pp 95-97, and Ehrman 2006, pp. 187-92). This placed Mary Magdalene at the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11) and at the anointing of Jesus:

> Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. (*John* 12: 3).

In Matthew and Mark's version the anointing took place at a dinner in the house of Simon, and in Luke's version, the unnamed woman who anointed the feet of Jesus was a "sinner." Since Mary Magdalene had been exorcised of seven devils, Gregory inferred that she had been subject to all the seven deadly sins. His pronouncement led to the idea that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute who gave up her life of luxury and indulgence to become a follower of Jesus. Mary is also often conflated with the unnamed "woman taken in adultery" that Jesus saved from the Pharisees who wished to stone her (John 8).

The dramatic moment of her decision to renounce her life of sin is illustrated in the 1858 drawing *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti together with its accompanying sonnet:



Why wilt thou cast the roses from thine hair?
Nay, be thou all a rose,—wreath, lips, and cheek.
Nay, not this house,—that banquet-house we seek;
See how they kiss and enter; come thou there.
This delicate day of love we two will share
Till at our ear love’s whispering night shall speak.
What, sweet one,—hold’st thou still the foolish

freak?
Nay, when I kiss thy feet they ‘ll leave the stair.”

“Oh loose me! Seest thou not my Bridegroom’s face
That draws me to Him? For His feet my kiss,
My hair, my tears He craves to-day:—and oh!
What words can tell what other day and place
Shall see me clasp those blood-stained feet of His?
He needs me, calls me, loves me: let me go!”

At the center of the drawing Mary (a portrait of the actress Ruth Herbert) sees Jesus and casts the roses from her hair. Despite the protestation of her richly dressed companion (a portrait of the poet Charles Swinburne), she decides to leave the procession of revelers.

After Pope Gregory’s conflation of Mary with the sinful woman who repented of her sins and anointed the feet of Christ, the Magdalene became commonly viewed as the *beata peccatrix* (“holy sinner”). Numerous paintings have depicted her stunning beauty and her sincere repentance (Haskins,1993, particularly Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Below is Caravaggio’s *Penitent Magdalene* (1595).



A beautiful young woman with auburn hair sits in a shadowy room; she has removed her jewelry and is quietly weeping. This was the first realistic portrait of the Magdalene: Caravaggio had used an actual prostitute as his model. In his commentary on the painting Hunt (2012, p 174) remarks

> Caravaggio paints the Magdalene possibly ambiguously, choosing the moment after she has loosened her hair, an act sometimes perceived as a provocative act in which a courtesan would have usually prepared to bed a client-lover, but here more likely an allusion for her preparation to wash Christ's feet. … the chains on the floor around the Magdalene in the painting may be gold but they could nonetheless be interpreted as having bound the Magdalene to a life of rich material "possession"—even the putative "demonic" possession from which she was exorcised.

Apostolos-Cappadona (2005, p 219) comments on the position of the Magdalene's head

> Leaning toward her left shoulder, her lowered head droops downward and her chin tilts onto her collarbone in a pose empathetic to that of the crucified Christ.

Unfortunately, paintings of the repentant Magdalene often lapse into sentimentality. Indeed, the word "maudlin" derives from her name. Many paintings are extremely disconcerting in the sense that the viewer is invited to enjoy the view of her naked body while thinking holy thoughts about the denial of the flesh.

Misogyny in many forms runs through the history of Christianity and plays forever with our understanding of the Magdalene:

> One can't help but think that the men who relish this recollection of Mary the penitent sinner are those who are trying to inform their own world with their own vision of what sexual and gendered relationships ought to be, with women not enticing men with the dangers of sex but falling at their feet in humble submission and penitence. (Ehrman, 2006, p 192).

One of the legacies of the concept of the Magdalene as a reformed prostitute was the foundation of institutions to help wayward females. Though some of these may have provided safe asylum for abused women, many simply imprisoned and exploited their charges. The most notorious of these institutions were the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland. Here unmarried mothers gave birth to children that were taken from them. As penance for their sins, they then worked as slaves in laundries to raise money for the church.

