

IMAGININGS OF MARY MAGDALEN

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“ONE WOMAN WITH MANY FACES”:
IMAGININGS OF MARY MAGDALEN
IN
MEDIEVAL AND CONTEMPORARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT:

In recent years, an interest in religious (especially Christian) discourses has resurged, as evidenced by the popularity of the conservative Catholic film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Dan Brown's Church-conspiracy thriller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). My thesis explores the character of Mary Magdalen within such texts, comparing her contemporary imaginings with the imaginings of late medieval English texts. This comparison emphasizes the similarities between each archive—both eras are intent upon adding to the content and meaning of Mary's story—and their differences in purpose—medieval texts are largely devotional, contemporary ones much more iconoclastic. I examine such disparate texts as *The Golden Legend*, a late-medieval play called *Mary Magdalen*, films *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Jesus* (1999) and *The Passion of the Christ*, thriller *The Da Vinci Code* and Nino Ricci's novelization *Testament* (2003). Each text depicts Mary with a different role, and she often plays more than one role in the same text. The narrative impulse is so similar in both archives that I believe it is not possible to read the medieval archive as a less progressive version of the contemporary one—neither is immune to misogyny, neither is entirely misogynist. The constant reinterpretation of Mary Magdalen engenders a hybridity in her characterization; using Bakhtin's concept dialogism and some mythographic theory, I argue that the paradoxality and plurality of these reimaginings allow her to become a central part of the unfixing of meaning in the gospels. Using feminist theology I argue that Mary's marginality makes her an ideal site for such imaginings.

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“There’s only one woman in the world. One woman with many faces.”

—Satan/Guardian Angel in *The Last Temptation of Christ*

Introduction

Since her formation in the New Testament scriptures, Mary Magdalen has been recovered and reimagined in myriad and often opposing ways. Recently, this interest has culminated in the enormous popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and its many cultural responses, including a film and numerous critiques. This persistent interest often has to do with an interest in Christ, since Mary Magdalen was his peer and the first witness to his resurrection. As well, she makes manifest debates within Christianity about the role of female sexuality, as she is most often remembered as a repentant prostitute. Literary imaginings¹ of Mary Magdalen range from Pope Gregory the Great's sermon in 591 and her *vitae* of the later Middle Ages, to Dan Brown's attempt to "redeem" her image in *The Da Vinci Code* as recently as 2003. While Mary Magdalen is a politically potent figure because of her closeness to Christ, she is never properly contained by any one political use; instead, her image is used as often to transgress boundaries as it is used to reaffirm them.

This project explores these contradictory and myriad imaginings of Mary Magdalen, emphasizing particularly the connections to be made between those emerging from the later Middle Ages and in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. These two archives are important first of all since they have allowed for the greatest mutations of the Biblical story: the complex late-medieval legends of Mary Magdalen peaked before the Reformation, while continuing secularization and a rise in interest in

¹ I use the word "imagining" to evoke a sense of the constructedness of these various representations and to emphasize the element of fascination in the writers about their subject.

marginalized figures have allowed for a similar explosion of narratives in contemporary North America. This comparison sheds light on the differences and also the similarities of such ideologically distant eras. In fact, I argue that the analogous ways in which Mary Magdalen is constructed by writers from both eras complicates this supposed theoretical and ideological distance. While the effect of a midrashic² exploration of the legend of Mary Magdalen renders her Biblical character almost unrecognizable in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend* and in the anonymous Digby play, "Mary Magdalen," contemporary novelists Dan Brown and Nino Ricci further reconstruct her legend so that this character never merely reflects the interests of only one group. The tradition of narrativizing Biblical doctrine complicates its supposed monologism. In his introduction to the *Golden Legend*, William Granger Ryan writes "that most of these narratives were at least partially fictional—or better, the product of generations of oral retelling—in no way diminished their effectiveness. They served an important purpose: they humanized and dramatized the doctrinal point made" (xvi). Mary Magdalen, with her contradictory meanings—for example, as preacher in a church that discouraged women from preaching and as ideal believer who had also been a prostitute—transgresses doctrinal boundaries; thus, while she is a part of the process of setting up ideas about, for instance, her gender, she is simultaneously a part of breaking them down. If we then read Mary Magdalen as a site of negotiation for ideas about Christ, about women and about sexuality, such a comparison of the medieval and the contemporary reflects *both* the dominant *and* the

² "Midrash," which means "inquire" or "investigate" refers to a Jewish tradition of "commentaries on the Torah and all subsequent related writings and interpretations" (Falanga). I use the word to evoke a sense in which a holy or sacred text is embellished and rewritten in ways that affect an understanding of its meaning. By applying it to Christian works, I do not mean to appropriate the term but only to show that Christian works have their own albeit unrecognized Midrash.

counter-hegemonic ideologies of either era, showing, in the process, that the Bible does not belong exclusively to any one political agenda or another.

My argument, then, will be twofold, drawing on various theorists and relying on a comparison between exemplary medieval and contemporary treatments of Mary Magdalen. Firstly, I will argue that all of the texts—those of the “dark ages” and those of our own era—treat their subject matter in ideologically problematic as well as in more progressive ways. In comparing the two archives, it becomes clear that Biblical images and narratives are not as oppressive as might be assumed. Using recent feminist theology, especially that of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Jane Schaberg,³ I will look at Christianity as potentially transgressive and liberating, a religion that is as palatable for marginal as for dominant groups, regardless of the bigoted use to which it has often been put. Secondly, I will argue that none of the texts can ever be total in their ideological support, because they are all part of a narrativizing impulse.

Schüssler Fiorenza, along with other liberation theologians, suggests that feminist biblical studies can

deconstruct the dominant paradigms of biblical interpretation and reconstruct them in terms of a critical rhetoric that understands biblical texts and traditions as a living and changing heritage, one which does not legitimate patriarchal oppression but can foster emancipatory practices of faith communities. (*But She* 5)

Like Schüssler Fiorenza, I read the Bible as “potentially incendiary” and transgressive, a potential exemplified by the destabilizing and contradictory figuring of Mary Magdalen

³ I was also inspired by Phyllis Trible’s theology; she performs re-readings of so-called patriarchal Biblical narratives, showing that scripture itself can be interpreted in less problematic ways. See *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

(*But She* 4). Invoking the image of Mary Magdalen, Schüssler Fiorenza shows that a historical reconstruction of these Biblical origins reveals “early Christian history as a struggle between the dominant patriarchal discursive practices and those of the discipleship of equals,” a discipleship made up of those who would rather see the gospel used to destabilize a hierarchy (*But She* 81).⁴ Jane Schaberg is also interested in developing a theology that will destabilize the patriarchy; in *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, she also interprets Mary as a symbol of the marginalized hope for a less-oppressive Christianity. Like me, she reads the persistent interest in the Magdalen figure as proof of what cannot be contained by official doctrine: “Magdalene Christianity offers an alternative to Petrine Christianity, which has never been able to silence it. It might move us toward a religion of Outsiders” (19). Both Schüssler Fiorenza and Schaberg show that Christianity need not belong to a patriarchy in power; instead, Mary Magdalen represents for them a voice calling from the margins to challenge the dominant view.

Beyond feminist theology, which is directly engaged with Biblical women and the everyday practice of the Christian faith, this project will be informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism as well as a mixture of mythographic narrative theory derived from Paul Ricoeur, Lawrence Coupe, and Marina Warner. Not only does Mary Magdalen offer the hope of the marginalized in her challenge to the dominant, but her story also shows how dialogism and mythopoeia open up narratives so that they become more than their oppressive uses. Though Bakhtin is in particular interested in the novel as a more heteroglossic form of narrative than other genres, while Ricoeur, Coupe and Warner

⁴ “Theologies of liberation emphasize the biblical theme of God’s action on behalf of enslaved, poor, and outcast persons as a central paradigm for faith” (Mercer 168).

focus on narrative more generally, I intend to apply all four in a way that unites them, emphasizing their similarities rather than their differences. All four find in certain kinds of narrative the hope⁵ that can be offered when ideas are presented as part of a story instead of within a strict doctrine. The texts in which Mary Magdalen's character is developed—the gospels, legends, plays, films, and novels (to name a few)—allow for this openness of interpretation and reinterpretation. In part because of her original marginalization, I argue, she allows for the unfettered exploration and testing of official ideas. Thus, she makes an excellent access point to Jesus Christ for many more marginal readers—from pious laity of the later Middle Ages to secular audiences of the twentieth-century. The retellings of her story and the reimaginings of her character are in part so persistent because of her unique position as both central to the story and marginalized by society.

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin shows how heteroglossia works in specific novelistic examples, most of which would not apply in the texts I am examining. My use of Bakhtin is predicated on the spirit of openness and hybridity which does not rely on his stricter application of heteroglossia to the novel as a genre. The idea that many voices speak in a given text is still applicable in my project, especially in the case of Mary Magdalen, where “conflation merges and strings together texts to make a kind of novelistic whole” (Schaberg 74).⁶ Moreover, Katherine Ludwig Jansen uses Bakhtin's

⁵ This hope is the hope for a world less dominated by hierarchies and less oppressive to certain groups and individuals; by “hope” I mean the offering of possibility instead of constraint.

⁶ Schaberg adds that this novelistic whole is “in the service of certain gender ideologies” (74). While I agree that this is true, I wish instead to emphasize the possibilities offered by such a pastiche, rather than its given ideological constraints. I would also suggest that it does injustice to any culture to read their texts as

theory of dialogism in her interpretations of medieval sermons on Mary Magdalen: “They could be, in Bakhtin’s terms, dialogical in that it is not just the institutional voice, or the preacher’s voice, that is contained in them; frequently, if we listen carefully, the voice of the audience can also be discerned” (7). Bakhtin emphasizes the value of the novel as an unfinished genre—since it is still in the process of becoming, it is not a reflection of an official version of the past, but can instead reflect the heteroglossia of discourse that reveals its present context. Mary Magdalen, too, is always in the process of becoming, and is, metaphorically speaking, an unfinished genre herself. Each representation of her reflects the heteroglossia of the speakers, readers and writers of its given context; in contrast to the acceptance of a static and official doctrine,⁷ understanding the meaning of Mary Magdalen is a communal activity. As Bakhtin writes, “the novel . . . is associated with the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought (holiday forms, familiar speech, profanation)” (“Epic” 20). I read Mary Magdalen as precisely this sort of profanation, which is associated with that which is unofficial (or non-authoritative), and, therefore, living.

Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogue, a term used to emphasize the present-ness of speech and the interaction between individual consciousnesses that occurs in spoken language, and heteroglossia, which refers to the hybridity of these selves and the possibilities offered by such a hybridity, are crucial to my project. Instead of applying them to my texts or the speech acts within them in a specific way, I will use these

merely reflections of the dominant ideology. This bias does a disservice to the people who read and interact with the texts.

⁷ The mainstream view of Mary Magdalen, like that of Eve, has often made of her an emblem of women’s greater sexual weakness or her greater need for forgiveness.

concepts to foreground my discussion of Mary Magdalen and read all of the texts I have pulled together *through* them. The importance of Bakhtin's work here is not that many "voices" are present or allowed to speak but that a greater polyphony both within the texts and in the interaction between them will prevent one ideological authority from gaining an oppressive dominance. This does not mean that there are no ideologies and agendas struggling to be heard in a given text; on the contrary, dialogism in the novel allows for the tension that results in the multiplicity of these contesting voices instead of their easy translation into the audience's belief system. In some readings Bakhtin sees the Bible as precisely the kind of text that novelistic discourse is antagonistic towards because of its "presumption of authority" and "claim to absolute language" (Holquist xxxiii). Indeed, Bakhtin refers to religious language as an "authoritative discourse" that is "inert[. . .]" and "semantic[ally] finite[. . .]" ("Discourse in the Novel" 344). In contrast, the novel is "free to exploit" the "impossibility of full meaning" to "its own hybridizing purposes" (Holquist xxxiii). While I acknowledge this, I instead read the Bible in contrast to doctrine, since it is a pastiche of narratives, and thus must contend with the powerful hybridity of various and sometimes contradictory authors.⁸

Supplementary to my application of Bakhtin, I will use Ricoeur's, Coupe's and Warner's readings of myth in order to show how it is Mary Magdalen's constant rewriting in narratives that allow for a reinterpretation of doctrine and to show that the Bible, the medieval legends and the secular novels all fully participate in these

⁸ The Bible includes various genres including poetry (in the Psalms) and epistolary (in the book of Romans, for example). Many would argue that all of these forms and voices are presented as speaking for the voice of God. Even so, many consciousnesses are a part of its construction and its reception, and the Bible has lent itself to innumerable interpretations. Many thinkers (Simone Weil, for example) see Christ as a contradiction of Yahweh.

interpretive possibilities. Ricoeur writes that he “would like to see in the reading of a text such as the Bible a creative operation unceasingly employed in decontextualizing its meaning and recontextualizing it in today’s *Sitz-inn-Leben*” (“Bible” 145). Thus, it is not only the revisioning of Mary Magdalen into narrative that makes her characterization so limitlessly dialogic, but it is the rewriting and rereading of her story in changing contexts by different readers and writers that allows her to become an embodiment of myriad and even opposing viewpoints. Theologian Phyllis Trible reads this as true for even the stories contained in scripture: “A single text appears in different versions with different functions in different contexts What it says on one occasion, it denies on another. Thus, scripture in itself yields multiple interpretations” (4). If this is true for scripture, then the multiplicity of interpretations is even more evident in a scriptural story rewritten over a few hundred years into popularized legend, into an elaborate play, into films and into novels. No version is official, and all reflect both the possibilities of narrative and the impossibility of static doctrine: “Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth: there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account” (Warner *Six* 8). This is not to say that myth—or gospel narratives—are not treated like official doctrine, but that by their own narrativization they are kept from a singular and oppressive interpretation: “Myths aren’t writ in stone, they’re not fixed They can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they’re not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others” (Warner *Six* 13-4). To show how the midrash of Mary Magdalen texts—from more to less official—participates in this unfixing of meaning, I will use Laurence Coupe’s elucidation of radical typology. Instead of a typology that simply sees Christ as

the fulfillment of Adam (or Moses), *radical* typology reads the typological impulse as unending, so one story sets the stage for its own rewriting, and a story can be rewritten with a different understanding unlimited times. Just as the medieval legends add to the gospel stories, the twenty-first century novelizations add to both the legends and the scriptures. Throughout my project, I will conceive of Mary Magdalen as a metaphor for the impossibility of control over the Christian narrative: she, like other characters and stories, is an embodiment whose various imaginings recreate her as more than the sum of her didactic parts.

Part One will look at the legendary medieval Magdalen. I will discuss the various ways in which Mary Magdalen was known, most of which originate in a sermon given by Pope Gregory the Great that conflates Mary Magdalen with four other women who appear in the gospel; I will look at how Mary is represented as a sexual sinner, a penitent, an apostle, and a contemplative in two manifestations of her legend—the vita written by Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298) in his *Golden Legend*, and a Digby mystery play that presents her story around the turn of the fifteenth century. Both the *Golden Legend* and the Digby play are especially important for my project because they ostensibly reflect the status quo (the play is based on the legend, which was created to support devotional practices), were widely accessible, and present their versions of Mary Magdalen in a narrative form.

The medieval archive is crucial to my project because the “composite” or “single” Magdalen—the Magdalen who is devised as a combination of various women (other than Mary of Magdala)—was first created and proliferated in the Middle Ages. Although

Mary Magdalen first appears in the New Testament and in the Early Christian Church, it was not until the sixth century that the single Magdalen is wrought, a rendering which is solidified by the legends that emanate from this tradition in the later Middle Ages. As well, the legendary elaboration of Mary reaches its height in the later medieval period. In contrast to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century texts I will analyse in Part Two, which show various points of view on the spectrum of Christian belief to atheism, the medieval texts show how particular Christian readers and writers viewed Mary Magdalen, which sets up a major point of contrast in my larger thesis.

The medieval multiplicity of Mary Magdalen, in which she appears as both a preacher and evangelist (a position which complicates the church's ideal wherein women were not to preach) as well as a harlot, shows that she is always a threat to patriarchal ideology: she is constructed in ways that transgress the boundaries for "good women," even as she is also a moral exemplar for them. In this first part, I organize my project into five thematic sections, four of which reflect one of the ways Mary Magdalen came to *mean* for her medieval audience—she is represented as a worldly prostitute, as a penitent, as an evangelist, as a contemplative. In the final section of Part One, I consider how forms of power and humility are working in each narrative and assess their implications for an interpretation of the medieval Magdalen.

Interestingly, the medieval church is not alone in its obsession with the changing configuration of Mary Magdalen: the similarities between medieval and contemporary representations of her, read alongside explicit religious differences, reveal much about the ideology of both ages. While the focus of the second part is on two novels, I also

survey and briefly analyse four recent films in order to show, firstly, how contemporary artists have imagined Mary Magdalen and secondly to give a more complete picture of how this figure has translated into our own era. For example, Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* recalls the post-Reformation and Victorian effacement of Mary Magdalen as only a prostitute.⁹ In *Venus in Sackcloth*, Marjorie Malvern explains that in the centuries after the Reformation until the latter half of the twentieth century, there was an "emphasis on the Magdalen as a penitent Venus In both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, [writers] often replace her in literature as the 'whore', honest or wicked, pathetic or comic" (139); this emphasis would continue into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moving in a new direction, Scorsese's film (like some of the others) exemplifies recent projections of Mary Magdalene as a sexualized prostitute, but one both reformed *and* desired by Jesus Christ.

Part Two is also organized thematically, into three parts: the first explores the way Mary Magdalen becomes a symbol of the twentieth-century liberated woman, the second considers how her sexual behaviour is dealt with and the third hypothesizes that Mary Magdalen is most often used in the contemporary texts as a way of "getting at" the Christ. The first two sections, which make analyses based on gender and then on sexuality, may be seen to overlap somewhat, and even to be arbitrarily distinct. They remain separated, however: the first shows how contemporary producers, critics and audiences have made of Mary Magdalen a figurehead for feminist ideals, while the second shows that Mary Magdalen's body and her sexual behaviour are uncomfortable

⁹ I will also consider *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Jesus* (1999) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

subjects—subjects that are often repressed instead of acknowledged—even in the contemporary texts.

In each section, after an analysis of each film, I will deal with Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), both as a text and as a cultural phenomenon. The novel's attempt to redeem Mary Magdalen and uncover the "truth" about her, coupled with the book's popularity, reveal much about contemporary perceptions of Mary Magdalene. In *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary Magdalene is evoked as a female essence, the mother of Christ's children, while Brown blames the widely held perception that she was a prostitute on the Catholic Church's effort to defame her. In attempting to redeem Mary Magdalene from her sexualized past, Brown actually emphasizes her identification as a sexual object, not only by constantly referring to it, but also by sexualizing her relationship with Jesus Christ. *The Da Vinci Code* reveals a great deal about contemporary notions of female empowerment, particularly since it claims to be informed by them. Dan Brown tries to invoke a Gnostic Mary Magdalene by putting her into a marriage with and, as he believes, making her into a feminine counterpart to Christ; even so, his rendering does not maintain a crucial aspect of the Gnostic Mary—that she was more intuitive and "knowing" than the other disciples. By neglecting to give Mary a voice—her "mystery" is uncovered and alluded to by contemporary historians in the novel—Brown effaces the female apostle once more. *The Da Vinci Code* is important to my project not because Brown is trying to refer to or use the medieval legends with which I am dealing; on the contrary, it fascinates me that as Brown uses "ancient" and "mystic" texts to reinforce his theory, he inadvertently evokes the multiple and obsessive renderings of the medieval

Magdalen, while also neutralizing their power. His reiteration and reconstruction of Mary are analogous to the persistent restructuring of her figure in the Middle Ages. Even so, like all of the texts in my project, Dan Brown's does not merely transmit ideas in a doctrinaire way; his text also participates in the re-contextualizing of the story of Mary Magdalen, which allows the possibilities offered by a multiplicity of interpretations.