Legends of Mary

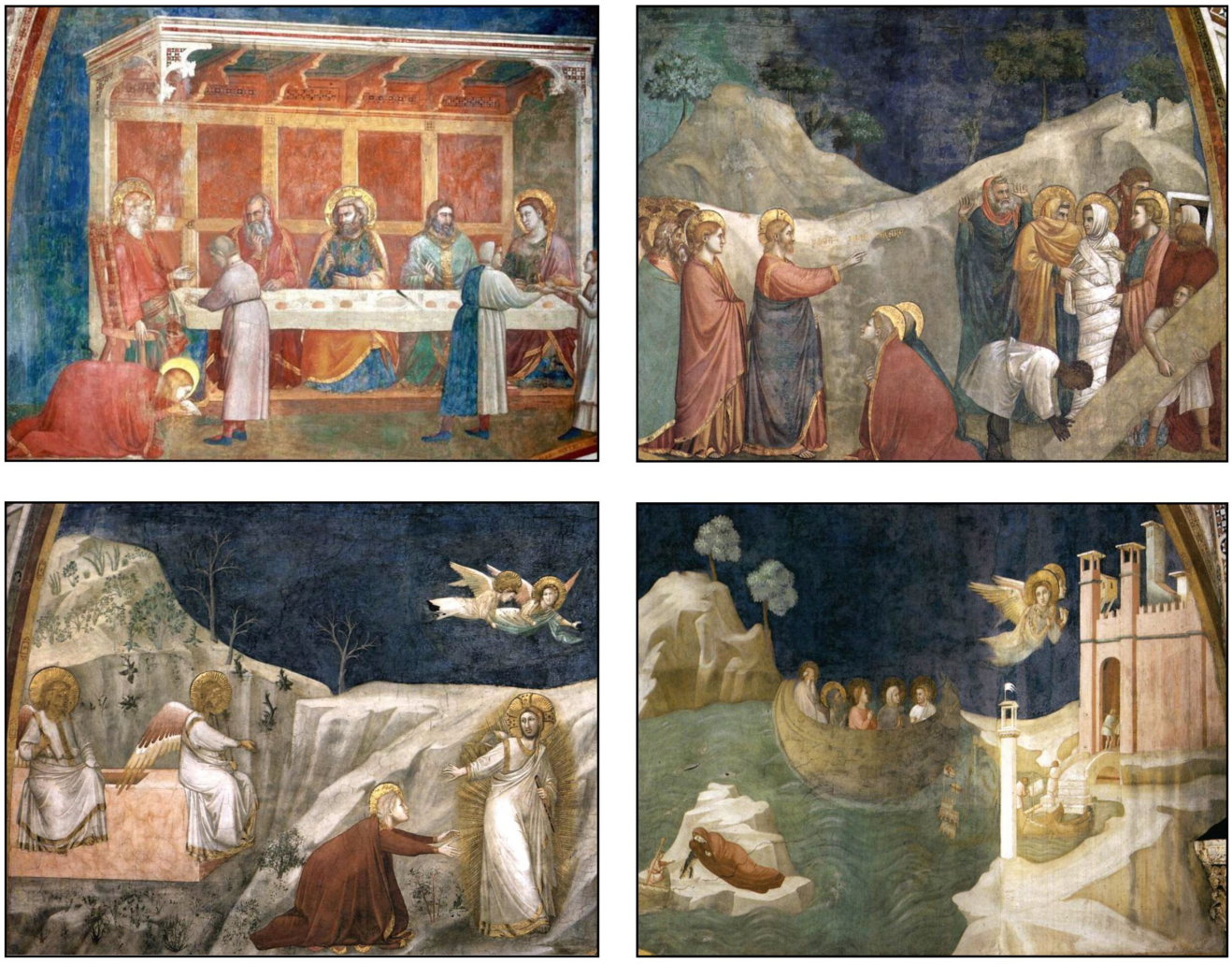
Mary Magdalene the Apostle soon inspired some amazing stories. These were collected by Jacobus de Voragine for his book about the saints entitled *The Golden Legend* (circe 1260).

According to legend, Mary Magdalene together with Bishop Maximin, Martha and the resurrected Lazarus were cast adrift in the Mediterranean Sea by an anti-Christian mob. Though the boat has neither rudder nor tackle, they were miraculously carried to the West and made landfall in the Camargue near Marseille. There on the steps of a pagan temple, Mary Magdalene preached the gospel of Christ. One of the pagan leaders came to the temple to make offerings to the gods so that his wife might bear him a child. Mary prayed that the Lord might give them a son. When his wife conceived, the leader decided that they should go to Saint Peter in Rome on a pilgrimage of thanks. Unfortunately, during the voyage a storm arose and the wife died in childbirth. Fearful that they had offended the gods, the sailors left her and the newborn son on a rocky island. When the pagan leader reached Rome, Saint Peter consoled him, told him that all would be well, and took him to Jerusalem to see where Jesus had lived and died.

When the pagan leader finally travelled back to Marseille, he came upon the rocky island where his dead wife had been left. There he found his two-year-old son, capering on the rocks and nursing at the breast of his dead mother. Mary Magdalene had miraculously intervened to preserve the body of the mother and the life of the son.

After several years preaching the gospel in the South of France, Mary Magdalene retired to a deserted mountainous region, where she lived for thirty years as a hermit. During this time, she had no need of earthly food. Instead, she was daily transported into the sky to dine with the angels. Ultimately, she received her last communion from Bishop Maximin and died. The Basilicas of Sainte Marie Madeleine in both Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume, Provence, and Vézelay, Burgundy, purport to have relics of the saint.

The story of the Magdalene arriving in France and the miracle of the child who was nourished at his dead mother's breast is depicted in one of the frescos (illustrated below, lower right) by pupils of Giotto in the Magdalen Chapel of the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi (Mignozzi, 2019). Other frescos in the cycle illustrate the anointing of Jesus, the raising of Lazaurus, and the *Noli me tangere* episode. In the Lazarus episode, Christ speaks the words "Lazarus come forth" (Vulgate *Lazare veni foras*, *John* 11: 43). In the fresco these words are written in reverse order, to illustrate how they travelled from Jesus to Lazarus:



Jacopo de Voragine also reports the story that Mary Magdalene was married to John the Evangilist, and that John left Mary on their wedding night to follow Jesus. Indignant that she had been deprived of her husband, Mary indulged herself in the

pleasures of the flesh. Not willing to let the calling of John be the cause of her damnation, Jesus later convinced her to repent and join his disciples. This version of the story was expanded in Yourcenar's passionate story of the Madeleine in her collection of prose poems entitled *Fires* (1935). Though Mary loves Jesus passionately, she realizes that she must give him up to his destiny:

> So as not to ruin his career as Saviour, I consented to see him die as a mistress consents to the rich marriage of the man she loves. (p 72).