The final text that I will explore in each section is Nino Ricci's *Testament* (2002), comparing it to *The Da Vinci Code* as another attempt to rework and "empower" the image of Mary Magdalene. Ricci's Mary Magdalen is given a voice, that of the narrator of a quarter of the novel. Here, she is reconfigured as a plain girl with no desire to marry; there is no mention of her sex life. Mary Magdalene, in Ricci's rewriting, is a companion of Christ, privy to information not given to the other disciples. This picture seems to straddle various medieval conceptions; for example, she is intuitive, like the Mary Magdalene in the Gnostic writings, and a kind of disciple, as in the *vitae*. I will examine Ricci's text in light of the aforementioned texts, interrogating his decision to overhaul her characterization and see how it resonates in terms of medieval and contemporary ideas of the feminine. In a comparison between Brown and Ricci, I will argue that Ricci's choice to position Mary Magdalen within her own narrative allows her to be interpreted in multiple and often more positive ways; such an argument will support my consideration of mythographic and narrative theory, showing that narrative gives rise to new ideas rather than presenting old ideas in a finished form.

In part, a contrast can be made between Brown and Ricci because their projects are so different: Brown's novel is a fast-moving thriller intended to gain a wide

readership, while Ricci is interested in writing a work of literary fiction, not necessarily a popular one. At the same time, Brown's and Ricci's agendas are very similar: both desire to strip away some of the divinity of Christ through their writing. Brown's effort has resulted in a highly controversial work that has provoked readers enough that numerous works have been released to reject his claims. Ricci, while being a more serious critic of the Church,¹⁰ has not stirred up as much controversy, probably because of his lesser visibility. My project is keen to reveal the agendas and the representations they engender in all of the texts I will explore in order to show their heteroglossia; the presence of these ideological aims alongside the recontextualization done by the rewriting of Mary's story shows that since she is always an embodiment of contradictory ideas, her characterization is always a hybrid one.

Mary Magdalen embodies and reveals many powerful ideas about gender and sexuality, and spirituality. As a woman, she provokes discussion about the role of women in the church. As a reformed prostitute, she shakes up the Christian understandings of sexuality. As Christ's contemporary and peer, Mary Magdalen provides the model for a relationship to him. While there might seem at first to be a contrast between the two archives in my project, the writers from both eras use the same figure in similar ways. Just as a study of the medieval legends helps contemporary readers to understand the ideas about femininity and about power circulating in that age, a study of contemporary fiction and film reveal a great deal about our own ideologies, ones that might not be revealed by our explicit discourse about ourselves. Ruth Mazo Karras argues, along fairly

¹⁰ Brown confesses to be a Christian (F.A.Q.) while Ricci persistently reiterates his rejection of Christianity.

typical lines, that the medieval church was misogynist: “The medieval discourse of gender, largely fashioned by monastic writers, distrusted and feared women in general” (32). If the discourse of gender in the Middle Ages was truly misogynist, then ours is likewise so; alternatively, if we choose to reject Karras’s claim, we are compelled to reinterpret the medieval construction of the feminine.

If, as I suggest, this medieval construction of the feminine must be reinterpreted, so must the New Testament scripture be reread in terms of its potential to liberate. As is shown by the mutations of Mary Magdalen by all sorts of writers (both religious and secular, both misogynist and not), Christian narratives cannot be put perfectly to work for any one or another doctrine or ideology; therefore, the Christian Bible is not inherently or necessarily oppressive. Mary Magdalen is one site of the tension between the oppressive and the transgressive potentials of Christian beliefs. As Caroline Ramazanoglu suggests, when a certain culture or religion is deemed to be patriarchal or oppressive, “the atheist or agnostic western feminist [is set up] as a superior knower” (152). Instead of reiterating this kind of binary, I wish to explore, through the use of the character of Mary Magdalen, less hierarchical ways of understanding medieval (and other forms of) Christianity and its stories. All of the texts studied in this thesis contribute to a such an understanding; they are all dialogic instead of monologic and all reopen the gospel story to new readings.

Part One: Legends of Mary Magdalen

While my project could easily be much larger and move through the centuries from Christ's ministry to our present,¹¹ I instead begin my analysis in the later Middle Ages, when Mary Magdalen's cult was flourishing and ideas about her abounded and made their way into legend. The Mary Magdalen found here has little in common with her Biblical counterpart in great part because of a sermon given on September 21, 591. Though, as we will see, the multi-faceted Mary Magdalen was constructed over a long period of time, the official conflation of the "Magdalen"—a saint composed of the stories of more than one Biblical character—can be traced to this specific moment. In this sermon, Pope Gregory the Great hypothesized that Mary Magdalen was the same woman as Luke's sinner and Mary of Bethany. Jansen translates the rhetorical move thus: "'We believe that this woman [Mary Magdalen] whom Luke calls a female sinner, whom John calls Mary is the same Mary from whom Mark says seven demons were cast out'" (33). In the Biblical story, Mary Magdalen is mentioned only a few times, and all that is known about her from the scriptures is that Christ had driven seven demons from her, that she came from a place called Magdala, and that after searching in vain for Christ's body, she became the first witness to his resurrection.¹² In the scriptures, she is not mentioned as especially sexual, nor is there a reference to her as a "sinner", except that of her demonic possession. In fact, given her important role during the resurrection, it is at first surprising that her name became associated with sexual sin, prostitution and repentance. Gregory's

¹¹ Haskins and Malvern have published accounts with this greater scope.

¹² She is mentioned as present at the crucifixion (Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25), at the entombment (Matthew 27: 56 and Mark 15:47) and at Easter (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10, John 20:1). The driving of demons is mentioned in Luke 8:2-3 and her status as first witness in John 20:10-18.

hypothesis, as ill-founded as it was, replaced previous understandings of Mary Magdalen and became the basis for her legend.

After Gregory the Great, the Magdalen acquired associations with such sin and repentance because of her association with a penitent woman who anoints Christ's feet with perfume.¹³ Because of a similar story in which a woman anoints Christ in Bethany,¹⁴ Mary was then also endowed with the contemplative aspects of Mary of Bethany—a companion of Christ who had “chosen the better part” of contemplation¹⁵—which buttresses her legendary role as apostle and contemplative ascetic. In any case, by the late medieval period, Mary Magdalen's legend had grown to become almost entirely unconnected with her Biblical role. Susan Haskins argues that this conflation lessened Mary Magdalen's transgressive potential:

From the gospel figure, with her active role as herald of the New Life—the Apostle to the Apostles—she became the redeemed whore and Christianity's model of repentance, a manageable, controllable figure and effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex. (94)

Though Mary Magdalen was indeed invoked in order to control women, her legend still contains aspects that challenge this control, since she plays so many, often contradictory roles. In her vitae, she is emphasized also as an apostle: “Theologians, exegetes, homilists, and vernacular poets and dramatists showed just as lively an interest in elaborating Mary Magdalene's other spiritual roles as contemplative, apostle, and desert hermit” (Coletti “*Curtesy*” 3). That she was invoked both as a representative female

¹³ Luke 7:36-50. This woman is often referred to simply as “Luke's sinner.”

¹⁴ Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, John 12:1-8.

¹⁵ In Luke 10 and John 11, Mary chooses to converse with Christ while her sister Martha serves them both domestically. Christ tells them that he prefers what Mary has chosen. This story is taken up in the medieval language about the contemplative and active roles. See Gris  for a useful description of these roles.

sinner and as a powerful apostle is one example of how myriad interpretations and uses were contained in one figure who is meant to embody a rather straightforward message.

By the late Middle Ages, Mary Magdalen was one of the most popular saints,¹⁶ and, although this popularity had a particular political charge in Italy and Provence, her legend was also widely disseminated in England. This legend does not only reflect the interests of a powerful few or a singular, official interpretation, since much of this dissemination comes “through popular devotional literature and the sermons that drew upon it” (Jansen 41); in a ninth century *vita*, Mary Magdalen is assimilated with Mary of Egypt, a repentant prostitute, and in other *vitae*, she is shipwrecked and converts the city of Aix-en-Provence (Jansen 38-9). Even the sources for the printed version of her legend are various and scattered.¹⁷

By the time Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298) wrote his version of the legend, most of these elements are present in her story: David Mycoff names it as Mary’s *vita* in “its fully-developed and relatively stable thirteenth century form” (3). Extremely popular, the *Golden Legend* (ca. 1260) was available to most readers by the fifteenth century and was likely a prominent source for the Digby *Mary Magdalen* (1490s-1525).¹⁸ Both this play and de Voragine’s *vita* show how the “single” or “composite” Magdalen came to represent so many different ideas; both were relatively accessible and likely represent prevalent understandings of her legend. As Clifford Davidson notes, the Digby *Mary Magdalen* is a “kind of medieval pilgrim’s progress,” where all Christians are encouraged

¹⁶ See Jansen 3.

¹⁷ The earliest sources for de Voragine’s *Legend* likely derive from an old English martyrology from around 850 (Malvern 77) and a tenth century sermon attributed to Saint Odo of Cluny (Mycoff 5).

¹⁸ Theresa Coletti’s dating (“*Paupertas*” 337).

to identify with her journey (71).¹⁹ The genre of the *Golden Legend* is more didactic than the play, since it was written to enhance devotional practice (Jansen 37). While the play is no doubt fully engaged with its political and ideological backdrop, as part of a less institutionally-driven genre, it can provide a comparison with the more doctrinal vitae.²⁰ Thus, a reading of Mary Magdalen's vita as depicted in the *Golden Legend* and in the Digby play, alongside the ideas circulating in sermons and other writings will reveal some of the predominant ways Mary Magdalen is constructed in the medieval Church.

Beginning with her role as a sinner or "worldly woman", I will explore the various meanings that Mary Magdalen came to have in the popular imagination, including a penitent, an apostle or evangelist, and a contemplative ascetic. This part is organized thematically; in each of its first four sections, both texts are discussed in relation to one of Mary's "faces." The fifth and final section of this part will instead be a discussion of alternative ways of conceiving of the movements of power in the Digby play. In this structuring, I intend to emphasize the complete, complex and simultaneous roles Mary Magdalen is made to play and the different meanings each role reveals, showing indeed that this marginal character emphasizes not the need for women to be controlled, nor the misogyny of the Catholic Church but the heteroglossia present within a single (but unfinished) story. In both her marginal status and her hybrid identities, Mary

¹⁹ As well as being informative about the development of Mary Magdalen's characterization, this play is crucial to scholarship about medieval saints' plays, since it is one of the only surviving examples: "Because it draws encyclopedically on themes and conventions associated with the three traditionally recognized medieval dramatic types—miracle, mystery, and morality—*Mary Magdalene* has emerged as a touchstone for speculation about the generic development of early English drama" (Coletti "*Paupertas*" 338).

²⁰ Coletti writes that it probably attracted a mixed audience: "The panoramic scope and theatrically ambitious spectacle of *Mary Magdalene* have inspired speculation that it hailed from a city 'of major size and considerable dramatic experience' or a 'prosperous market town' that could have gathered the mixed audience to which, according to Alexandra Johnston, it seems to appeal" ("*Paupertas*" 344).

Magdalen is simultaneously a challenge to official discourse and an apostle for its message.

I. A Woman of the World: Mary Magdalen's Pre-Conversion Life

The suggestion that Mary Magdalen was a prostitute before her conversion is much less explicit in the *Golden Legend* than might be assumed. Even so, many of the other biographical “facts” described by de Voragine were enough to deem Mary Magdalen a harlot within medieval gender discourse. As well, as Karras explains, in medieval understandings, the salient feature of prostitution was not “financial exchange,” but promiscuous or “indiscriminate sexuality” (5). Therefore, the legendary ideas about Mary Magdalen’s pre-conversion life, from her wealth and independence to her tendency towards sensual pleasures, were enough to name her a “sinner,” which would be tantamount to “sexual sinner,” which would be synonymous with “whore.” There are scanty Biblical sources for the pre-conversion Magdalen that led to these assumptions. Because Mary takes her name—“of Magdala”—from her place of origin and not from her relationship to a male figure in her life, readers tended to see her as especially independent, an independence that would have been impossible unless she were wealthy. So, from her name alone, two major “facts” of Mary’s legend are taken: her independence and her wealth. In medieval gender discourse, both of these factors were enough to suggest that she is more susceptible to sin: she is a woman who lacks male protection and control and whose wealth would be understood to tempt her to various sins, including lust, pride, vanity, and idleness (Jansen 150).

Mary Magdalen’s class status is described in the *Golden Legend*: She “was born of ryght noble lyngnage [and] parentis whiche were descended of the lyngnage of kynges”

(de Voragine CCXVI a).²¹ The development of her legend may have had something to do with her association with wealth.²² Both in de Voragine's version of the legend and in the Digby play, Mary Magdalen is, as necessitated by tradition, conflated with Mary of Bethany, rendering both Lazarus and Martha wealthy as well. In the *Golden Legend*, Mary Magdalen's fall into sin does not seem to be solely connected to her class status, since Lazarus and Martha choose otherwise: "Marye gaf her self to all delytes of the body/And lazare entended alle to knyghthod martha whiche was wyse gouerned nobly her brothers parte/ [and] also her susters" (de Voragine CCXVI a-b). Still, de Voragine concludes that it is Mary's wealth and beauty that led to her carnality: "By cause delyte is felawe to rychesses and haboundaunce of thynges/ and for so moche as she shone in beaute gretly and in rychesses so moche the more she submysed her body to delyte" (de Voragine CCXVI b). The Digby Mary's fall is explained in a similar way.²³ This Mary is preyed upon by Satan, bad angels and personified sins, like "pryde," "covetyse," and "luxuria." The story is expanded here, though, and it is not until Mary's father Cyrus dies and she inherits "the Castle of Magdalen" that she is besieged by sin. According to these associations, Mary's wealth and autonomy lead directly to her susceptibility towards sin. Coletti suggests that the play is centred on themes of wealth and poverty: "In *Mary Magdalene* it is not simply redemption but the saint's entire spiritual project that is figured through material and economic transactions" (Coletti "*Paupertas*" 341). Her

²¹ All quotes are taken from Caxton's translation.

²² See Coletti "*Paupertas*" 345.

²³ Though both of these sources link Mary's sin to her wealth and autonomy, another legend held that Mary turned to "fleshly pleasures" after being jilted by a recently converted St. John the Evangelist. De Voragine addresses and opposes the rumour of this jilting. See de Voragine CCXIX a.

move from wealth to voluntary poverty, as I discuss in a following chapter, is as important as her move from sinner to saint.

While de Voragine's legend is vague as to the details of her actual behaviour, the Digby play depicts it in both allegorical and realistic detail. There are lengthy scenes that illustrate "þe Kyng of the Wor[l]d, þe Flesch, and þe Dylfe, . . . þe Seuen Dedly Synys, [and] a Bad Angyll" who indicate their relationships and are commanded by Satan to make Mary Magdalen their servant (305-84). After some rhetorical flourish (385-439), Lechery (Luxuria) and the other deadly sins enter the Castle of Magdalen. Lechery defers to Mary, and she responds that s/he is "welcum onto" her and that his "tong" is "amyabyll" (449-50). Lechery brings her to a tavern, where "Coryoste" meets them, disguised as a "Galavnt" (470-510). This gallant proceeds to seduce Mary and eventually she concedes to leave with him: "Ewyn at your wyl, my dere derlyng!/Thowe Ze wyl go to þe wordys eynd,/I wol neuyr from yow wynd,/To dye for your sake!" (543-6).²⁴

Mary's corruption is here depicted as not only a consequence of her gender and class situation but is also due to the fact that she is under-protected by the men in her life. Her father has died, leaving her with a great amount of financial security and freedom, and instead of leading her away from "lechery," Lazarus abets her seduction. Before leaving for the tavern, Mary asks him to watch over the Castle while she is gone, and he replies that he and Martha "xal do [her] intende" (466). The Castle is significant as a

²⁴ Mary's desire to "dye for" her lover's "sake" also prefigures her relationship to Christ, which subtextually sexualizes her relationship to Christ.

symbol of Mary's body:²⁵ "The unbreached castle is one of the many attributes of the Virgin Mary, symbolising her unbroken virginity In the case of Mary Magdalen, the same symbolism applies, in the Digby play, as the vices besiege the castle of her chastity" (Haskins 167). Davidson reiterates this point: the Castle of Magdalen "is immediately recognizable as the familiar Castle of Virtue and is intended to be associated with the soul who defends herself against vice" (75). The failure of this defense underlines the failure of male protection: in failing sufficiently to protect Mary's castle, Lazarus has failed to protect her body and soul.

The "castle of virtue" is, in Mary's case, inadequate protection, which also underlines the necessity of a spiritual protection as well as a physical one. Another reading of the inadequacy of male protection here might argue that instead of calling for better male control of women, the legend is calling for a kind of spiritual power that might replace and overcome earthly masculine power. Though in the Digby play, "male power is built around the patriarchal image of the good father (or ruler), who protects and provides for his family (or his subjects) through his earthly wealth and power," as Susannah Milner points out, this power is associated with antagonists like King Herod and not with Christ (388). Milner suggests that not only has Mary's faith in male power been disappointed, but it actually leads to her sin: "Mary's desire to treat Curiosity with 'reverens' reflects and highlights her continued belief in the masculine power system of the castle, as established earlier by Cyrus" (391). Thus, the play calls for a non-

²⁵ According to Theresa Coletti, it is important to read the castle in economic as well as allegorical terms: "The text makes it eminently clear that the Magdalene's patrimony is most significantly a piece of property" ("*Paupertas*" 347).

patriarchal kind of power, a power that is not “illusory” or “worldly,” but actually supports the subversive potential of Christianity (Milner 390). The non-patriarchal, non-worldly power called for in the Digby play relates to the community Schüssler Fiorenza calls her *ekklēsia* (*But She* 7) and Schaberg’s society of outsiders (39). Mary Magdalen is in a unique position to confuse the boundaries between the margins and the centre, since she resides in both places; she is in a unique position to realize the subversive potential of Christianity.

However, Mary’s wealth and consequent autonomy were problems for those who believed that women needed protection and control: a “condition of the Magdalen’s pre-conversion life which allowed her, in the preachers’ view, to sink into the depths of depravity was the unfettered liberty she enjoyed. She was an autonomous woman, under the control of no man” (Jansen 150). Mary’s legend could function as a warning against women entering a public arena; such women would immediately be coded as harlots.²⁶ Her nobility also had a function in the larger story. Her “neglect of her class status compounded her sin,” but her “class standing, nobility, wealth, and beauty made her in the medieval mind more appropriate as a special friend for Christ than if she were a common prostitute” (Karras 20). Though her wealth was understood to be the cause of her sin, it also made her a more worthy saint.

Though Mary’s transgression becomes an opportunity for problematic warnings against women, the tavern scene in the Digby play can provide alternate readings. The

²⁶ “To the monastically created misogynist ethos of the Late Middle Ages, any young, beautiful, courtly lady was undoubtable a sinner, and Mary Magdalen embodied this gender definition” (Karras 28).

tavern scene is not only a comment on gender, but also on class.²⁷ While Mary's "worldly" autonomy *is* located in the fallen realm, "commercial activity" is as well ("*Paupertas*" 352).²⁸ The class-coded men in this scene—the "gallant" (Curiosity disguised) and the taverner—are not exempt from being associated with sin. Coletti suggests that the gallant figure would have been "identified with moral, social, and economic dimensions of excessive attire" which "complicates the signifying function of clothing, with important implications for the dramatic image of female vice" ("*Curtesy*" 10). Thus, Mary's fall in the Digby play does not necessarily (or solely) connect with her gender; rather, her fall reveals the constraints of class hierarchies (Coletti "*Curtesy*" 10). While it can still be maintained that Mary Magdalen's legend was used in misogynist rhetoric to regulate female autonomy and sexuality, certain manifestations of her narrative—especially in the late-medieval Digby play—complicate any such totalizing critique.

The connections between Mary's wealth, independence and susceptibility to sin were compounded with the New Testament source (Luke 8:2) that referred to Mary Magdalen as a woman from whom Christ had exorcised seven demons. These seven devils were treated as the seven deadly sins as a result of their identification in the patristic writings.²⁹ The seven deadly sins are full of connections to various ideas about the female gender and the pitfalls of wealth. Mary Magdalen's gender and wealth would

²⁷ Coletti writes, "Mary's capitulation to Curiosity's advances in a Jerusalem tavern implicates her sin in the homiletic and misogynist tradition that constructed the tavern as a site of feminine transgression, but it also locates that sin in late-medieval systems for the exchange of wealth and goods" ("*Paupertas*" 350-1).

²⁸ Coletti reads this alongside an assertion that the Digby play probably originated in "a prosperous urban venue" ("*Curtesy*" 1).

²⁹ See Davidson 73 and Grantley 458.

be understood to lead to vanity; and Karras writes that these associations were all connected to lust as well: Mary's "makeup, perfume, clothing, and frivolity, the outward signs of lust, implied . . . sexual sin" (23).³⁰ Mary's vanity is alluded to in the Digby play when Lechery uses flattery to lure Mary away from the castle (440-65). Vanity was rooted in pride, which, along with curiosity, was the sin that led Eve to fall (Haskins 13). Davidson suggests that her pride has led to her lust since, in the Digby play, "Curiosity, as the Bad Angel suggests, is really only a disguise which Pride has taken" (79). Greed was often ascribed to prostitutes as well, because of their occupation (Karras 4). Mary's story was used not only to warn against sexual sin, then, but could solidify Christian ideas about various sins and their assumed connection to the female sex.³¹ Most often, Mary was assumed to be a sexual sinner: "Though [her list of sins] often included pride and the enjoyment of other carnal pleasures besides sex—sometimes all seven deadly sins—all the representations of Mary Magdalen's early life saw the sin of lust (*luxuria*) and sexual looseness as the key" (Karras 18). De Voragine does not connect her with the seven deadly sins and names her fall as one into "delytes of the body" (CCXVI a-b); though she is tempted by all seven sins in the Digby play, Mary's connection to lust is underlined by the playwright since she is convinced by Lechery herself to pursue a sexual relationship with a disguised Curiosity (440-546).

³⁰ Davidson comments that Mary Magdalen's body is adorned in such ways that emphasize her vanity in the Digby play: "Perhaps she wears a garb which is now not only more elaborate than in the tavern scene but which also is indicative of her professional status as a courtesan. Both her fine clothing and the lushness of the arbor will contrast sharply with the plain dress which she will assume after her conversion and with the primitive cell in the wilderness where she will spend the final period of her earthly life" (80).

³¹ "Vanity, lust, prostitution. . . preachers made them conform to the rather vague biographical facts of her life in order to address exigent questions about the nature of Woman, women's place in society, the need for female protection, and the problem of prostitution" (Jansen 146).

Mary Magdalen's fall into sin was, then, used to support misogynist ideas about women's sexuality; they were assumed to be more susceptible to sin and therefore male surveillance of them became necessary (and godly).³² The Church began taking direct action on behalf of prostitutes in the late twelfth century (Haskins 174). Medieval convertites, convents designed to house repentant female sinners—usually prostitutes—were set up in Mary Magdalen's name. Her legend was often invoked in order to support these movements regarding prostitution. Such institutions offered asylum to these women as long as they gave up their vocation and converted fully to Christianity.³³ Though this kind of institutionalization is obviously a means of social and sexual control, it is perhaps better than total condemnation. Jansen writes that “when we strip away the shrill threats, the bonfires, and the inflamed rhetoric, we find that beneath the fire-and-brimstone lay a message of hope and liberation” (Jansen 196). It would be too easy to dismiss such moves as irredeemably misogynist, since they are rooted in a doctrine that gave women the means to leave prostitution, a vocation that was often a desperate measure and was (and is) in many ways oppressive to women.³⁴ Still, these limiting definitions of Woman are inextricable from the discourse of medieval prostitution.

Medieval ideology was concerned with the protection of women, both spiritually and physically. The *Golden Legend* emphasizes this understanding in the description of

³² “Medieval gender ideology” claimed that women “were unstable, easily seduced, and predisposed toward sexual sin. Therefore, it was necessary for them to be subject to male surveillance and guidance at all times. Statutes from medieval convertites sanctioned this view” (Jansen 182).

³³ These asylums “had as their aim the amelioration of society, [but] served also as instruments of social control” (Jansen 194).

³⁴ Of course, prostitution is a complex feminist issue. In her helpful section on the topic, Schaberg writes that “the central aspect of the legend, the identification of the Magdalene as a whore, has untapped power. It is not only a slur to be scraped off the historical figure . . . It can be read as creating good confusion, an opportunity for subversion” (Schaberg 113). In Part Two I discuss further the complicated treatments of Mary's sexuality and prostitution.

her name: “Magdalene is as moche to saye as abydyng culpable/Or magdalene is interpreted closed or shette/or not to be ouercomen/Or ful of magnyficence/by whiche is shewed what she was to fore her conuersion/and what in her conuersion/and what after her conuersion” (de Voragine CCXVI a). Her conversion arms her, where she was once unprotected. In her post-conversion life, she is described as “unconquered,” which connotes a restoration of her virginity. Her story is essentially about the restoration of her castle, one that cannot be conquered. One can read Christianity as controlling and oppressively chivalrous, then, but it is also a source of strength and resistance for Mary, since it frees her from the bonds of earthly male control (at least ideally).

Though the dominant ideology reiterated patriarchal definitions of women, of women’s sexuality and of the need to control them, counter-reactions to the story of Mary’s pre-conversion life were possible. For example, with male preachers inveighing against the practice, a certain group of nuns nearly celebrated Mary’s pre-conversion delight in the world: “The unruly sisters of Villarceaux clearly associated vanity, frivolity, and dancing with the feast-day of Mary Magdalen, despite the preachers’ persistent and escalating condemnations” (Jansen 159). Women might choose to meditate on aspects of Mary Magdalen other than the ones emphasized by male preachers. For example, some holy women “agreed entirely that vanity should be renounced, but not necessarily for the reasons the preachers posited. Their reasons centered on personal salvation rather than on the commonweal” (Jansen 254). Though legends like that of Mary Magdalen were used as tools of social control, the message did not always reach their intended audience. Such women could reinterpret such stories. This negotiation of

meaning perhaps explains how Mary Magdalen could stand for such different kinds of women: she served “as a prime exemplar for two very different kinds of women in particular, the female mystic of the Middle Ages, and the whore, the prostitute who, like the mythical repentant Magdalen, rejected her former life of sin, and was taken under the protection of the Church” (Haskins 170). As well as the mystic and the (converted) whore, Mary Magdalen was an exemplar for the penitent, which will be discussed in the next section.

II. Exemplar of Conversion: Mary Magdalen as Penitent

Many scholars read Mary Magdalen's ecclesiastical prominence as well as her popularity as a result of her appeal as a sort of "every-Christian." Unlike the Virgin Mary, Jesus and many of the other Christian heroes, Mary Magdalen proved that salvation and even sainthood was possible for everyone, even the worst of sinners. Clifford Davidson writes that "during the late Middle Ages she had been exalted as a luminary perhaps only exceeded in glory by the Blessed Virgin, for she had become the standard example of the serious sinner's repentance and ascent into bliss" (71). Especially in the later Middle Ages, as reflected by her legend, Mary Magdalen is invoked again and again as an exemplar for Christians in general and for specifically female piety in order to support the doctrine of penance, which was growing in importance.

The *Golden Legend* begins with a threefold interpretation of the name Mary as "bitter see," illuminator, and "enlumyned" (CCXVI a). De Voragine sees these three meanings as representative of the "parts" she has chosen: that of "penaunce," that of "contemplacion" (which I will discuss in a following chapter), and that of heavenly glory (CCXVI a). It is evident from the outset that penance is a crucial part of Mary Magdalen's legendary identity, but, interestingly, it is not the focus of the *Golden Legend*. In de Voragine's version, after she is identified as a sinner, she pursues Christ at Simon the Leper's house. She demonstrates her humility by, in (almost) accordance with the Biblical narrative, washing the Lord's feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and anointing them" (de Voragine CCXVI b). Christ reacts by "foryaff[ing] the woman alle her synnes" (de Voragine CCXVI b). Mary Magdalen's tears and active humility

mark her penance in this story: “She is sayde a bitter see/For therin she had moche bitternes/And that appiered in that she wepte so many teres that she washe therwyth the feet of our lord” (de Voragine CCXVI a). Even so, the bulk of the legend is devoted to her life after Christ’s ascension—as an evangelist to Marseilles, a miracle worker and a contemplative hermit. In my reading of this legend, there is very little emphasis on Mary Magdalen as either overly sexual or as marked by her role as a penitent. Even her extreme asceticism in the wilderness is disconnected from her much earlier conversion by a gap in which she acts as an evangelist.

It is possible that her conversion and penance needed little elaboration because they were such well-known aspects of Mary’s story. As Haskins notes, “the sorrowing Magdalen, repenting of her sins, red-cloaked, and with long loose hair, clasping the cross, represented all those sinners who had brought Christ to his Passion and, as the weeping lover, was the model for those who wished to repent” (191). Karras writes that “by the end of the Middle Ages the identification of Mary Magdalen and women in general with sexual sin had become so pervasive that the dramatists needed only a few symbols to evoke it” (23). While such a move certainly has the effect of flattening Mary Magdalen into a fairly static symbol, it also allows for different themes to be emphasized in her legend, which of course promotes the hybridity of her symbolism instead.

In the *Golden Legend*, Mary humbles herself and pursues Christ; her act of service to Christ in washing his feet is done out of her own impetus. De Voragine implies, of course, that she was also “enspyred wyth the holy ghost” (CCXVI b). Spiritual guidance is much more forceful and explicit in the Digby play. An angel first

convicts Mary of her sinfulness: “Why art þou aZens God so veryabyll?/Wy thynkys þou nat God made þe of nowth?/In syn and sorow þou art browth” (590-2). Mary repents and announces that she will find and follow Jesus: “I xal porsue þe Prophett wherso he be” (610). She finds Christ at Simon the Leper’s house and begs him for forgiveness, after which she washes his feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with perfume. Throughout her conversion, Mary acts freely rather than being acted upon.³⁵ Once converted, Mary is prepared for her coming role as an evangelist, immediately leaving for home to tell Martha and Lazarus about her change.

Though perhaps less explicitly than in the Digby play, themes of repentance and renewal are embedded in the *Golden Legend*. For example, Mary’s journey to Marseilles is an allegory for spiritual death and rebirth (Haskins 224). The conversion narratives of the royalty of Marseilles further elaborate on the theme of repentance, so that a core concern of the legend is the movement from unbelief and sin to belief and faithfulness. What may have been more important in the *Golden Legend* than an emphasis on Mary’s penance is her movement from effaced sinner to a powerful position as a great saint. It is not her penitential measures, then, that are important in Mary’s legend, but it is the juxtaposition of the extremes of sin and sanctity. Jansen writes that “at bottom, the ultimate meaning of the Magdalen in the late Middle Ages was a message of hope” (232) since she emphasized the power and availability of forgiveness.

Her association with these core Christian concerns also leads to her repeated invocation as an exemplar: “What greater *exemplum* of penance than a great sinner

³⁵ Christ’s defence of her could be read as problematically chivalrous, even as it emphasizes her value.

transformed through penitence into a great saint?" (Jansen 205). Her story supports the Gospel power to change even those who seem irredeemable, and, in these stories at least, her movement from pride to humility is emphasized more clearly than a move from sexuality to "purity." Still, images of Mary Magdalen and extra-legendary invocations of her proliferated a sense of her sexuality: "It should never be forgotten that Mary Magdalen was known in the medieval world as the *Beata peccatrix*, the holy sinner Her nakedness is at once innocent and seductive" (Jansen 134). Many images of Mary from this time period depict her as naked in the wilderness, covered only by her long hair (see Appendices A, B and C for examples). But, as Jansen notes here, both her nakedness and her long hair functioned simultaneously as symbols of humility and of feminine sexuality.³⁶ The Digby scene in which Mary washes Christ's feet is erotically charged: Christ describes her hair as "fayur and brygth shynnyng" (669). Throughout the play Mary is referred to as "fair" and "lovely," which emphasize her appearance and her physicality. Haskins details the association between sexuality and sin, describing how Mary Magdalen functioned as a New Testament answer to Eve, who was also depicted as sexual and therefore sinful: Mary Magdalen "represented the sexuate feminine redeemed, and therefore rendered sexless. In this way, she stood for Eve redeemed, not, like the Virgin, as Eve's antithesis, but rather as her more fully developed counterpart" (Haskins 141). This "rendering sexless" belies a misogynist fear of female sexuality, since Mary Magdalen has to become like a virgin in order to be worthy of sainthood.

³⁶ Ruether describes how early Christian myth held that the sight of a woman's hair in church would cause angels to fall from grace (24).

The fictionalization of Mary Magdalen as a repentant prostitute has her embody dualisms about the body and the soul, the material and the spiritual. The sexual/saintly binary being opposed reinforces the fears of female sexuality and the demonization of prostitution. Reformed prostitute saints work so well as exempla because they represent the extremes: here, a woman's worst imaginable sin is sexual (Karras 3). Karras acknowledges, however, that "the message of repentance and forgiveness in the legends of the prostitute saints spoke to men as well as to women" (30). Mary Magdalen as exemplar can be read in a positive light, since her story offered the hope of companionship with God to all believers. Still, Karras warns that "if women took the message as concerning femininity as well as repentance, it would not have been an encouraging one" (31). Karras is, of course, right to critique pervasive binaries that symbolically subjugated women to a less spiritual plane. However, implicit in her statement is the idea that woman did not necessarily take the message as concerning femininity; even if they did, this message would, in some ways, be empowering, since Mary Magdalen preached in a world that warned against women preaching and her humility and repentance gave her clout as an exemplary Christian. Again the effect of Mary Magdalen's representation is one that confuses boundaries rather than reinforcing them up; here, she is used both to subjugate and to empower, depending on what in her story is emphasized and in which way her story is used.

In fact, Mary Magdalen's penitential status did reach people for reasons other than her gender and the role of her narrative in gender construction; for, as Jansen notes, "Scholars have reiterated frequently that Mary Magdalen was an important model for

female piety and devotion in the Middle Ages. What needs emphasizing, however, was that she was an equally important model for men” (249). In 1215, under Pope Innocent III, confession and penance were made obligatory; at the same time, mendicant preaching emerged and further encouraged the spread of the cult of Mary Magdalen (Jansen 199, 201; Haskins 146). Religious men who wished to counter the (masculine) power of the Church associated themselves with the humility of a penitent Mary Magdalen.³⁷ This use of Mary Magdalen not without its problems: “Generations of clerical exegetes pledged to poverty and celibacy readily allied Mary Magdalene’s vice with the corrupting influences of wealth, as well as the fleshiness and fallibility that they deemed central attributes of the female sex” (Coletti “Curtesy” 2). I will discuss the movements of “feminine” and “masculine” power in a following section. For now, it remains interesting that a woman as supposedly sinful as Mary was allowed such an important part of the Christian story. Instead of being relegated to the status of perpetual penitent, Mary Magdalen is also given authority as an apostle.

III. Apostle of the Apostles: Mary Magdalen as Evangelist

The seed of Mary Magdalen’s post-conversion life as an apostle is present in the gospels; in fact, the story in which it is found, figuring her as the first witness to the

³⁷ “The model of the penitent at Christ’s feet was not gender-specific. Men seemed equally comfortable in casting themselves as well as others of their sex as penitent Magdalens. Perhaps it was Jerome who had first set the tone when he described himself as the penitent who had wept at Christ’s feet and dried them with his hair” (Jansen 258).

Resurrection and the bringer of that news to the apostles, is the most detailed account of her in scripture. The evangelical emphasis in her medieval legend is fascinating given the constant warnings against women preaching. In the fourth until the seventh century, women were excluded from administration; under Merovingian and Anglo-Saxon kings of the seventh to the eleventh century, they were given some authority in royalty or as leaders (never fully) of monasteries; and in the eleventh century on, “abbesses were [still] prohibited from professing novices, hearing confession, and preaching, except to other women and not within hearing of a male” (Haskins 178). Though female clerical power was negotiated, it is consistently controlled and usually prohibited by the medieval Church and its clerics.

Though some clergy used Mary Magdalen’s role as first witness to the resurrection as proof that women were not inferior (Haskins 156), such ideas were contained by the dominant (patriarchal) ideology. For example, Aquinas (d. 1274) argued that Christ appeared to Mary because of her great love and perseverance, but that she was not as well equipped as the male apostles to preach (Haskins 178). Others, like Ambrose (4th century), Peter Comestor (d. ca. 1179) and Peter the Chanter (d. 1197), held to the same reasoning and argued that Christ’s command that Mary not hold on to him meant that women were not allowed to preach.³⁸ Reacting to her legendary evangelizing, some thirteenth century thinkers, like Gautier de Château-Thierry and the Franciscan Eustache d’Arras argued that women preachers like Mary Magdalen were only able to do so “by divine dispensation, and in extraordinary circumstances because the Early Church was

³⁸ After revealing himself to her, Christ tells her not to “cling” or “hold onto” him. The latin version has Christ saying “Noli me tangere.” See John 20: 17.

bereft of preachers” (Jansen 56). It was under such circumstances that one of the most popular and important female saints of the later Middle Ages could be renowned as a preaching apostle in a society that prohibited women from doing exactly that. Eventually, Mary Magdalen’s preaching role expanded from her first witness of the Resurrection to a belief that after Christ’s ascension she had evangelized and converted believers in France: “In the eleventh century [the apostolic legend] began circulating in the West. It described the evangelization of Gaul by Mary Magdalen and her companions” (Jansen 52). These accounts eventually solidified and were incorporated into the mainstream understanding of Mary Magdalen.³⁹ By the later Middle Ages, Mary’s role as an evangelist figures prominently in both the *Golden Legend* and the Digby *Mary Magdalen*.

While her status as apostle was contained by those in control, its interpretation was still myriad. Preachers still used this aspect of her legend in their instruction, regardless of its anti-ecclesiastical implications:

One might assume that given all the sanctions against women preaching . . . sensible preachers would not have bothered incorporating Mary Magdalen’s problematic preaching in Gaul into their sermons. Surprisingly, this is not what happened at all: Mary Magdalen’s apostolate in Provence became a popular motif in medieval preaching. (Jansen 57)

Some members of the clergy even approached this aspect of the legend without disclaimers; in fact, some used it to argue for women preaching: “The image of the *apostola* served as an antidote to such gendered constructs and even provided a counterargument against them. Robert of Sorbon (d. 1274) told his audience that because

³⁹ “By the twelfth century these legendary events were considered the biographical facts of Mary Magdalen’s life . . . The *vita apostolica* very quickly became the *materia praedicabilis*, preaching material, that enlivened sermons” (Jansen 53).

the Magdalen was the *predicatrix* (preacher) of the Lord's resurrection, men should not disdain women's words" (Jansen 268-70). She was, then, used to justify women's authority.⁴⁰

Ecclesiastical control of Mary's evangelism, even when it was accompanied by disclaimers, was still limited. Examining the ecclesiastical proscriptions does not provide a complete picture of how people could respond to Christian stories and invocations. For example, some people could not understand why Christ had not appeared first to his mother, the Virgin, so they maintained a belief—contrary to scripture—that he *had*: "Maintaining such convictions [that the Virgin was actually the first witness] reveals that audiences shaped their own responses to preaching and devotional reading" (Jansen 264). Similarly, responses to Mary Magdalen the apostle often went against the preachers' prohibitions. For example, artists depicted her behind a pulpit: though "the canonist Huguccio had taught that women were not to ascend the pulpit, nonetheless that is just where later medieval artists envisioned Mary Magdalen preaching" (Jansen 66-7). This aspect of the saint has particular appeal for women: "The idea of Mary Magdalen as the 'apostle to the apostles,' which may have been revived by the legend of her apostolic career in Provence, seems to have appealed to women in particular" (Haskins 220).⁴¹ While Mary Magdalen was commonly evoked in negative ways—to control sexuality, for example—an antidote to such evocations is present in the body of her own legend.