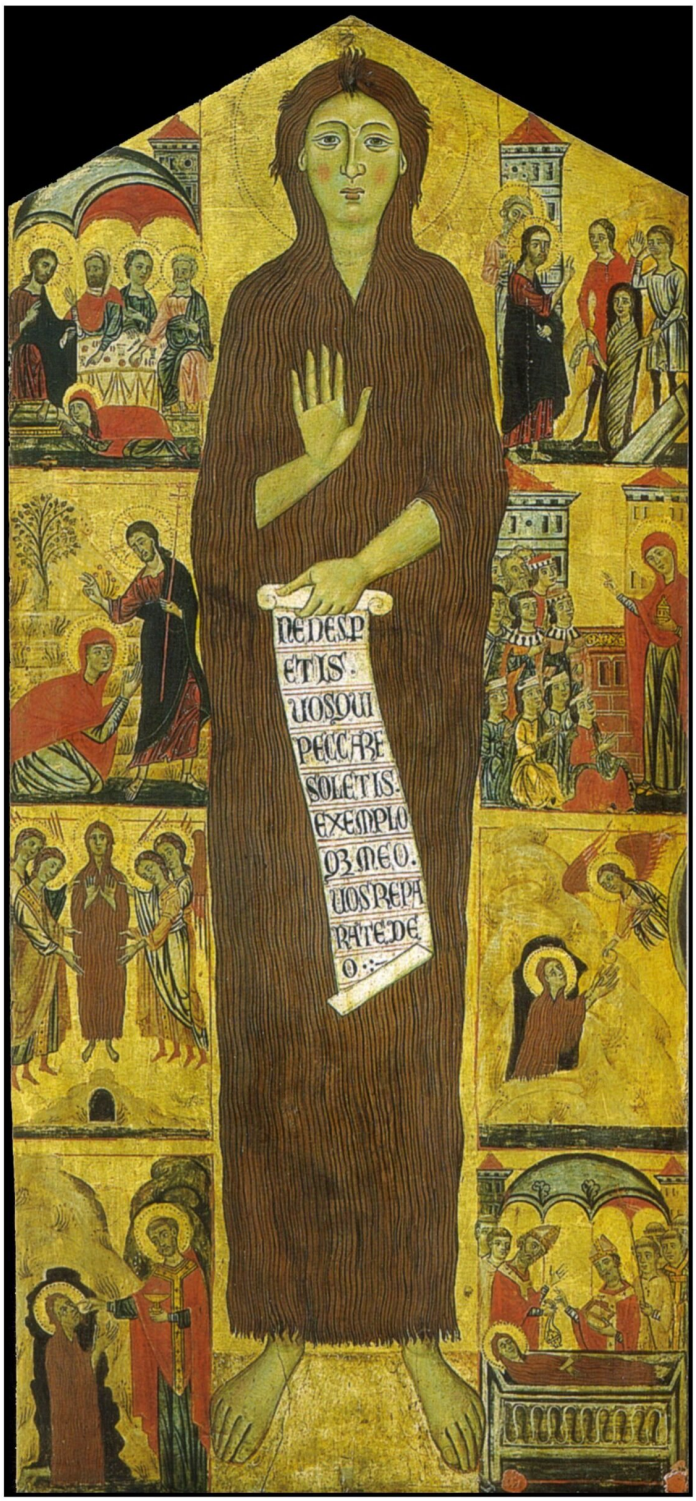
Ascetic Mary

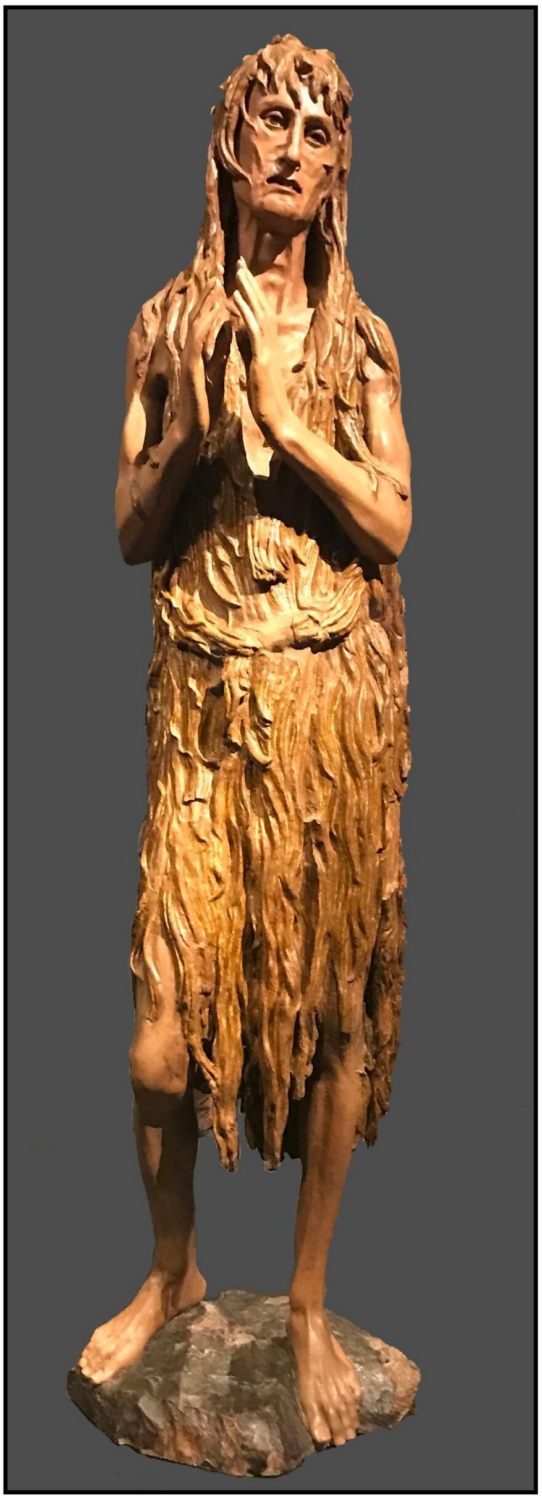
The Golden Legend also included the story of Mary of Egypt, a prostitute born in the 4th Century CE, who left her profession and became a hermit in the desert. Her clothes wasted away so that her hair was her only covering.