Women were implicitly encouraged by this legend to preach, even as they were explicitly

⁴⁰ "Mary Magdalen, *apostolorum apostola*, was invoked to justify the apostolates of heterodox and orthodox women alike" (Jansen 273).

⁴¹ Haskins cites an example: "The noble lady, Jutta Tersina of Liechtenfels . . . in c. 1200 commissioned a psalter, her donor page showing her at Mary Magdalen's feet with the clumsily written words 'apostolorum apostola' above the saint's head" (220).

forbidden from doing so.⁴² The effect of the midrash of interpretations and reactions built into the medieval Mary Magdalen makes of her a sort of heteroglot—in her construction, many, often contradictory, voices appear. While some might claim that any particular version is the “Ur-version,” the multiplicity of renderings of Mary’s legend present an unrelenting (if subdued) challenge to the centrality of an official Christian discourse (Warner *Six* 8).⁴³ The reinterpretation of Mary’s story into different contexts and the opposing ideological voices evident within it show her participation in the unfixing and paradoxality of a dialogic view of literature. Its meaning is always present, is always in a process of becoming; it has an immediacy created by dialogue much like the immediacy that Bakhtin reads in the novel.

It is in the *Golden Legend* that Mary Magdalen’s post-ascension (and post-scriptural) life “appears most fully” (Haskins 222). De Voragine quotes Ambrose, who underlines her role at the resurrection: She is the one “whan hys deseyples departed to whome Jhesu cryst appyered first after his resurectione/and was felawe to the appostlys/and made of our lord appostolesse of thappostles” (CCXVI b). The next scene recounted occurs fourteen years after the ascension: “Seynt maxyme/marie magdalene/and lazar her brother martha her suster Marcelle chaumberer of martha/and seynt cedonye whiche was born blynde . . . were taken of the mescreauntes and put in to a shyppe in the see wythout any takyl or rother/for to be drowned” (CCXVI b). In this version, it is Mary Magdalen among all these other Christians who speaks out against idol-worship when they

⁴² *The Golden Legend* includes other vocal women without acknowledging them as especially disposed. See his vitae of Catherine of Alexandria, for example, where St. Catherine addresses and converts the greatest (male) philosophers of the land.

⁴³ Schaberg emphasizes the ambiguity and inconsistency of Mary’s characterization (112).

miraculously reach Marseilles. De Voragine tells that she was very eloquent and defines her as one whose mouth is blessed; unlike many of the preachers who explained away Mary's ability (and calling) to preach, the "*the Golden Legend* [does not mention] a word about special dispensation" (Jansen 81). Mary Magdalen continues to appear as a preacher, warning the King and Queen⁴⁴ of Marseilles about their paganism. She comes to them in visions, reproving them for not feeding her and her fellow Christians.

However, Mary's authority as a preacher is eventually undermined in the *Golden Legend*, which is unsurprising given the mainstream and didactic role of its author. Mary defers to Peter's power when the King asks her how she will defend her faith: "Certaynly I am redy to defend it/as she that is confermed euery day by myracles/and by the predycacion of our mayster seynt peter/whiche now sitteth in the see at rome" (CCXVII a). Peter, not Mary, is the "ecclesiastical authority" (Jansen 189). His wife demands a miracle, which Mary grants, praying that she conceive a son, while the King decides he will go to Peter to verify Mary's story. This deference to Peter "resolved the Peter-Magdalen tension by acknowledging Mary Magdalen's apostolic mission but yoked it to her humble submission of Peter" (Jansen 190). Even so, it is on this voyage to see Peter that the King loses his wife during childbirth (giving Mary the opportunity to perform another miracle). He blames Mary for his loss, then prays that she will restore both the infant and its mother. Peter confirms Mary's story and the King discovers his wife and child have been resurrected by Mary's influence. They are converted and thank Mary, who is again found preaching: "Sone after they cam to the porte of marselle/. . . they fond the blessyd marie

⁴⁴ In Caxton's translation, they are named the prince and his wife.

magdalene prechyng with . . . disciples” (CCXVIII a). Mary’s urban position has changed—she has gone from prostitute to a woman of influence.

The *Golden Legend* of Mary Magdalen contains, then, many contradictory messages. On one hand, Mary’s role as a preacher is affirmed by its unqualified and constant reiteration. On the other hand, the ecclesiastical authority of a patriarchal church is maintained by the King’s unquestioned need to hear the gospel directly from Peter. These meanderings further underline the medieval openness of interpretation in the reception of Mary’s legend, even as it contradicts mainstream ideas, and show the ways in which Mary is at once marginalized and privileged, voiceless and powerful. This sort of anti-power is the only kind of power that feminist theologians like Schüssler Fiorenza and Schaberg think can redeem the institutional Church:

The Outsider’s perspective and determination to remain outside causing trouble are important conversation over false boundaries, creating good confusion about what is central, centrality itself, and what is inside. The Outsiders’ Society . . . would reject the culture of violence; it would be without regimentation of formality, without leaders, dues, offices. (Schaberg 39)

In her multiplicity and confusion of boundaries, Mary Magdalen is precisely the kind of figurehead that could inspire Schüssler Fiorenza’s *ekklēsia*.

Mary’s apostolic mission is even more elaborate in the Digby play. The Digby playwright explicitly vindicates her by having her directly called to apostleship by Christ. First, Christ asks her to announce his resurrection: “Goo ye to my brethryn, and sey to hem per,/pat þey procede and go into Gallelye” (1121-2). After his ascension, he asks Raphael to give Mary his commission: “To Mary Mavdelyn decende in a whyle,/Byd here pass þe se be my myth,/and sey she xall converte þe land of Marcyll” (1369-71). Raphael does so,

telling Mary that she shall be a “holy apostylesse” (1379-80). The Digby play is unapologetic about Mary’s role as apostle; she is divinely called to this task.

In the Digby Marseilles, Mary’s preaching is elaborate; she tells not only of her own experience but gives a creation account. This is significant since it seems to extend her role from that of apostle to that of theologian; she makes connections between Christ’s message and the Hebrew Bible, affirming her intellectual comfort with scripture. Despite her eloquent articulation of scripture, the King and Queen only convert on the condition that the Queen conceive a son. Though Mary does send them to see Peter, they are converted because of Mary; this is a significant departure from the *Golden Legend*. The Queen praises her as a “blyssyd womman, rote of ower savacyon” (1669-70) and the King expresses gratitude: “Now thanke I þi God, and specyally þe,/And so xall I do whyle I leve may” (1678-9). After receiving these blessings, Mary suggests that they go to Jerusalem to thank Peter. In this form, the deference to Peter seems to be more a gesture of Mary’s humility, not a diminishment of her power as a preacher or miracle worker. When his wife dies in childbirth on the way, the King’s faith does not waver. Arriving in Jerusalem, he tells Peter that Mary “þis pylgramage cavsyd me to take” (1824). Here, the King is on a pilgrimage done to support his faith, not to seek patriarchal sanction for Mary’s words.⁴⁵ The discovery of the Queen’s miraculous restoration causes them to praise her again: “O

⁴⁵ In both this text and in the *Golden Legend*, though, baptism is solely given by men. De Voragine has Maximin do it, and the Digby playwright has Peter baptise the king. As well, de Voragine calls the King “pilgrim” in this context. It is not only this nomination but also the timing of the conversion of the King and Queen that is significant here.

almyty Maydyn, ower sowlys confortacyon!/O demvr Mavdlyn, my bodyys sustynavns!”

(1902-3). After Mary gives a version of the beatitudes,⁴⁶ she is hailed like the Virgin:

Heyll, þou chosyn and chast of wommen alon!
It passyt my wett to tell þi nobyllnesse!
þou relevyst me and my chyld on þe rokke of ston,
And also savyd vs be þi hye holynesse” (1943-6).

The Digby play seems to emphasize and give credence to Mary’s role as a preacher in a way not present in de Voragine’s legend, which again underscores that Mary could be used and understood in myriad ways.

Scherb argues that the Digby playwright is unconcerned with Mary’s gender or her sexual past because he is more interested in “the Christianization of the European world” (1). Perhaps the emphasis in this play on Mary as a messenger and bringer of news is because of this larger concern. Mary as *nuntia* (or messenger) is emphasized by the Digby play. Mary is not only an exceptional woman who was given permission to preach, but she is a “preacher *par excellence*” who embodies the Christian message (Scherb 8). This embodiment is expressed by the King and Queen of Marseilles, who call her a “tabyrnaklyll of þe blyssyd trenite” (1943). Here, again, the person of Mary Magdalen embodies and thereby reconciles contradictory ideals, making her a constant point of reference for those who may have differing view. Davidson writes that this aspect of Mary’s life was crucial to her legend: “The role of the Magdalene as one who spreads the faith was, of course, central for the cult with which she was associated” (82).

It is not only in her apostolic role that Mary Magdalen straddles opposing representations

⁴⁶ “The Magdalene’s sermon, a loose paraphrase of the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew, culminates a pattern of revisions—all related to the management and significance of worldly wealth—that the Digby playwright made to standard accounts of the saint’s life in Marseilles” (Coletti “*Paupertas*” 358).

and emphasizes a feminine strength not bound by her physicality. In the following section, I will look at another legendary but essential role that Mary Magdalen plays: that of a contemplative and mystic.

IV. Contemplation and Spectres of the Active Life: Mary Magdalen as Hermit

Another of Mary Magdalen's exemplary roles is as a saint or ascetic; she models for holy women both the active and the contemplative life. Women's piety, as noted by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, had an "unparalleled expansion . . . during the period from 1100 to 1400, particularly in the thirteenth century" (Haskins 177). The Magdalenian legend and cult was also expanding during this period, and it likely had a great influence on growing female piety (Haskins 177). This expansion can be linked to the growing lay interest in contemplation, which made of Mary Magdalen, in her move from base to holy, an important figurehead in lay and female piety. Victor Saxer also links Mary Magdalen with increased eremiticism, considering her move to the wilderness to be "the 'literary' cause of the increase of hermit life in the medieval West" (Malvern 79). In the later Middle Ages, "the hermit in her grotto becomes the most prevalent representation of Mary Magdalen" (Haskins 226).

Mary's hermitic life is confirmed by its rendering in the *Golden Legend*, and her ascetic life is linked with another prostitute-saint, Mary of Egypt, who also repented and became a hermit in the desert.⁴⁷ In many depictions, Mary is shown naked and covered with long hair.⁴⁸ Thus, Mary Magdalen—renowned for her great sin and penance, for her work as an apostle, becomes refracted in the image of the late-medieval holy woman. The origins of Mary Magdalen as contemplative derive mainly from her association after Gregory the Great with Mary of Bethany. In Luke 10:39-42,

⁴⁷ The two are conflated in many versions: "The legend of the converted prostitute living the life of a hermit, being fed by angels, and clothed only in her long hair was absorbed by the Magdalen" (Malvern 77).

⁴⁸ I discussed the potentially problematic double-nature of this nakedness and the long hair, which was both an erotic gesture and one of humility, in a previous section. See Appendices A, B, and C for examples.

she devotes herself to hearing the words of Christ while her sister Martha serves their guest. Jesus approves Mary's pure devotion above the practical housewifery of Martha. Thus, for medieval theology, Martha becomes the emblem of the active life, while Mary becomes a symbol of the preferred contemplative life. (Davidson 84)

Mary Magdalen is also associated with the active life herself (which seems to do away with the neat Mary/Martha binary) in her acts of service, such as wiping Christ's feet and tending to his body after he has died. So while the composite Magdalen was usually an exemplar for the contemplative and ascetic side of life, she was also, as we can see, used to support an active vision. Her act of washing Christ's feet was a "metaphorical work[...] of mercy" that "inspired others to perform good works in her name" (Jansen 110-1). She became the patron of hospices for pilgrims and hospitals alongside her emblematic use in asylums for repentant prostitutes.

Mary Magdalen is again a complex figure, and one who appeals to a great many followers. Given her movement from sin into sainthood, she was an influential exemplar for women, like Margaret of Cortona (1247-97) and the fifteenth-century laywoman Margery Kempe, who could not aspire to the purity of the Virgin: "During the thirteenth century, increasing numbers of women became 'honorary' virgins, like the mythical Magdalen" (Haskins 184). This option for women can be seen as a somewhat liberating one: "Women . . . took to the new forms of religious life as a form of rebellion against the roles imposed upon them as wives and mothers, regaining their autonomy, and becoming mistresses of their own destinies" (Haskins 182). Thus her move to the wilderness can be interpreted as a move towards autonomy. As well as being an appealing model for women who want to rise to the heights of spirituality, Mary Magdalen, in her mix of

action and contemplation, became important to the mendicant orders, since they also attempted to mix action and contemplation in their vision of the Christian life (Jansen 50).⁴⁹

The Golden Legend depicts Mary as the quintessential active saint in her relationship to Christ and the disciples: “he toke from her seuen deuyles/he enbraced her alle in his loue/and made her right famylyer wyth hym/he wold that she shold be his hostesse/And his procuresse in his journey” (CCXVI b). After Christ’s ascension, Mary’s *vita activa* is further reflected in her plea to the Queen of Marseilles: “Wherfor hast thou so moche rychesse/and suffrest the pour peple of our lord to deye for hungre [and] for colde” (CCXVII a). Here, Mary is both apostle and active saint: she speaks out in service to the bodily needs of others. Moreover, in her service to the Queen, Mary does not only participate in miracles on a spiritual plane, but actively nourishes the miracle into materiality. The Queen, after being restored to life, praises Mary: “For in the peynes of my delyueraunce thou were my mydwyf/And in al my necessityes thou hast accomplysshid to me the seruyce of a chaumberer” (CCXVIII a).⁵⁰ As a handmaid to the Queen, Mary repeats her earlier role as housekeeper to Christ and the disciples.

⁴⁹ If Mary Magdalen can be seen to reconcile the active and contemplative lives, she can be seen as an exemplar for the late medieval development called the “mixed life.” It seems likelier, however, that her movement from preaching and tending towards the heights of solitary contemplation is instead modeled after the ascent model found in many of the writings of medieval mystics, the most important of which, in England, was the scale of perfection. See Grisé for valuable definitions of the mixed life and a discussion of Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*.

⁵⁰ Mary’s associations with mothering and caring here, what Jansen calls the “generative mode” (294), have to do as well with the inscription of the Virgin Mary onto other saints’ lives. In one chapter of her study of Mary Magdalen, Jansen outlines the many ways that she was invoked as both a virgin and a mother, which buttresses the importance of both the ascetic and the active roles.

What I have termed spectres of the active life are embedded in the Digby play as well. Milner argues that in the play Mary is often placed in this mode:

The parallels to female ascetics are clear: in their service to others, medieval women can attempt the same spiritual oneness with God that Mary achieves Even as ‘an holy apostylesse,’ however, Mary’s spiritual emphasis is still on service to the bodies of others. Her miracles in Marseilles—actually performed by God, but attributed by the other characters to Mary—include making the barren Queen pregnant and preserving the dead bodies of the Queen and her son during the King’s voyage to Jerusalem. These miracles are clearly linked to the role of Mary as a woman who cares for the bodies of others. (Milner 394).

In an oblique reference to the gospel narrative, Mary is depicted in service to those in need of care. Her ministry to the dead Queen recalls her position at Christ’s tomb, bringing perfume to his body. Though she is again linked to service in her care for Christ and the Queen, Mary Magdalen is then contrasted with the active life as she leaves it in favour of a lengthy contemplation. She chooses to enter the wilderness as a hermit, while the King proclaims that he will remain in the world, establishing the faith for the edification of others (1972-2002). Complicated by Mary’s ascent to the contemplative mode, the binary relationship of the active and passive lives reemerges as she and the King “call attention to differences between their choices that were epitomized in medieval conceptions of the active and contemplative lives” (Coletti “*Paupertas*” 371). At the end of her legend, Mary is aligned with the ascetic and contemplative mode.

Part of the move towards a separated contemplation involves a renunciation of wealth, and, in many instances, of food. The move towards poverty is an especially extreme one for Mary Magdalen; as she moves from great sin to saintliness, she also moves away from great wealth towards extreme poverty. In the *Golden Legend*, Mary

Magdalen leaves Marseilles, “desyrous of souerayn contemplacion/sought a ryght sharp deserte/and toke a place whiche was ordeyned by thangele of god/and abode there by the space of xxx yere without knowleche of ony body. . . . She was fedde and fylled with right swete metes . . . in suche wyse as she had no nede of corporal norisshyng”

(CCXVIII a). Eventually a priest encounters her and learns of her heavenly relationships (CCXVIII b). Immediately before dying, she receives the Eucharist and she is named as the cause of many miracles.⁵¹ Again, Mary is made relatable to the late medieval audience: “The administration of the eucharist, then, is presented as a model of penitence which is as accessible to the members of the audience as it is to Mary Magdalene” (Milner 398). Her participation in the Eucharist marks her as an every-Christian.

In the Digby play, the move toward contemplation is underlined by her final sermon in Marseilles where she paraphrases the beatitudes: “For ‘*paupertas est donum Dei*’./God blyssyt alle þo þat byn meke and good,/And he blyssyd all þo þat wepe for synne./Þey be blyssyd þat þe thirsty gyff fode” (1930-3). The beatitudes are an important touchstone for liberation theology, since they praise the weak and the poor; here again, Mary’s role is to emphasize the liberating potential of Christianity for those who have been marginalized by mainstream society. Mary goes into the “deserte” (1990), claiming that she will renounce food and comfort in favour of contemplation (2000-2). Christ immediately hears her prayer and sends angels to feed her daily manna. Theresa Coletti argues that in addition to the importance of a changed relationship to food, Mary’s

⁵¹ Caroline Walker Bynum details the significance of food for late medieval women’s piety : “In light of Mary’s gender, her role as ‘an holy apostylesse,’ and the focus on the sins and spirituality of the body in this play, one medieval phenomenon which might prove useful in examining *Mary Magdalene* is female asceticism However, Bynum states that food-related spirituality—mostly fasting—was much more common to women than to men in the period from 1200 to 1500” (Milner 386).

poverty is crucial for the Digby audience. Coletti writes that the emphasis in this play on movements from conspicuous wealth toward conspicuous poverty speaks to the audience's class positionings: "In the history of medieval saint making, a voluntary turn from wealth to poverty, for both men and women, is a gesture that emerges frequently as an option for the prosperous classes" (*Paupertas* 369). This emphasis in the play is another gesture toward the growing lay piety of the audience. As well, poverty, humility, and obedience were traditionally gendered female, often used to oppose a "masculinized Church" (Jansen 84-5). This gender inversion was again invoked by male mendicants, who sought "to highlight the differences between themselves and the ecclesiastical hierarchy" (Jansen 84). Thus, we see Mary Magdalen occupying a gendered role, but her marginal position is put to powerful use in terms of the legitimization of religious experience in opposition to ecclesiastical power.⁵² Instead of rendering her a mere victim of internalized misogyny, Mary's legend is a part of the questioning of particular kinds of authority in a Church that was meant to erase such hierarchies.⁵³

As Haskins writes, Mary's hermitic move is not meant primarily as a penance or as a renunciation but it is focussed on contemplation. About the Digby play, Davidson writes that "her contemplation will not involve allowing vague fantasies of piety to run through her mind, but will focus intently upon the virtues which emanate from the Divine

⁵² "With the emergence of new mendicant orders in the thirteenth century, the inspirational element in the Church—gendered female—had reasserted itself, reviving the ancient question of what to do with those whose spiritual authority was distinctly non-institutional" (Jansen 85).

⁵³ It is obviously debatable whether the Church was meant for this. Discussions of the history of the Church often emphasize its capacity to abuse power and to obsessively hierarchize. Still, many marginalized groups found power in Christianity, from the early Church's resistance of the Romans to the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. In this comment (as in others), I am aligning myself with feminist and liberation theologians who do see this potential. The very fact that such differing agendas can use the same text speaks to its hybridity.

Being” (83-4). Indeed, Mary immediately calls upon God to send her heavenly things to contemplate and study (2002). In the Digby rendition, Mary is also seen as a scholar in her preaching; she does not, as previously mentioned, focus on her own experience, but extrapolates theologically about both the origins of creation (1481-1525) and about the meaning of Christ’s teaching (1931-8). Likewise in the *Golden Legend*, the importance of her contemplation is remarked upon: “So moche as she chaas the parte of contemplacion wythinforth she is a lyghtar/For there she toke so largely/ that she spradde it habundantly/She toke the lyght there wyth whiche afterward she enlumyned other” (CCXVI a). In this passage, her contemplative aspect is drawn from both Mary of Bethany (for choosing the best part) and from her hermitic life (when she drew deeply of contemplation).

Aside from the renunciations involved in Mary’s contemplative turn, themes of Mary as a “knower” emerge in this part of her legend. Colleges and cloisters are dedicated to her, in acknowledgement of her contemplative vita. In his sermons, Franciscan Matteo d’Aquasparta calls her a “model student” and an example of “scholarly comportment” (Jansen 118). She was, like St. Catherine of Alexandria, “regarded as [a] learned woman” (Jansen 74). The Dominican Order, which “showed particular devotion to these two saintly preacher-intellectuals whose *vitae* revealed similarities to their own conception of mission” (Jansen 76); Mary was named their patron saint in 1297.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The relationship between enlightenment and Mary Magdalen is a particularly Gnostic invocation that appears in teaching about her from time to time: “Through Bernard of Clarvaux’s sermons on the Song of Songs, the medieval Magdalen becomes, as the anointers of the Christ were in Origen’s third-century

Mary's exemplary role in terms of female piety might render her again a tool of misogyny; however, as Peter Brown points out, the diversity of roles available to pious women might also be read as empowering:

In his work on the body in antiquity, Peter Brown discusses the trip into the wilderness as a unique option which offered women, especially, a 'heartening freedom' to experience spirituality outside accepted social systems; Mary Magdalene's trip into the wilderness functions in this way as well. (Milner 397)

Moreover, any woman could aspire to the special role of Mary Magdalen. To carry on with these ideas, in the next section I discuss ways that Mary Magdalen reflects complicated inversions of masculine and feminine power that extend from the gospel message itself.

exegeses of the Song, the sister-bride of the Christ. Bernard, like Origen, equates the Mary-Church-Bride with the contemplative soul and lauds the divine love which leads to 'contemplation'" (Malvern 82). Mary as sister-bride (feminine counterpart) of Christ is an image we have not yet explored. It will be discussed further in Part Two.

V. Rethinking Power in the Magdalenian Legend

This fifth (and final) section of this part will not explore another of Mary Magdalen's personae; instead, I will here focus on ways of rereading her character and role in terms of medieval Christian ideas of power. Distinct movements of power, both earthly and heavenly, dominate her legend. Here I will explore the relationship between Mary Magdalen and late-medieval female piety, between her character and the representation of both feminine and masculine power. While a twenty-first century (more secularised) reader might wish to read the Christian demand that Mary Magdalen renounce her sexuality in favour of faith as irredeemably misogynist, it is possible to read this movement towards repentance as one that is both liberating and empowering. Like Bynum, I wish to refute (or at least complicate) the "standard interpretation of asceticism as world-rejection or as practical dualism and of the standard picture of medieval women as constrained on every side by a misogyny they internalized as self-hatred or masochism" (6). Instead of viewing Mary Magdalen as a "normative phantasm" for a sexist agenda, I will show how she is aligned with rather than oppressed by power through her faith (Butler 3). Mary Magdalen's movement from being a woman mired in sin to a follower of Christ to a Christian apostle is present in the *Golden Legend* as well as the Digby play, but I will focus on the play in this section because of its breadth and its accessibility to late-medieval (lay) piety.

Two kinds of power are juxtaposed in the Digby *Mary Magdalen*. Mary Magdalen's pre-conversion life takes "place within the male-oriented system of wealth and inheritance, and feasting; her later experiences (after her conversion) emphasize a

female-oriented system of figures of food and the body” (Milner 389). All of the deadly sins that become temporarily associated with Mary’s name are also associated with the men in the narrative. The play opens with a boast by Tiberius Caesar, which leads directly into a boast by Syrus, Mary’s father: “Behold my person, gylsteryng in gold,/Semely besyn of all other men!” (52-3). The wealth and vanity that mark Mary are in this play first linked to her father and are perhaps then not a commentary on gender since other than Mary, most of the characters associated with wealth, pride, gluttony and lust are male.⁵⁵ In the castle, Mary and her family are all a part of a wealthy and self-flattering lifestyle. As the scenes that follow move back and forth between Rome, Herod’s palace in Jerusalem, Pilate’s palace in Jerusalem, and the Castle of Magdalen, wealthy and powerful men are paralleled throughout:

The spectacle of Cyrus’s own person ‘gysteryng in gold’ (53) and of the family’s feasting on ‘wyn and sycys’ (112) epitomizes their material excesses and possibly the reach of an upwardly mobile social aspiration, since the play elsewhere designates this fare as the repast of kings: both Augustus Caesar (46) and the king of Marseilles (962) feast on wine and spices. (Coletti “*Paupertas*” 349)

Clearly, Cyrus is being aligned with powerful men who, as well as being too proud and greedy, participated in Christian persecution.

As well as being negatively aligned with sin and a distaste for Christians, men in the play are linked to excessive sexuality. In the tavern scene, three male figures—the taverner, the gallant/curiosity and luxuria—are complicit in Mary’s seduction. Coletti

⁵⁵ My argumentation here is different than in the first section, in which I discussed how Mary Magdalen was aligned with the seven deadly sins. Both arguments hold; this is yet another example of the ways in which Mary’s story is heteroglot, since it is possible to use it to support and to refute the same argument.

points out how the gallant imitates courtly discourse. Having just met Mary, he hyperbolizes the extent of his feeling: “A, dere dewchesse, my daysys iee!/Splendavnt of colour, most of femynyte,/Your sofreyn colourrys set wyth synseryte!/Consedere my loue into yower alye,/Or ellys I am smet wyth peynnys of perplexite!” (515-9). As much as this scene might be viewed as a commentary on female sexuality, it might also be a critique of male courtesans. Later on in the play, a shipman and his boy have a bawdy conversation (1395-1421). As Coletti notes,

the saint play dramatizes an expansive brotherhood of masculine desire that reaches up and down the social ladder, embracing the servant boy and King; what takes the form of courtly discourse in the high-status characters becomes bawdy, homoerotic repartee among the low. (“Curtesy” 28 n. 84)

So, while Mary is considered sinful in her sexual seduction, this seduction originates with male deviance and places her firmly within that male-oriented system. This placement is reinforced by her positive response to the gallant’s flattery. Milner and Coletti both interpret the pre-conversion scenes as commentaries on the seductive and ultimately frustrating temptations of wealth and power: “Social climbing” is given “sinister associations . . . that result from [the gallant’s] partnership with the World, the Flesh, and the Devil” (Coletti “Curtesy” 12). Mary is not empowered by her sexuality, but, as is typical of courtly discourse, it actually strips her of power: “The contradiction between Curiosity’s socially exalting rhetoric and the total submission with which Mary Magdalene responds to it provides a devastatingly concrete illustration of what R. Howard Bloch terms the ‘ruse’ of courtly discourse” which seems to empower but actually effaces women (Coletti “Curtesy” 13). The patriarchal system is similarly

complicated by the failings of the male protectors in Mary's life. She is vulnerable because "her faith clearly lies in her father's power to protect her, not in God's" (Milner 390). Her trust in (earthly) men is continuously disappointed.

Thus, Mary's conversion also marks a movement from the masculine to feminine systems of power.⁵⁶ The first part of this play is filled with conspicuous (male) feasting; clearly juxtaposed with Mary's ascetic renunciation of food in the wilderness, the male treatment of food is given a far harsher judgement. The earlier feasts are contrasted with the disciples' supper with Christ: "In doing service to his 'gestys,' and most specifically to Christ, Simon takes on what could be considered a feminized role. His purpose in planning a dinner is to feed and care for others, not use food as an ostentatious medium" (Milner 392). Christ and his followers are a part of a system of mutual service and not one of machismo. Ideally, Christianity would be a power-in-humility, so according to its edicts, Mary exhibits an ideal kind of power, one which is focussed on service to others.

The feminized connotations of especially bodily service and nurturance are evident in her apostolic mission to Marseilles.⁵⁷ In the Biblical story, Mary is featured in her care for bodily needs; she tends to Christ's body both when she anoints his feet and head and when she bears myrrh to anoint his dead body. In both the *Golden Legend* and the Digby play, Mary nurtures bodies, especially those of the Queen of Marseilles and her child. As stated in a previous section, her miraculous healing is not transcendent but is a working of service to their bodies. Women's experiences and lives are elevated by their

⁵⁶ Simultaneously and paradoxically, women are aligned with the body in a body/soul binary in medieval ideology. It is their marginality that allows for their privileged position here.

⁵⁷ Some of this has been detailed in the earlier discussion of the active life.

figuration in this text: “Although men, too, can participate in ‘feminine’ activities of serving the body of God (Simon and the King of Marseilles, for example), such activities are more accessible to women by virtue of their translation from everyday life” (Milner 398). In this schema, women are especially capable of Christian acts of service and care.

Insofar as these Magdalenian narratives are didactic, they seem to operate as stories for all Christians—stories about a move from pride to humility, from self-service to self-sacrifice—and are not *only* linked to warnings about the female gender and her sexuality. This belies a major theme in medieval (and other) understandings of Christ as a figure who reconciles the feminine and the masculine. Though her focus is on women’s visionary literature, Elizabeth Petroff writes that medieval women may have been empowered by their visions of Christ’s redemptive acts. The crucifixion, in that it is both active (as an act of salvation) and passive (as a victimization), leads to this kind of reconciliation for female mystics: “For women who were sensitive to the emotional content of traditional images of masculine and feminine, the participation in the crucifixion became enormously liberating, for the opposites of passive and active, female and male, were reconciled in this single act” (14). This kind of liberatory potential can also be seen in women’s experiences of the Eucharist: “A vision in which the soul drinks the blood of Christ was one that women found to be highly significant for their spiritual growth; for the imagery points again to the profound interplay of masculine and feminine, governing and nurturing roles” (17).⁵⁸ The ways that Christ offers his body up—both for

⁵⁸ Petroff adds that Christ plays various roles in relation to these women, from their mother to their lover (17).

salvation and for (spiritual) nourishment—can be read as much more traditionally feminine acts.

Because Mary's relationship to Christ is one of friendship, and because she (as Mary of Bethany and as the first witness to the resurrection) is particularly close to Christ, she is often seen as a female counterpart to Christ. We will see this especially in the contemporary texts, as she is often invoked to redeem the "feminine" element that is seen as having been erased from Christian history. There are connections to this in her medieval legend as well. One instance that parallels the two characters is foot washing. Mary washes and anoints Christ's feet in her conversion scene. Later in the gospel—at his Last Supper—Christ washes his disciples' feet in an effort to teach them how to serve each other; this can almost be read as an imitation of Mary's action. Schüssler Fiorenza shows how even within the gospels, Christ's mind is changed by a woman's speech; Mary Magdalen is clearly given some clout in her closeness to Christ, even if her power is not official.⁵⁹ Moreover, the ascetic part of Mary's journey correlates with Christ's narrative; for "Mary Magdalene's temptation in the wilderness and her ascension into heaven are patently modeled on those of Christ" (Bevington qtd. in Milner 385). These examples show how Mary Magdalen is, at least, an every-Christian, while they might also lead to an idea of her as a quasi-Christ.⁶⁰ While this modeling of a female saint on Christ participates in a well-known tradition—i.e. *imitatio Christi*—I would like to emphasize how empowering such an association is for Christian women. It is clear that

⁵⁹ In *But She Said* 11-14, Schüssler Fiorenza reads the story recorded in Mark 7: 24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28 in this way.

⁶⁰ Marjorie Malvern shows how Mary's figure relates the idea of "Woman," in her parallels to ancient goddesses. In her reading, the saint is more clearly sexualized: she "appears in Vézelay as *La Madeleine*, a goddess of fertility, 'the keeper of the vats,' the mystic Bride of the Christ, a miracle worker" (Malvern 80).

Mary Magdalen, even as she is degraded in many ways by misogynist medieval rhetoric, is allowed by medieval tradition a place of privilege as well.

VI: Conclusion to Part One

The legendary medieval Magdalen is made up of many elements that extend and elaborate on the gospel story. While there are negative associations with Mary Magdalen as problematically sexual in the legend that do not appear in scripture, many positive associations—Mary as apostle, penitent, and contemplative—are greatly heightened by the legend. For example, Mary-Magdalen-as-penitent is a reflection of the medieval legend and not possible when she is read according to the scriptures: “Once the medieval tradition is removed, the biblical exemplar of repentance *and* contemplation is removed” (Davidson 71-2). Of course, while the “composite” Mary Magdalen’s conflation with the other Biblical women actually opens up her narrative to allow for a deeper contemplative and evangelical life, it also makes it necessary to understand her promiscuity (or prostitution), an understanding not required by the Biblical text. Susan Haskins writes that “this refashioning by the early Church Fathers has distorted our view of Mary Magdalen and the other women” (11). Haskins recovers a Biblical Magdalen whose association by name to a place emphasizes her independence, since she is not nominally tied to a man, either father or husband. Haskins writes that demonic possession was not considered a sin,⁶¹ and that her image has been tainted and must be recovered: “Mary Magdalen, chief female disciple, first apostle and beloved friend of Christ, would become transformed into a penitent whore” (15). Interestingly though, this transformation, which would make “magdalen” synonymous with “whore”, is not accomplished by the medieval

⁶¹ Schaberg shows how even demonic possession is not a more accurate or unproblematic interpretation: “Medieval society made the connection between women’s preaching and demonic possession,” using the accusation to discredit women’s speech (78).

legend, but occurs after the Reformation. In any case, it would be too simplistic to blame such an association on the oppressive “nature” of the church.⁶²

The Reformation had a profound effect on the lessening of the Magdalen’s symbolic force. Whereas in the medieval legend she stands for various, even opposing things, her post-reformation figuration is fairly limited. Ironically, her “true” Biblical association as an apostle to the apostles is the only one that seems to be entirely lost. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she becomes important mainly for her association with the sacrament of penance. This sacrament was being questioned by the reformers, which led to its emphasis in the counter-reformation:

Where once the figure of the Magdalen was inscribed with multiple symbolic meanings, now the saint’s efficacious penance, once of the five sacraments under siege by the Protestants, was emphasized above all else. Her role as *apostola*, legendary as it was deemed to be, dropped out of sight altogether. (Jansen 335)

Her image as a hermit in her grotto is retained, spun with greater emphasis as an act of penance: “A miraculous intercessor, she is also the true embodiment of the Counter-Reformation spirit, meditating upon death, and weeping for her sins” (Haskins 229). Her importance lies in this era in her protection of the sacrament of penance (Haskins 255). Haskins adds that this penitent becomes eroticized in artistic depictions.⁶³

This sexualization carries into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her image becomes secularized in art, where along with classical and historical women, Mary

⁶² For further information on depictions of Mary Magdalen between the Middle Ages and today, see Haskins and Malvern.

⁶³ “She became, to use Mario Praz’s words, the ‘great amorous penitent’ or ‘Venus in Sackcloth,’ in a period when contrition and forgiveness were the hallmarks of the Catholic faith, and eroticism the means to express pietistical emotionalism” (Haskins 261).

Magdalen is repeatedly depicted as nude or semi-nude (Haskins 298). She is repeatedly associated with prostitution: "In both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries . . . her descendants often replace her in literature as the 'whore,' honest or wicked, pathetic or comic. But nineteenth-century romanticism brings a revival of interest in the fictionalized Magdalen herself" (Malvern 139-40). In the nineteenth century, "magdalen" became a euphemism for "sinning woman" and magdalenism for prostitution (Haskins 318). In Victorian gender discourse, the Madonna/Magdalen binary is set up once again, and in the mid to late-twentieth century, Mary Magdalen continues to be the quintessential whore.

Karras argues that Mary's repentance makes her a problematic figure:

Mary Magdalen fulfilled some of the functions that in other religions were embodied by a goddess of love or the wife of a male divinity. But the church only accepted her sanctity after the denial of the erotic side of her being (even if echoes persisted). . . . Christianity did not have a sexually active feminine divine principle to offer them (Karras 31).

Karras simplifies the relationship by conflating a certain canon of the Catholic church with Christianity in general, and thus risks blaming the New Testament text for what is really a matter of certain, albeit problematic interpretations. Painting the medieval Church as irredeemably misogynist generalizes the medieval experience *and* it taints the contemporary Church with the accusation. It cannot be assumed that if Christianity had a "sexually active feminine divine principle" it would be less misogynist. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* makes her just such a principle and effaces (and essentializes) her (and Woman-in-general) in a different way. Jansen notes that

in applying the principle of historicity to the cult of the saints, we have no doubt gained in historical accuracy, and that indeed is an important contribution to knowledge and scholarship . . . [but] we must not forget that . . . it was the “Dark Ages” that honored her as a preacher and apostle of the apostles. (336)

To make the medieval world a metaphor for being unenlightened (sexually and religiously) is to promote a medievalism that shows a contemporary prejudice against what is perceived as the dangerous naïveté of religious belief. The drive to recover Mary Magdalen—to search for her “roots”—preoccupies the contemporary texts I will explore, especially *The Da Vinci Code* and *Testament*. Though their goal can be connected to the projects of feminists revisionism and feminist theology, it is actually (not-explicitly-feminist) men who strive for this revision in these two novels. Again, in these contemporary texts, Mary Magdalen is not only a point of access to religious discussions of gender and sexuality, but she leads towards Christ, a powerful figure haunting the post-Christian era.

Part Two: Contemporary Magdalens

While redemption is a central theme in Mary Magdalen's Christian story, it is the contemporary, secular writers I will analyse—namely, Dan Brown and Nino Ricci—who seem to be interested in redeeming Mary Magdalen from her harlotization,⁶⁴ a defamation that they tend to blame on the Catholic Church. Certainly, the Church's continued insistence that priesthood be a solely male vocation makes it a target of many critics and writers in the early twenty-first century. Moreover, Mary Magdalen's past—those legendary and theological conflations surveyed in Part One—makes her an apt symbol of some of the problems with the church's "truth-making." That she has been so constructed raises the possibility that Mary Magdalen's representation is something other than a reflection of facts. As I demonstrated, most myths about Mary Magdalen's sexuality can be diffused with a little research so that she becomes the emblem of the manipulation of facts and the politically problematic rewriting of history. Regardless, it is often not the medieval Catholic Mary Magdalen with which critics take issue, since her image has changed quite a bit in the intervening years. While Mary's reputation as a harlot has carried into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many of the other aspects of her legendary career—her evangelism and hermitude, for example—were all but erased from the protestant and popular imaginations. Meanwhile, in popular culture, she remains conflated with women-sinners in the New Testament.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Schaberg's coinage.

⁶⁵ "While it is now common scholarly knowledge that the image of the Magdalene as a repentant whore is a distortion, that image is still alive and powerful in contemporary novels, plays, films, and TV presentations" (Schaberg 70).