Mary of Egypt was soon conflated with Mary Magdalene. The depiction of the Magdalene covered in her own hair began in Italy with the painting of the Master of the Magdalene (1285) illustrated on the left below (Bradfield, 2002; Huggins, 2016). In the central portrait, Mary holds a banner stating

> *Ne desp[er]etis vos qui peccare soletis exemploque meo vos reparate Deo* (Despair not you who are accustomed to sin, and by my example, return to God.)

On both sides of are episodes from her life: On the left are shown *Mary Anointing Christ's Feet, Noli Me Tangere, Mary Borne to Heaven by Angels, and Bishop Maximin giving Mary her Last Communion.* On the right are *The Resurrection of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene Preaching, An Angel Feeding Mary in the Desert, and the Funeral of Mary Magdalene*





In 1455, Donatello created a wooden sculpture of *The Penitent Magdalene*, unclothed except for her own hair (illustrated on the right above). In 1492, Riemenschneider carved a series of panels for the altar of Church of Saint Mary Magdalene in Münnerstadt, Germany (Chapuis, 1999, Kalden-Rosenfeld, 2004). These show *Christ in the House of Simon, Noli me Tangere, Mary*

Magdalene's Last Communion, and Mary Magdalene's Entombment. In the latter two panels (on the right) Mary is clothed only in her hair, although in these examples the hair appears to grow from all her body:

*7

The Visionary

In the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary asks Jesus about a vision she experienced:

> She said, 'I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, "Lord, I saw you today in a vision." He answered me, "Blessed are you for not wavering at seeing me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure." I said to him, "So now, Lord, does a person who sees a vision see it with the soul or with the spirit?" The Saviour answered, "A person does not see with the soul or with the spirit. Rather, the mind which exists between these two sees the vision …" ' (Meyer, 2008,pp 641-2)

This makes a skeptic wonder whether her meeting the resurrected Jesus was a visionary rather than real experience. In his *Vie de Jésus* (1863) Renan noted that Mary Magdalene had earlier been exorcised of her devils, and therefore questioned the veracity of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden outside the empty tomb.

> The life of Jesus, to the historian, ends with his last sigh. But so deep was the trace which he had left in the hearts of his disciples and of a few devoted women, that, for weeks to come, he was to them living and consoling. Had his body been taken away, or did enthusiasm, always credulous, afterwards generate the mass of accounts by which faith in the resurrection was sought to be established? This, for want of peremptory evidence, we shall never know. We may say, however, that the strong imagination of Mary Magdalene here enacted a principal part. Divine power of

love! Sacred moments in which the passion of a hallucinated woman gives to the world a resurrected God!

The request of Jesus that Mary not touch him was unusual. Was it because he was just a vision and that there was nothing to touch?

The Holy Grail



The Holy Grail (old French *San Gréal*) is a long-lost treasure sought by knights of old. The most common interpretation is that it is the cup ("holy chalice") used by Jesus at the last supper. The word "grail" might have derived from the Greek *krater* (a bowl used for mixing wine with water). According to some legends this cup was also used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch the blood dripping from the wounds of the crucified Jesus. Other legends describe how the cup was then brought by

Joseph to France or Britain, and kept in some undiscovered Castle of the Holy Grail, where it was guarded by the Grail Maiden. Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted this *Damsel of the Sanct Gréal* in 1874 (illustrated on the right).

In 1982, Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln published a reinterpretation of these legends in The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail. Based upon a reading of san gréal as sang réal (royal blood), they conceived the holy grail as representing the bloodline of Jesus. They proposed that Mary Magdalene conceived one or more children by Jesus and raised her family in France. Saint Sarah of Provence was perhaps her daughter (Starbird, 1993). Baigent and his co-authors proposed that, over the years, the descendants of Jesus and Mary were protected by the Cathars, the Knights Templar, and the Priory of Sion against the forces of orthodoxy that tried to destroy them. These speculations are the basis of Brown's bestseller The Da Vinci Code (2003), in which the last surviving descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is ultimately discovered in modern Paris.

Epilogue

We can never know the real Mary Magdalene. She has become a legend, and legends have various interpretations. Perhaps her most characteristic trait is her human-ness: she is not tainted with divinity. She enjoyed physical love, repented of her sins, and had one main loving relationship with a man, who was crucified for what he taught. After his death, Mary had visions of his continued presence. She tried to continue his teaching, but was maligned for being a woman. She gave birth to a daughter and fled to France to raise her family.

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