This continued sexualization is evident in a preliminary survey of four recent films based on the Gospel narrative. In the film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), Mary's prostitution is implied, and her relations with Christ suggest some physical desire between them. Mary is often depicted doting on Christ; she "cools down [Christ's] face" with a cloth and sings him a lullaby ("What's the Buzz").⁶⁶ As in the gospel story, the apostles chastise Christ for associating with her. Another of Mary's songs—"I Don't Know How to Love Him"—indicates her status as a prostitute who is on her way to being reformed.⁶⁷ In Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988),⁶⁸ the mythical conflation reiterates Mary's status as a prostitute who eventually finds her redemption in Christ and then figures as his lover and wife in a fantastical temptation from the cross. Her sexuality is not merely suggested: she wears ornate jewelry, is depicted naked and in sexual situations with one man after another, including Christ himself. As in much earlier paintings of Mary Magdalen, she is easily recognizable because of her long hair and her nudity. Mary is again represented as a prostitute in the television production *Jesus* (1999). Though her character is not here conflated with Mary of Bethany or with the usual female sinners, she is shown in bed at various times with various men; in this film, she wears heavy makeup, jewelry, and long, loose, curly hair. Unlike the preceding three films, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), a cultural phenomenon much like

⁶⁶ All song lyrics are taken from "Jesus Christ Superstar Lyrics".

⁶⁷ In a response to the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, a recent production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* suggests that Mary and Jesus marry: "The Tivoli Theatre's Mary Magdalene does a lot more than study Jesus' teachings—she bunks down with him at night and may be carrying his child" (Boase "A New").

⁶⁸ Scorsese's film is based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel by the same name. I have chosen to focus on the film because of its greater accessibility to contemporary audiences.

Dan Brown's novel,⁶⁹ focusses only on the last twelve hours of Christ's life, his passion. Mary Magdalen's role in this heavily visual film is to be constantly watching Christ's persecution, along with his mother and the disciple John. A short, suggestive flashback associates Mary with the adulteress whom Christ saved from stoning, gold jewelry again indicating her sinfulness. During the film, Mary is endowed with her traditional imagery: her head covering falls down to expose her long hair and she, of course, weeps.

If there is an "official" version of the pop culture Magdalen, as these films indicate, she is thus—a prostitute, a sinner who is saved by Christ, and whose relationship with this redeemer may have a sexual subtext as well, in part because of the emphasis on her physical appearance. This is the Mary Magdalen of the contemporary imagination and the foundation of this model's reworking in *The Da Vinci Code* and *Testament*. While this Mary Magdalen is radically different from (and in some ways more one-dimensional than) the medieval version, the narrative interest in her role in the gospels is analogous. In a similar fashion as the medieval legend-making, contemporary depictions, in their various forms and from their myriad viewpoints, offer the same remythologization of an ancient story. This constant rewriting of an old story makes it possible for the gospel to be resurrected, reconsidered, and reinterpreted, which keeps it from ever being confined to static religious authority. In the same way, the different political and religious uses to which Mary Magdalen is put make such a singular doctrinization impossible. The hybridity of Mary Magdalen is fully explored by

⁶⁹ In that both have had unprecedented and unexpected success.

contemporary writers, even as they participate in it. According to Ricoeur, the acts of reading and writing are what allow for the unfixing of meaning:

I would like to consider the act of reading as a dynamic activity that is not confined to repeating significations fixed forever, but which takes place as a prolonging of the itineraries of meaning opened up by the work of interpretation Beyond this, I would like to see in the reading of a text such as the Bible a creative operation unceasingly employed in decontextualizing its meaning and recontextualizing it in today's *Sitz-inn-Leben*. (Ricoeur "Bible" 145)

In other words, the work of reading and interpretation helps to keep the Bible's meaning from being fixed; all new versions of older stories participate in such an interpretative act. As rewritings of ancient and already rewritten stories, the contemporary texts I will explore participate in the dynamic act of reading; Mary Magdalen is de- and then recontextualized into a post-Christian, post-feminist situation. What appears in these contemporary texts as it did in the medieval renderings is a hybrid Mary Magdalen. In fact, hybridity, plurality and paradoxality are her salient features.

The recontextualizing done by contemporary authors occurs in a framework as marked by plurality as is the character of Mary Magdalen: the world in post 9/11 North America is a world in which the schism between the secular and the religious is deepening (in the opposition between fundamentalist Christianity and liberal humanism) while spirituality and skepticism seem to coexist (in that people are experimenting with various new kinds of religion, even as they remain skeptical about the idea of religion). This is a world in which both *The Passion of the Christ*, a rather traditional Catholic passion play, and *The Da Vinci Code*, which exploits conspiracy theory and skepticism to

refute the divinity of Christ, can become runaway successes. This context has changed even since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when, as Miles notes,

No 'old-fashioned reverential films' (like the earlier *Greatest Story Ever Told*) were box-office successes Films about Christianity [from this era] are largely iconoclastic: Jesus is pictured as a 'real man' troubled by sexual fantasies; or as a media figure . . . ; or as a contemporary inner-city African American . . . ; or as a critic of capitalist consumerism. (19-20)

This is a marked difference from the early twenty-first century climate; here, both *The Passion of the Christ* (a major box-office success) and the miniseries *Jesus* treat their subject matter with reverence. But the iconoclastic spirit of films made little over a decade earlier has not been entirely lost: *The Da Vinci Code* has ushered in a new wave of Church conspiracy literature. From its publication in March 2003, this suspense novel has remained a bestseller, becoming so profitable that publishers have not yet needed to release it in paperback format.⁷⁰ The novel has become a "must-read,"⁷¹ has led to a large number of texts attempting to explain or debunk its claims,⁷² and has lured "pilgrims" to various sites in Europe found in *The Da Vinci Code*.⁷³ In contrast, Nino Ricci's *Testament* has been given far less attention, but is acknowledged by some as a more literary take on Biblical themes.⁷⁴ Indeed, this reflects their marketing: Brown's text is a fast-moving thriller, while Ricci, a Governor General's Award Winner, is marketed to

⁷⁰ As of May 2005. They have, however, released a more expensive, illustrated hardcover edition.

⁷¹ In July 2005, there were still over 400 borrowers waiting to read the book at the Hamilton Public Library.

⁷² See, for example, Dr. Darrell Bock's *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everybody's Asking* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2004); Ben Witherington's *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and da Vinci* (Downer's Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2004); and Bart D. Ehrman's *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: a historian reveals what we really know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004).

⁷³ See Fleming.

⁷⁴ See Persky.

more literary crowds. However, the novels have more in common than their Christian allusions: both are intent on demystifying their subject matter. This intent, I would argue, reflects the dual nature of current trends in belief—we (as a culture) are interested in even the older forms of religion, but we are highly suspicious of it. Interestingly, both *Jesus* and *The Passion of the Christ* are as focussed on “accuracy” as are Brown and Ricci’s texts; both attempt versions of gospel narratives that are theologically and Biblically sound. In this connection, the plurality of our postmodern existence (and the heightened temperature of our post-9/11 climate) is underlined; in this context, each version of the truth is presented and considered in public forums.

In the three sections that follow, I will explore contemporary revisions, considering how Mary Magdalen is being rendered, why this is the case, and some of problems that such depictions might introduce. In so doing, I will show that recent, secularised versions of this figure are no more “progressive” than their medieval counterparts; instead, both the medieval and contemporary rewritings are part of a similar impulse to narrativize in order to explore what is assumed to be known. One of the ways that I see Mary being used by contemporary authors is to support feminist revisions of scripture. This follows from rising feminism in the field of theology and runs parallel to an increased public interest in women’s stories from the Bible.⁷⁵ Brown and Ricci both exploit theology and scholarship that has been influenced by the unearthing of the Gnostic gospels.⁷⁶ In these writings, Mary figures much more prominently as a disciple and a counterpart to Christ. Brown addresses the issue explicitly, while Ricci’s depiction

⁷⁵ For example, Anne Diamante’s popular *The Red Tent* (New York: Picador Press, 1998).

⁷⁶ They were uncovered in Egypt in 1945, having been buried in AD 400.

of Mary's relationship with Christ seems influenced by a Gnostic reading. In line with recent feminist scholarship and theology, then, these texts explore Mary as a representative of the crucial but silenced role of women in the gospels.⁷⁷ Secondly, I will look at the way Mary is used to reinterpret sexuality in the Church. As stated, sexuality is a major aspect of the contemporary Magdalens. While Brown and Ricci are intent on erasing her prostitution, both depictions are ambiguous, since while they seem critical of Christian repression of sexuality, they do not necessarily celebrate her sexuality in more liberating ways. Thirdly and finally, I will explore how Mary Magdalen's relationship with Christ is developed in these texts to show how she becomes a point of access to him. She is depicted as a disciple, a bride, a lover, a friend and a counterpart. This interest is similar to lay interest in the medieval Magdalen, in that (even secular) revisions continue to be based on an interest in accessing the figure of Jesus Christ.

It is evident, even in this brief overview, that contemporary writers are not immune to the attempt to make Biblical figures fit within their own ideological framework. Both the medieval and the contemporary texts attempt to arrive at a "truer" (either spiritually or historically) version of the gospel. Even as Brown and Ricci seem to do a playful exploration of possibilities, they frame their texts in a tone of seriousness. Brown prefaces *The Da Vinci Code* with a list of "facts," where Ricci's final note indicates that while *Testament* is a "work of fiction," he has "made every effort to work within the bounds of historical plausibility"; he here cites the Jesus Seminar, a group

⁷⁷ "As awareness of [Mary Magdalen's] role increases, so too does our awareness of her importance; she has become a touchstone in relation to such contentious issues as the wrangle within the churches over that last bastion of patriarchy, the ministry and ordination of women" (Haskins 392). See also Jansen 12-4.

solely interested in the historical accuracy of the gospels. These texts are not so different than the medieval legends, then, in terms of purpose: both seek the narrative truth of the gospel. Coupe, like Ricoeur, emphasizes the dynamism of narrative: “Myths work according to the imperative of narrative dynamism and will always evade the stasis of doctrine” (110). Thus, while both archives can be accused of political manipulation and of misogyny, both archives are also a part of the narrativization of a story that has never been entirely contained by one doctrine or another.

I. A Feminist Forebear: Mary Magdalen as “W”oman

Parallel with the popular cultural interest in Mary Magdalen is a renewed concern about her and about Biblical women more generally in feminist and theological scholarship. As fields that study gender, sexuality, and women’s history grow in the later twentieth century, characters like Mary Magdalen become models that prove the history of women’s subjugation. Jansen points out that “recent scholars of early Christianity, particularly feminist scholars, have taken up the case of Mary Magdalen in an effort to demonstrate the presence of authoritative female leaders in the early Christian church” (12). Scholarly monographs from many disciplines on the subject of Mary Magdalen were produced in the 1990s (Jansen 13-4). As fields studying gender and sexuality have grown, study of the figure of Mary Magdalen (and of other women in the gospels) has become much more interesting to scholarship. Further, Haskins indicates that feminist scholarship “rendered Mary Magdalen a figure-head in the argument over women’s ministry” (367). If the gospel commentary and representation of women like Mary could be mistrusted, then Mary Magdalen’s real role—her “true” power—could be reinterpreted in much more feminist ways.⁷⁸ Mary Magdalen is not only a symbol for feminists of what is wrong with the Church but also of what else might have been intended by Christ’s message. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, reads Mary Magdalen as a symbol for the problems of gender identity for Christians (Schaberg 68). In *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, theologian Jane Schaberg draws parallels

⁷⁸ VanBiema’s and Conroy’s articles in particular depicts the ways that Mary Magdalen has been viewed positively by women believers.

between Virginia Woolf and Mary Magdalen. Emphasizing Mary's suppression, she writes, "Mary Magdalene is the madwoman in Christianity's attic. Her madness . . . could stand for resistance and subversion, for rage and brave protest against patriarchy, that is, for a kind of sanity" (79). She sees Mary as a marginal figure who can stand in for all those who have been oppressed by dominant groups and through whose recovery the dominant groups can be healed. Though I will not be delving into a survey of Magdalenian scholarship, but rather an analysis of films and novels, the same interest in Mary Magdalen as a feminist forebear or model can be seen in these texts. Treating women as equal to men is a necessity for the progressive thinkers and writers of our day, so the lack of such feminism in institutions like the Catholic Church becomes grounds to dismiss their ideas as inherently limited. Such argumentation is most explicit in *The Da Vinci Code*, but is implied elsewhere.

Because she is an important voice in the New Testament—one who announces the resurrection and whose faith in Christ is arguably greater than many of the male disciples⁷⁹—and one that is silenced as demonic and whorish by history, it is easy to see why Mary Magdalen is important to feminist scholars. She is a prime example of the patriarchal corruption of Christ's ministry. Even so, the feminist and secular interest in redeeming Mary's image from her harlotized past to arrive at a different truth about what she means for Christianity is fraught with its own biases and assumptions about what she *ought* to mean. Since the female characters in the gospels are given less attention than the men, while the male disciples have very different personalities and reactions to Christ's

⁷⁹ Thomas doubts the resurrection, for example, while Peter betrays Christ three times.

message, it is easier to make one of the women into a symbol for all women Christians. Mary Magdalen is just this sort of figurehead, continuing in contemporary texts to play roles dictated by context and popular (or authoritative) opinion. So while her meaning has changed for contemporary audiences, Mary Magdalen continues to be pushed to support one agenda or another. Of course, even when these roles *are* unsavory, the texts all participate in the play of meaning through changed viewpoints and contexts.

These roles are still more problematic in the recent films that have depicted her. *Jesus Christ Superstar* gives Mary Magdalen, along with Judas Iscariot, one of this production's more developed characterizations. She seems to represent a feminine reaction to Jesus, one which is markedly different than that of the male disciples. While they follow Christ around, urgently singing, "What's the buzz, tell me what's happening," Mary appears to attend to his bodily needs, by cooling him down with water. Later on, she again nurses him in his tent, anointing him with myrrh and singing him a sort of lullaby:

Try not to get worried
Try not to turn on to
Problems that upset you
Don't you know
Everything's alright
Yes, everything's fine
And we want you to sleep well tonight.
("Everything's Alright")

Men and women are depicted in gender-stereotyped roles here; while the women, led by Mary Magdalen, help to nourish him, the men—especially Judas—are concerned with

political matters.⁸⁰ Even so, she is given a more starring role than most of the other disciples, and while she does not “know how to love him,” neither does Judas, who sings virtually the same lyrics as Mary does:

I don't know how to love him
I don't know why he moves me
He's a man
He's just a man. (“Judas’ Death Lyrics”)

So while Mary seems, because of her female gender and closeness to Christ, to be represented as a woman-nurse with a crush on her Lord, Judas sings the same lyrics, which indicates that they are “moved” spiritually as opposed to physically.

More explicitly and controversially, *The Last Temptation of Christ* emphasizes the womanhood of its female characters. Mary Magdalen again plays an important role in the story: she is rejected by Jesus when they are younger, becomes a prostitute, is saved from stoning, repents and then joins Christ as a quasi-disciple. While these parts of the story are (loosely) based on scripture, it is while Christ is on the cross that she becomes an important female symbol. Sexist clichés abound. When Christ is tempted off the cross to a regular life and weds Mary, she weeps, “thanking God for bringing [Christ there].” While the Jesus is associated with spirituality and a noble calling, Mary represents the mundanity of existence, wanting nothing greater than marriage. When they sleep together on their wedding night, she cries “we can have a child” as he climaxes, again supporting stereotypes in which women are focussed on domestic matters. While she is still pregnant, Mary Magdalen dies. His guardian angel (actually Satan) says to Jesus, “Listen. There’s only one woman in the world. One woman with many faces. This one falls, the

⁸⁰ Malvern sees this depiction as preserving the “mother goddess” in Mary Magdalen (150).

next one rises. Mary Magdalen died, but Mary, Lazarus' sister, she lives. She's Magdalen with a different face. She's carrying your greatest joy inside her: your son." Far from being glorified in her role as Christ's wife, Mary Magdalen is entirely dispensable, meaning very little else to him than the sum of her roles as lover and mother.⁸¹ But even an emphasis on Mary's domesticity cannot be clearly judged as problematic. Such an emphasis in the medieval texts is seen as a gesture towards the active life—a positive example of a life of service to others. In a medieval context, such actions are praiseworthy, but in a contemporary one, the same actions are a sign of weakness and of female stereotyping. The taint or meaning of domesticity changes drastically when seen through a medieval versus a contemporary lens.⁸²

Neither *Jesus* nor *The Passion of the Christ* is quite so explicit in its stereotyping. Both films remain quite close to Christian tradition, depicting Mary Magdalen as a reformed prostitute who joins the Virgin Mary in watching the crucifixion. In *Jesus*, the Virgin Mary acts as a kind of evangelist, bringing Mary Magdalen into the fold and befriending her. Mary Magdalen's faithfulness is emphasized, and she is given the status of a disciple. She tells Jesus, "If I were a man, I would be your most loyal disciple," to which he replies, "those who speak for me are my disciples." In *The Passion of the Christ*, the two Marys are again side by side throughout the film, both watching as the crucifixion unfolds. While most of the time they are silent or acting in ways that accord

⁸¹ The controversy of *The Last Temptation of Christ* was buttressed by feminist interest in Mary Magdalen: "Feminist reactions to the film's treatment of Mary Magdalen were in part conditioned by the re-evaluation of her role within Christ's ministry, itself the fruit of recent scholarly study of the early Church and of women's position within it" (Haskins 367). Haskins writes, "Even the devil who tempts Jesus in the desert is female, bare-breasted, and, in the film, speaks with Barbara Hershey's voice. Mary Magdalen [is given a] crude, stereotypical characterization" (Haskins 371).

⁸² See p. 59 for a discussion of how domesticity elevates Mary and the female reader in medieval texts.

with church tradition, Mary Magdalen speaks out in one scene that reflects her treatment throughout history. She pleads for Christ's life to some soldiers: "They've arrested him. In secret! In the night! To hide their crime from you. Stop them!" At first the men are inclined to listen to her, until another man tells her to shut up, explaining to the soldier that "she's crazy." This silencing is emblematic of the way Mary Magdalen has been treated and represented as mad or sinful instead of credible. In making this suppression so explicit, the film appears to concede that the church was in the wrong for such treatment, even while Mary still appears within the film as a reformed prostitute.

It is these more explicitly religious films, then, in which Mary Magdalen is given a more empowered role. Both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which question the divinity of Christ, reproduce Mary Magdalen in stereotypically feminine roles. The Mary Magdalen appearing *The Last Temptation of Christ* "reiterates the dualistic polarities of divinity and mundanity, spirit and flesh, good and evil" (Haskins 370).⁸³ These examples might be enough to show that it is not the presence or absence of religious belief or purpose that leads to a derogatory or stereotypical understanding of women. *The Da Vinci Code*, to which I will now turn, provides further proof of this line of argument. Brown's novel—insofar as it is a "Magdalen novel"—might be read as an amalgamation of both *The Last Temptation of Christ* and of feminist scholarship on the subject. Brown ostensibly tries to recover this lost icon of feminine spirituality, but in so doing, he makes of her the same caricature as the Magdalen of Scorsese's film. While no one is insisting that *The Da Vinci Code* is a primarily feminist

⁸³ "Feminists, both Christian and otherwise, were up in arms as in the film the temptation that tore 'the son of Mary' from his divine mission is symbolised by an entirely female world" (Haskins 366).

work, the novel does focus largely on the figure of Mary Magdalen as a symbol of the lost “sacred feminine.” On Brown’s web site, he replies to someone who mentions that “this novel is very empowering to women” that “women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power. The novel touches on questions of how and why this shift occurred...and on what lessons we might learn from it regarding our future” (F.A.Q). Further, Brown’s characters make claims about the feminism of those they study: Teabing tells Neveu, “Jesus was the original feminist. He intended for the future of His Church to be in the hands of Mary Magdalene” (Brown 248).⁸⁴ Van Biema sees Brown’s novel as one of many attempts to make sense of this figure after the Catholic Church’s admission that her “standard image as a reformed prostitute is not supported by the text of the Bible” (38). *The Da Vinci Code* is a fictional attempt to hypothesize about who Mary really was and what she really means for Christianity.

The protagonist Robert Langdon is described as a “symbolist” whose most recent research explores the “iconography of goddess worship—the concept of female sanctity and the art and symbols associated with it” (Brown 23). Langdon and another male character, Jacques Saunière, are portrayed as experts on this goddess iconography; these men then set about educating Langdon’s love interest and Saunière’s granddaughter, Sophie Neveu, about the topic of the sacred feminine. Contrasted with this academic interest in female sanctity is Opus Dei, a Vatican prelature depicted in the novel as sexist, masochistic, and backward. For example, at their New York headquarters, “women enter through a side street and are ‘acoustically and visually

⁸⁴ Jesus can be viewed as a feminist whether or not he gives Mary this special status.

separated' from the men at all times within the building" (Brown 28). Silas, a member of Opus Dei, does a great deal of violence to others and to his own body; he is aligned with both evil and with the Catholic Church; as a hulking albino, he is depicted in the text as horrific and monstrous.⁸⁵

There is no question that Langdon and his few colleagues are bent on restoring what they see as an eternal and universal sacred femininity to the Catholic Church, or at least on revealing its problematic absence as a "smear campaign" against women (244). This sacred feminine is associated with Delphic oracles (23), Yin and Yang, Venus, Mother Earth (36), and, finally, with Mary Magdalen (244). Leigh Teabing, a wealthy scholar and friend of Langdon, explains to Sophie the significance of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, in which the person sitting to Christ's right (usually believed to be John), is interpreted as a woman, as Christ's wife, as Mary Magdalen. According to the scholars in this novel, the male leaders of the Early Church "successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine" (124).⁸⁶ The Church's greatest secret, then, is that the Holy Grail is really Mary Magdalen, who is revealed to have borne Christ's children.

While a quick survey of the explicit statements of the text may seem a progressive alternative to belief in a patriarchal institution like the Catholic Church, *The Da Vinci Code* actually uses the figure of Mary Magdalen to make claims equally as problematic

⁸⁵ There are other Catholics in the text who are not thus aligned. Sister Sandrine is wary of Opus Dei: "Their views on women were medieval at best" (41). Still, the novel as a whole is critical of most forms of Catholicism and Catholic doctrine precisely for its position on and treatment of women.

⁸⁶ This explains the slaughter of "witches" (actually "female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, herb gatherers") (125).

as those it is critiquing. In some ways, the text actually effaces women and limits their power or agency to a narrow definition of what is both sacred and feminine. As stated, Sophie Neveu, one of the few female characters in the text, knows very little about the conspiracy against the sacred feminine and must be initiated by her male mentors. In the same way that Neveu, the sole major female character, is not at first privy to the secrets of female sanctity, Mary Magdalen is reduced to an object and stripped of the position as evangelist and disciple that renders her so powerful in other documents. Not only does Mary not speak for herself, but she is represented as the “Holy Grail,” a womb and a wife who is important insofar as she bore the offspring of the male Christ. Her effacement is parallel to the treatment of women by courtly love poetry, which finds in women a perfect object to pursue (much like the grail itself).⁸⁷ None of the power of the original Magdalen narrative is conveyed: she does not speak for anything and has none of the disciple’s faith. She is made into the love object of Christ, much like the problematic Magdalen of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In fact, this film is mentioned in the novel in a positive way.⁸⁸

Other ironies undermine Brown’s focus on the sacred feminine. Brown cites the Gnostic gospels as one of his sources, both in his “Acknowledgments” page and in the body of the text itself. Teabing reads to Neveu from *The Gospel of Philip*:

And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on the mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it. (246)

⁸⁷ I discuss the courtly love tradition briefly in the final section of Part One.

⁸⁸ “The French government, under pressure from priests, had agreed to ban an American movie called *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was about Jesus having sex with a lady called Mary Magdalene. [Sophie’s] grandfather [. . .] said the Church was arrogant and wrong to ban it” (Brown 246).

Teabing explains that the word “companion” means “spouse,” showing Neveu other Gnostic passages in which Jesus and Mary are depicted in these near-romantic terms. While the text uses Gnosticism to support ideas about the sacred feminine, in fact, such a mixture is not so easily allowable by Gnostic ideas.⁸⁹ Gnosticism is dualistic, first aligning the female with the body and then denying the body: “The Gnostics split spirit and matter, and saw matter as evil. They believed that men were spirit and women were matter At heart, Gnosticism was profoundly anti-woman” (Stanford F11). So while *The Da Vinci Code* explicitly attempts to recover the lost feminine in religion, the text is laden with misogynist sources and ideas.⁹⁰

Further, even the idea of a sacred feminine is problematic since it is entirely essentialist. Not only is Mary Magdalen essentialized into her female body parts, powerful because of her reproductive function, but the whole concept of a need for a feminine aspect in religion suggests that there are essential differences between men and women. Without women (or female symbols) involved in religion, it loses certain “feminine” traits: “The days of the goddess were over. The pendulum had swung. Mother Earth had become a *man*’s world, and the gods of destruction and war were taking their toll. The male ego had spent two millennia running unchecked by its female counterpart”

⁸⁹ Haskins writes that although the central position afforded to women disciples in the Gnostic gospels implies that they are more feminist than the New Testament gospels, their dualism betrays a familiar misogyny: “The Gnostics’ use of the terms male and female to describe the division between spirit and matter, and their further equation of those terms with good and evil, inevitably leads to the association of women and sexuality with evil” (42). When Simon Peter in the *Gospel of Thomas* decries women as unworthy of “Life,” Jesus replies, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males,” (Haskins 43). Women were allowed to be saved, as long as they could be made men.

⁹⁰ The theory that Mary Magdalen bore Christ’s children and is actually the Holy Grail does not originate with Brown. He has been accused of plagiarizing Baigent and Leigh’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which also inspired Starbird’s *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*.

(125). That the balance of the universe is achieved by maintaining both male and female power essentializes both kinds of power, implicitly stating that women tend to be one way and men another. Instead of being a liberating discussion of female power, then, *The Da Vinci Code* effaces and essentializes women, suggesting that actually giving women a voice in religion is more complicated than claiming that they have no voice in Christianity.

Although Nino Ricci is also interested in presenting a Christ who is more human than divine, his *Testament* grants more power to gospel women than Brown's novel. His Miryam of Migdal (Hebrew for Mary of Magdala) narrates a full quarter of the text; instead of being effaced, Mary is given a voice. In fact, he structures the text into four parts meant to mimic the gospels, which endows each speaker with a position of authority. And while Ricci does seem to be interested in showing a historical Jesus who was not divine, he does not attack the Church for being sexist in the same fashion as Brown does.⁹¹ Throughout the text, male disciples are critical of Christ's closeness with his female companions, while Ricci's Christ treats them as equals. Not only does this Christ see them as powerful, but his treatment of them empowers them: "Yeshua always encouraged us to ask him questions or even to contradict him. Many of us were alarmed at this, not least the women, since we had always been taught to hold our tongues" (129).⁹² In fact, this Mary is more deeply questioning of Christ: "I was astonished that the

⁹¹ In an interview, Ricci notes that women characters were diminished by Church tradition: "The tradition itself . . . hadn't acknowledged the important place women seemed to have had in Jesus' ministry—a position, it seems, of equality with men" (Boase "The Grit" 13).

⁹² Yihuda (Judas) narrates, "because he treated them with a measure of parity with the men and suffered them to be among his intimates, they imagined him to be their protectors, and showed me an arrogance I would never have countenanced in them if it were not for Yeshua's sake" (44).

others made no protest to Yeshua It seemed to me that the others had been bewitched” (160). She is worried about Judas’ influence and intentions, when the male disciples are less wary of him. The presence of this questioning spirit on Mary’s part might indicate what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “the biblical-theological voice of women, which has been excluded, repressed, or marginalized in Christian discourse” (*But She* 11). She suggests that Christ did not merely take women into his circle as his followers, but that he engaged in dialogue with them in such a way as to learn from them.⁹³ Far from a passive and repentant prostitute, this Mary is no marginal character.

Ricci does not reduce his Miryam to a symbol, partly accomplishing this by placing her within the context of a story; his narrativization permits the possibility of myriad interpretations. Because of Ricci’s rendering of the setting and political context, it becomes clear that this Christ is interested in keeping company with those who have been marginalized; aside from Judas, who comes from a minority radical movement, his disciples are all women, fishermen and peasants. Ricci’s treatment of Mary Magdalen is similar to that of feminist theologians. Both Jane Schaberg and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza emphasize the importance of rereading the scriptures through previously marginalized characters—this is the only way that Christianity can be preserved without being oppressive. In an interview, Ricci indicated that he was looking to give a voice to those previously silenced by ecclesiastical authority: “I wanted to hear from the outsiders [because] they were less beholden to tradition” (Boase “The Grit” M13). Thus,

⁹³ As mentioned in a note in Part One, Schüssler Fiorenza’s biblical example of this kind of woman is a non-Jewish woman who reasons with Christ in order to have him cure her daughter. See *But She Said* 11-15. The episode is recounted in Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28.

while his giving voice to the marginalized gospel stories is in some ways similar to the project of feminist theology, Ricci's intentions are also to complicate the "truth" of the gospel and to challenge Christian tradition.⁹⁴ The text has many elements of that reveal this challenge; for instance, his picture of Christ in the third section of the story, narrated by Miryam, Christ's mother, portrays Jesus as an illegitimate child who is insolent, all but disowning his family. Her version of events, unlike the other three chapters, stresses Christ's flaws and characterizes him in a way opposite from the gospels. While to his disciples, he is at least charismatic (if not Christ), this section is shocking in its portrayal. Thus framed, we might also read Miryam of Migdal's narration as similarly jolting—she is no beauty, no prostitute, and she is given a mind and a voice. This shock value can be interpreted negatively, as a controversy designed to incite readers, but it also parallels the gospel message itself, since Christ's words and deeds were shocking and incited people enough to make them execute him for his political and religious views. The overall effect of Ricci's novel is, unlike Brown's, not really a caricature of the Christian tradition but in some ways echoes the power of the gospel itself. Though both intend to bring us the "truth" of the gospel story, it is only Ricci's version that makes the gospel fresh and immediate.

Miryam of Migdal is not contained by her author's explicit purposes, but, as a protagonist and narrator, is given complexity and authority. Of all the texts I have studied in this thesis, Ricci's is the only one in which Mary gives a first-person perspective on

⁹⁴ I recognize that these are lofty claims to make about a work of fiction. However, Nino Ricci has made public comments that indicate he is skeptical of the Christian message and wishes to challenge it. As well, Ricci has cited the Jesus Seminar, a group intent on treating Christ as human and not divine.

events, a perspective that is not mediated by an ecclesiastical authority (as in de Voragine's legend) or by a secular skeptic (as in *The Da Vinci Code*). Even so, this Mary is ventriloquized by Ricci's authorial voice and intention, and his text alludes conspicuously to the things Mary could be (and has been) made to mean. Just as it leads to ideas about her promiscuity and wealth in the medieval legend, Mary's status as a single woman causes problems for many of the other characters in *Testament*. She must put up with more prejudice and questioning than the male disciples. Yihuda questions Christ for having unmarried women in his group: "I had often warned Yeshua of the ill-advisedness of going about like some desert chieftain, with all of his wives in tow" (89). Similarly, Jesus' mother asks if Mary is his wife, and there are hints throughout that she may desire this. When asked by his mother, she "said, He has no wife, but felt a deep shame at the question, [she] couldn't have said why" (132). Miryam, his mother, writes of the same encounter, "I saw that she wished it" (291). Ricci thus calls attention to popular interest in seeing Mary as Christ's wife, but refuses to categorize her as the sexual or domestic partner of Christ. His Miryam chooses not to be married, believing that she is meant for "something higher" (196). This "something higher" is not a career as an evangelist, since *Testament* never gets much farther than the crucifixion. Instead Miryam of Migdal is one of Christ's most loyal companions and an intuitive who is a disciple in everything but title.

As a companion and intuitive, Ricci's Magdalen is partly influenced by Gnostic ideas. Yeshua and Miryam have a close relationship, and he speaks privately with her on long walks together. In the Gnostic writings, it is this closeness that the male disciples

object to, worrying that Christ loves her better than them: in *The Gospel of Mary*, Matthew says, “‘Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us’” (Haskins 39). Ricci’s Miryam is, or at least sees herself as, greatly loved by Yeshua. Miryam also sees herself as intuitive:

When Yeshua had chosen the twelve, he had promised to keep me always at his side; but how, as a woman, could I hope to keep pace with him. I envied Shimon and the others for being men, but in my pride I also thought that they couldn’t fathom Yeshua as I did, and that Yeshua too had understood this. (155)

Yeshua and Miryam have a close relationship, and he speaks privately with her on their long walks. In inscribing Mary Magdalen with special intuition, Ricci again parallels the Gnostic texts, where she “represents the . . . value of individual visionary experience” (Haskins 39). Just as Brown has explicitly used Gnostic texts to reinterpret Mary Magdalen, Ricci draws subtextually on these same writings. Unlike Brown, he draws on them without making an argument out of them. Ricci, more than Brown, participates in the radical typology of mythopoeia by erasing Gnostic dualism from his text in its revision of the story and thereby unfixing the meaning of both the Gnostic texts and the gospels.

Although Brown’s and Ricci’s texts both assume the false consciousness of the Christian gospels and Christian doctrine, both deal with the figures of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalen very differently. Brown overtly challenges any traditional conception of Mary Magdalen, making her Christ’s wife, while *Testament*, a subtler reinterpretation, subverts Mary’s characterization in a far more radical way. The greatest difference in their treatment is Mary’s placement in the text. In *The Da Vinci Code* she is a shadow of

an idea that feeds a controversy: she is part of no narrative and has no voice. In contrast, Ricci fills out a narrative, giving Mary an important role and a voice. I believe it is this narrativization that prevents Ricci from occupying the doctrinaire stance of Brown and that keeps the character of Mary Magdalen in *Testamen* from remaining only the symbol of a limiting message. Yet even a novel as ideologically driven as *The Da Vinci Code* is still heteroglossic: it allows for different voices to come through in speaking out about Mary Magdalen. Teabing's speech about her coexists with Langdon's more respectful commentary and Neveu's surprised reactions. As well, even though the text is dominated by Langdon's quest, Neveu undergoes her own quest, and her grandmother figuratively replaces her grandfather. Again, like the medieval texts, Brown's novel reiterates and reinforces misogynist norms while also participating in the challenge to those norms.

The feminist interest in Mary Magdalen is because of her rich characterization in the gospels, the legends, the myths and other tellings of the gospel story; a text that attempted to force Mary Magdalen into a simplified, proto-feminist role would diminish this richness. Feminist theologians looking to address the importance of Biblical women have made of Mary Magdalen an important figurehead of the possibility for a more liberating Church. Attempts to revision the Biblical narrative are still laden with their own assumptions and biases; even Ricci is intent on creating a picture of Jesus and Mary Magdalen that fits with his own ideas about them.⁹⁵ To me, there is little difference (other than in content) between medieval exempla-making and the attempt to make Mary

⁹⁵ Ricci acknowledges this possibility: "People tended to find the Jesus they were looking for, each epoch and each individual recreating him in their own image" (Ricci "On Writing"). The same could be said about treatments of Mary Magdalen.

Magdalen into a feminist figurehead. This is not meant as a totally negative criticism—exempla and “role models” are both important and can be inspirational. Both are imbued with ideological agendas, however, and at least attempt to limit meaning. Even so, both Brown’s and Ricci’s texts participate in what Coupe calls radical typology, the constant process of opening up old texts and characters to new contexts and interpretations so that their use is kept from stasis. In the section that follows, I will explore the ways in which Mary’s sexual behaviour is understood and used in contemporary films and novels in order to make powerful statements about both women and the Church; at the same time, I will continue to show how such statements are always involved in their own unmaking.

II. A Goddess of Love: Mary Magdalen and Sexuality

I have already explored the ways in which Mary Magdalen became renowned for her harlotry, so much so that “Magdalen” became synonymous with “prostitute.” In the later twentieth and early twenty-first century, there have been moves to erase or at least to amend this conception of her. As has been seen, this reconceiving led to myriad other theories about Mary’s status among the disciples, making her into a “rich and honoured patron of Jesus,” an apostle, a bride and “Christ’s prophetic successor” (Van Biema 38). Though the Mary Magdalen who had been previously conflated with female “sinners” and with Mary of Bethany has been rejected, her transgressive sexuality, really a consequence of the discarded conflation, has remained part of many of her recent configurations. The seeming contradiction here—that there is no scholarly evidence for her prostitution or “free” sexuality, yet that writers maintain this traditional aspect of her character—is present in many contemporary works that take on the subject. Her sexuality continues to be used as a symbol of temptation (and thereby of Christ’s humanity), of the need for repentance, of the need for a place for sexuality in Christian doctrine, and of her (feminist) power. Mary Magdalen’s sexual history is just as potent in the contemporary imagination as it is in the medieval: its prominence in these texts relates to ideas wrought from the sexual revolution about women’s sexual independence and also allows them to be saturated with sexual acts and depictions of women’s bodies. In *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, Susan Haskins analyses various works of literature by feminists in recent years, concluding that these feminists try to make of Mary a symbol for female sexuality: these “deny her a dignity in which her sexuality could be a more integral part

of her humanity” (Haskins 387). In the analysis that follows, we will see that Mary Magdalen continues to be seen in great measure important as a sexual icon.⁹⁶

In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, while Mary is not given her stereotypically whorish outfit of heavy jewelry and makeup,⁹⁷ she is clearly a prostitute and scenes allude to some sexual chemistry with (or temptation of) Jesus. When she sings “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” it is evident that she has had a great deal of sexual experience with other men:

He's a man
 He's just a man
 And I've had so many
 Men before
 In very many ways
 He's just one more.
 (“I Don’t Know How to Love Him”)

In addition to mention of her sexual experiences—that she has “had so many/Men before”—she is characterized by a world-weariness, suggesting that she has been through so much that very little else could surprise her. In this song, there is an indication that she is repentant and no longer acting as a prostitute, but there is also a suggestion that Mary does not know how to be in a non-sexual relationship with a man:

If he said he loved me
 I'd be lost
 I'd be frightened
 I couldn't cope
 Just couldn't cope
 I'd turn my head

⁹⁶ These works show “the continuing relevance of using Mary Magdalen’s composite figure to illustrate sexual mores within a contemporary setting” (Haskins 375) and “the enduring power of the Magdalen-as-fallen-woman myth” (Haskins 377). Van Biema concurs: “In the culture at large, writer Kathy Shaidle has suggested, Magdalene is ‘the Jessica Rabbit of the Gospels, the gold-hearted town tramp belting out *I Don’t Know How to Love Him*’” (39).

⁹⁷ Instead, she is shown in hippie-bohemian clothing, reflecting the sexual liberation of her time.

I'd back away
 I wouldn't want to know
 He scares me so
 I want him so.
 ("I Don't Know How to Love Him")

Mary is characterized by her femininity (as I have shown) and her sexuality. She is depicted, by this song at least, as a woman who has been in control of her (solely) sexual relationships⁹⁸ and who is now changed, confused, and even broken by her relationship with Christ.⁹⁹

Aside from these obvious suggestions about her sexual behaviour, Mary's treatment of Christ's body in *Jesus Christ Superstar* exploits some of the erotic subtext already present in the Christian New Testament. Her first appearance, during the song "What's the Buzz/Strange Things Mystifying," has her attending to Christ's bodily needs as she cools down his face with water. While this scene (Christ's treatment of Mary, and the disciples' reaction) is based on Christian tradition, Christ's exclamation—"Mary, ooh, that feels good"—at Mary's touch suggests something more sexual between them. Similarly suggestive is Mary's presence at Christ's bedside. Again, she touches him, anointing him with myrrh, and tries to soothe him with her song:

Sleep and I shall soothe you
 Calm you and anoint you
 Myrrh for your hot forehead
 oh then you'll feel
 Everything's alright.
 ("Everything's alright")

⁹⁸ "Don't you think it's rather funny/I should be in this position?/I'm the one/Who's always been/So calm so cool/No lover's fool/Running every show/He scares me so" ("I Don't Know How to Love Him").

⁹⁹ Implied is the idea that she no longer "runs the show" and that she is now a "lover's fool", suggesting that she has been tamed, in a sense, by Christ. This can be read as problematic (perhaps by feminist critics) or as unproblematic (by Christian ones).

The film departs very little from the Biblical narrative, but visually and musically the erotic subtext is highlighted, both by the way Mary touches Jesus and by the tone of his responses. Mary's sexuality in *Jesus Christ Superstar* might only be a symptom of its fairly traditional interpretation of her life, but it again supports the idea that Christ was most interested in being around those who had been marginalized by society, shocking the viewer in ways parallel to Christ's controversial presence in the Gospels. As well, it provides evidence for his humanity—that he might have been tempted by or actually involved in physical (“carnal”) relationships with women.¹⁰⁰ Regardless, Mary's sexuality remains potent and central to her characterization.

Mary's sexuality and her closeness to Christ is even more explicit and central to her characterization in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Her first appearance in this film has her spitting on Jesus' feet because he is building crosses used to crucify other Jews. Though she is not named, she is clearly Mary Magdalen, known by her tattooed feet, her long curly hair and her dangling jewelry. Her flesh is also more bare than is that of the other women in the scene. At a later point, Jesus enters a building marked by a sign engraved with snakes, inside of which a group of men all wait for their turn with Mary, who can be seen naked and having sex with one of them at the front of the room. When Jesus finally speaks to Mary, she is naked. Mary Magdalen is clearly being associated with evil, is clearly a temptress and almost a sorceress—there is a misogynist link here between a woman's sexual power and her danger to men.

¹⁰⁰ I will deal with this notion further in my final section.

Jesus tries to ask Mary for forgiveness and to help her to change, but she is angry and bitter. If the Magdalen of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was world-weary, this one is entirely hardened by her experiences. Still, Christ has a great deal of power over her, since it appears that he had rejected her love; she is a scorned woman, desperate for his love. She insults him, using her sexuality as a weapon.¹⁰¹ At the end of the scene, she asks him to stay: "Please. Stay. Is it so bad sharing a prostitute's room? I won't touch you, I promise. You'll still be a virgin for the desert" (*Last*). Jesus chooses to leave. Instead of a woman who is in control of her patrons and her sexuality, like Mary from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, this Mary is hurt and desperate and in obvious need of redemption. Whereas the Magdalen of *Jesus Christ Superstar* reflects ideas about sexual freedom and seems to be acting autonomously, this Magdalen is oppressed by her sexual behaviour so that an anxiety about the sexual liberation of women is revealed in the later film. She remains a conflation with the adulteress, since Jesus saves her from stoning by an angry mob. When afterwards she asks to accompany him as he starts teaching, Jesus tells her to stay where she is. It seems that the Biblical resurrection scene in which Mary clings to Jesus and he tells her not to hold on to him, the famous "Noli me tangere" episode, has been expanded to make sense of their entire relationship in the gospels. Mary is associated with the physical, the sexual, the mundane, always tempting Christ with her touch and always being deferred or rejected. She is a symbol of his humanity and is, literally, his "last temptation." After her repentance, she is silent, glowing and

¹⁰¹ One might interpret Mary's characterization more positively. Here, Mary might also be defending her worth, showing that she is aware that many locate her value in her sexuality: "'You want to save my soul. This is where you'll find it. You know that. You're the same as all the others only you can't admit it'" (*Last*)

now wearing more modest apparel; even so, she appears as his bride and lover as he descends from the cross to follow his temptation.

Sexuality is the central characteristic of Mary Magdalen in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, moving from her role as an embittered prostitute to her role as the more legitimate but still problematic object of Christ's lust. The film's treatment of sexuality is at times contradictory. There is a distaste for female sexuality in the film, unless it is regulated by men. When Mary is shown as a prostitute, she is brash and crude in both her speech and her body language. For instance, she grabs Jesus' hand and holds it to her crotch, crying "is that the way you show that you're a man?" when he yanks his hand away. Jesus' character has pity for her, but he sees her as someone who needs saving. Unlike the medieval Magdalen and the character in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Mary here passively needs redemption instead of actively seeking it. During Jesus' fantastical temptation in the final scenes, her sexuality, while still associated with the lower things that tempt him, is seen more positively when Christ participates in it, when it is authorized by marriage, and when it results in childbearing. When Mary Magdalen dies and Christ moves in with Mary and Martha, he seems to have a polygamous relationship, but this is again depicted positively, since it makes him a father. Also, promiscuity is always more acceptable for men than it is for women. Thus, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, for all of its controversial and explicit sexuality, discourages "deviant" female sexual behaviour and seems to support patriarchal and misogynist ideas of sexuality, going so far as to persistently blame Mary Magdalen for Christ's temptation.

The miniseries *Jesus*, while it stays very close to the Biblical narrative (or at least to traditional interpretations of the gospels), still manages to make Mary Magdalen a whore and to depict her in explicitly sexual ways. As in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, there is here an attempt to show that Mary chooses prostitution because it allows her freedom and control over her sexuality. In one of the production's first scenes, Mary is getting dressed after an apparent tryst with one of her clients. When he asks her to return that night, she declines, saying forcefully, "I decide when" (*Jesus*). Mary again appears in heavy makeup and jewelry. While she is depicted as a working prostitute, she is not conflated with the adulteress who is almost stoned. Instead, she witnesses Christ's defense of the woman, remarking to him that he "treated her like she was worth something." Mary is ambivalent about her occupation. On one hand, as she tells Jesus, "I go where I want. I'm free," while on the other she does not like the way she is perceived by others in her society. Christ tells her that she is not free, but does not ask her to repent. The film here addresses and rejects contemporary ideas of women's sexual freedom. Instead, Mary waits and watches, becomes friends with the Virgin Mary, and eventually becomes a near-disciple. Her life as a prostitute is only addressed once: Mary confesses that she is a prostitute and Christ replies, "You *were* a prostitute," all but erasing it. In *Jesus*, it is odd that, given the closeness to doctrine on so many other counts, Mary Magdalen is depicted as a prostitute. While she is not conflated with Mary of Bethany or with the woman saved from stoning, she is still centrally known by her occupation. This film emphasizes her independence, but it also shows how important Mary's sexual status is to the myths about her—it seems, here, to be inextricable.

The link is again made between sexuality and Mary Magdalen in *The Passion of the Christ*, but in a much more subtle way. The focus in this film is the twelve hours leading up to Christ's crucifixion, so Mary is more peripheral than she has been in other films. Still, the film depicts Mary Magdalen as a reformed sexual sinner, maintaining her conflation with the woman saved from stoning. In a flashback scene, she is helped to her feet by Christ, after having apparently been defended and kept from death by stoning. On the ground, she looks up at him with amazement and gratitude; she is bejeweled and again has long, dark hair. Part of the way through the film, she takes off her head covering to mop up Christ's blood after his scourging while the Virgin Mary also mops up the blood but does not take off her head covering. That for the rest of the film Mary Magdalen's hair is uncovered, long, and moving with the wind alludes to the Biblical scene in which she (in conflation) scandalously wipes Christ's feet with her hair; as well, it suggests depictions of her character in art throughout the centuries. As was explained in an earlier section, Mary's hair is a symbol pregnant with meaning, evoking both her open sexuality and her marginal position, as well as evoking ideas about humility, since her hair is her only clothing when, in the legends, she lives in the desert for her final thirty years. Even in *The Passion of the Christ*, then, the magdalenian tradition that has her as a sexual sinner and the erotic power of this figure are maintained.

While scholarship, doctrine, and theology have now long accepted that Mary's assumed prostitution is mythical, her status as whore is still the defining characteristic of most contemporary treatments of her. The treatment of her as a prostitute, then, does not seem to be solely caused by Church doctrine, but also the way her story gets told and the

way she is represented. Mary's sexuality is a potent myth, no less potent for contemporary audiences interested in the humanity of Christ than it is for medieval audiences interested in extremes of sin and repentance. While *The Da Vinci Code* maintains that her harlotization is a "smear campaign" launched by the Catholic Church, I would suggest that her so-called defamation is far more complex, the result of various assumptions, interpretations, and narrativizations. Schaberg writes that

She became a whore for many reasons: sexism, never simple, and misogyny; the struggle to create or maintain a male hierarchy . . . ; unconscious or semi-conscious androcentrism; asceticism and the increasingly high value put on celibacy; intolerance of difference; the genuine fear of one's opponents within and without; political and social and cultural pressures; the liking for a good story; anger. (81).

Thus, while the systematic oppression of women in the early Church certainly has a part in Mary's harlotization, in a post-Foucauldian context, it is impossible to read the deployment of such ideological constraints as fully intentional. In addition to the contributions of doctrine, narrative discourse plays a role in her construction so that representations and stories about Mary Magdalen, as can be seen in the Digby play, for example, are always a part of the challenge and reinterpretation of a more limiting approach. Further, part of Mary's value to the project of feminist and liberation theology is her extreme position on the outside: she is so marginal not only because she is a woman, but because she is also spurned as a sinner. She shows that Christ is meant not only for more privileged women, but for all who have been rejected by the rest of society.

The ostensible position on female sexuality in *The Da Vinci Code* is a positive one; the progressive acceptance of sex is contrasted with the repressed and misogynist

Catholic Church, which seeks to defame women because of their independence or their closeness to Christ. Upon a closer look, however, the imagery, dialogue and actual narrative in the text reveal that its treatment of sex is ambivalent and contradictory at best. Just as *The Last Temptation of Christ* “exhibited the renewed interest in the figure of Mary Magdalen, which has spawned in recent years a plethora of novels written in an attempt to reassert Eros and the Feminine within Christianity” (Haskins 367), *The Da Vinci Code* is filled with imagery to suggest female sexuality. However, this sexual content is far from wholly positive for women, since it often fetishizes female genitals and renders women as passive bodies to be pursued. Leigh Teabing and Robert Langdon refer to Sophie Neveu as a “Grail virgin” (229); further, they speak about the experience of learning the secrets of the Grail in sexual terms. Upon discovering how much Langdon has told Neveu, Teabing exclaims, ““Robert, I thought you were a gentleman. You’ve robbed her of the climax”” (Brown 229). Langdon is depicted as somewhat uncomfortable with the sexual references, while Teabing tells Neveu ““you will never forget your first time”” (Brown 229).

The sexual subtext in this episode, which makes a conquest of Sophie Neveu, is heightened by the content of the dialogue. Langdon explains the “original symbols” of Mars and Venus (male and female). Langdon draws the male symbol—a 90 degree angle pointed upwards—and describes its symbolism: ““This icon is formally known as the *blade*, and it represents aggression and manhood. In fact, this exact phallus symbol is still used today on modern military uniforms to denote rank”” (236). The female symbol—called the “chalice”—is a 90 degree angle pointed downwards. Langdon’s description of

it (like that of the blade) is essentialist and rather typical: “‘The chalice,’ he said, ‘resembles a cup or vessel, and more important, it resembles the shape of a woman’s womb. This symbol communicates femininity, womanhood, and fertility’” (238).

Maleness and femaleness are reduced to their genitals, so that being male means rising and aggressing while being female means waiting to be filled. The secret—that the Grail is really a metaphor for womanhood (specifically for a womb)—also reveals misogynist assumptions about the sacred feminine. What is sacred about the feminine is a woman’s “ability to produce life” (238). There is nothing groundbreaking or sexually progressive, then, about the sacred feminine. Within its ideals, women are essentialized and reduced to their reproductive capacity. It is not problematic to value the life-producing ability, since it is crucial to the continuation of human existence. What is a problem, however, is an equation of women’s worth (spiritual or otherwise) with reproduction since not all women can or wish to bear children, yet presumably still have some worth.¹⁰²

Although Sophie Neveu might have challenged Teabing for the way he speaks to her, instead, she remains docile, prepared to listen to—and accept—anything she is told. Teabing is later revealed to be a villain, but at this point in the story Neveu, Langdon, and, most importantly, the reader all believe Teabing to be eccentric and rich, but well-intentioned. For these reasons, Teabing’s sexual rhetoric are examples of the problematic treatment of female sexuality in *The Da Vinci Code*. At the same time, this scene highlights the possibility of a dialogic analysis of ideology in the novel. Teabing and Langdon, while in agreement about the content of the theories, are contrasted in their

¹⁰² It is furthermore heterosexist and almost irrelevant to the contemporary context, since reproductive practices have become increasingly detached from a sexual act or a particular kind of body.

opposite treatments of their subject matter. These scenes contain more than just the voices of the characters and are imbued with erotic rhetoric. Descriptions of Neveu's reactions to the mysteries evoke a sense of that she is being sexually conquered and penetrated by Teabing's powerful information. Time and again, Brown's narration places Teabing and Neveu in the very situation of a man deflowering an initiate. At the beginning of the conversation, "Sophie sense[s] a rising air of academic anticipation . . . in both of her male companions" (Brown 230). Throughout the episode, Teabing looks "both startled and pleased," his eyes twinkling (Brown 229-39). By the end of the revealing scene, Neveu moves from surprise to looking "overwhelmed" (Brown 239). While the novel supports Langdon's view on female sexuality (even as it depicts Neveu as rather passive, in this scene at least), it allows for a dialogue with other views; this heteroglossia shows the ways in which sexuality itself is not a simple issue of freedom versus repression. Instead, sexuality is revealed by the text to be a complex issue, with interpretations and behaviours with varying degrees of social acceptability.

Although upon analysis Brown's depiction of the "sacred feminine" and the need to reinstate female sexuality within religion is revealed as ideologically fraught, it is nevertheless interesting that he uses sexuality in order to criticize the Church. Mary Magdalen is a skeptic's muse, filling the traditional role of a woman inspiring male activity. She is again a symbol, a metaphor for the sacred feminine and for the sexuality that has been lost by the Church. The text is clear about the necessary centrality of the sexual act. For the members of the secret societies, heterosexual intercourse is crucial. Langdon explains to Neveu that "the ancients believed that the male was spiritually

incomplete until he had carnal knowledge of the sacred feminine By communing with woman,' Langdon said, 'man could achieve a climactic instant when his mind when totally blank and he could see God'" (Brown 308-9). While this brand of spirituality is far more sexually focussed than is a religion like Christianity, the male-female sexual relations are no more positive. Under this rubric, men essentially use women's bodies in order to reach heights of spirituality: she is reduced to her physiology and dehumanized. This essentialism and effacement is reinforced by a description of one of Langdon's classes:

"The next time you find yourself with a woman, look in your heart and see if you cannot approach sex as a mystical, spiritual act. Challenge yourself to find that spark of divinity that man can only achieve through union with the sacred feminine."
The women smiled knowingly, nodding.
The men exchanged dubious giggles and off-color jokes.
Langdon sighed. College men were still boys. (310)

The focus in *The Da Vinci Code* is on what man can achieve in his penetration and use of the sacred feminine. Dynamically, though, the text undermines its own rhetoric—in the end, Langdon does not achieve his final revelation through a sexual encounter with Neveu, but instead through his engagement with Saunière's communication and his own intellectual quest.

Given the emphasis on the positive effects of sex with women, it is strange that Langdon and Teabing's interpretation rejects Mary Magdalen's prostitution. It might be fitting that she was a prostitute, giving her body to many men for the sake of their

spiritual enlightenment.¹⁰³ Instead, the idea that she was a whore is dismissed as defamation, and *The Da Vinci Code* gives Mary Magdalen a contained position insofar as she is a sexual woman. Her sexuality is emphasized but is placed safely within the confines of a marriage relationship. The Mary of this text is re-remembered as a noblewoman, of “royal descent”, her harlotization the effect of fear about Mary giving Jesus a claim to the throne (248). Instead of a prostitute who finds redemption in a friendship with and discipleship of Christ, Mary Magdalen is recast as Christ’s wife: “‘Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father. My dear, Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel’” (249). Instead of maintaining a place for Mary in which she has power that is not tied to her gender or her sexuality, *The Da Vinci Code* emphasizes the necessity of her gender and sexuality. What Brown’s text actually accomplishes is erasing all that is positive about the Christian gospel—Christ’s emphasis on poverty, on the marginalized and afflicted, his emphasis on a power not rooted in bloodlines or earthly privileges. When compared to the Mary Magdalen of medieval legend, with all of its problems, *The Da Vinci Code* seems more misogynist. Whereas the legendary Magdalen gains some independence and has clout in her community, Brown’s Magdalen is silenced and reduced to what she may or may not have carried in her body. The medieval Magdalen has power in her speech and in her relationship with Christ; this contemporary Magdalen is *only* powerful through how her sexuality can be used by others. Brown has actually re-harlotized her, while claiming to do the opposite.

¹⁰³ In fact, sex is made a holy and precious act, gaining connections to contemporary Christian rhetoric in which youth are encouraged to “save themselves for marriage” because sex is a powerful “gift” not to be treated casually.

In many ways, Nino Ricci's treatment of sexuality in *Testament* is less problematic than Brown's, even while it remains quite separate from that of the medieval texts. Ricci's treatment of sexuality is far less central to his text, but Miryam of Migdal's characterization is framed by her traditional treatment as prostitute. Because the entire narrative resides in the characters' fictional-historical-Biblical world—that is, the narrative never moves to a view of her by contemporary characters, like Brown's does—Mary's constructed harlotry is never directly addressed. Any question about her sexuality is immediately put to rest at the beginning of her narrative. It seems that, far from her glamorous, scandalous image, Miryam is only a plain girl who wants something other than marriage for her life:

I was plain like my father. It wasn't true, however, that no one had asked for my hand—in the beginning there were several who had come In the end I always found some reason to refuse them . . . Perhaps I was afraid that they'd grow tired of me, or that I'd be barren and they'd divorce me, and I couldn't bear the thought of such humiliations. But it was more than that—when I imagined myself as a mother or a bride, it seemed a sort of death, though I didn't hate these things and couldn't say what other future it was I intended for myself, since there was none. (Ricci 126)

Immediately, Miryam is distinguished from traditional Magdalens who found livelihoods as prostitutes and from Brown's Mary who plays exactly those roles—i.e. a mother and a bride—that Miryam rejects. Miryam's body and femininity are not the focus in *Testament*: they do not define her role and are not the reason that Yeshua values her.

Even so, Ricci dabbles in the possibility of sexual love or attraction between Miryam and Yeshua. As mentioned in a previous section, the other Miryam (his mother) immediately believes that she wishes to be her son's wife. While this attraction is not the

focus of their relationship, it is nevertheless present in their interactions, at least on her part. She sometimes seems to be infatuated with him: “When he spoke he said, I have missed our walks, and in an instant my heart was in his hands” (163). This description does not necessarily indicate a love relationship between them, but given her past and even recent popular history, any hints of an attraction are bound to be much more suggestive than they might in the context of another story. In the same way Brown’s characters find so telling in the Gnostic Gospels, Jesus has physical interactions with her: “And he took me in his arms to comfort me in a way he hadn’t done since he had first come to us. My heart gave in to him then. For many days afterwards I still felt the press of his arms against me like the bodily mark of his forgiveness” (194). Again, such an interaction need not point to sexual attraction; indeed, for all of the disciples, Yeshua’s treatment of them—physically and verbally—is very powerful without having a more sexual meaning. Again, though, any physical interaction between Christ and Mary Magdalen is certain to evoke sexual possibility.

Sexuality is dealt with directly in *Testament* in terms of Christ’s women followers more generally. Ricci’s Yeshua, like the Biblical Jesus, does not condemn women “sinners” and takes unmarried women into his fold without much thought about the social consequences. The other men among them worry about his reputation. Judas writes about his and the other disciples’ disapproval of Jesus’ relationship with the women; just as in the Gospels, and in some of the contemporary treatments, Judas is concerned about Christ’s reputation.¹⁰⁴ In *Testament*, this concern is warranted: Jesus’ reputation is

¹⁰⁴ *Jesus Christ Superstar*, for example, has Judas object twice to Christ’s interaction with Mary Magdalen.

affected by his treatment of the women in his group. Simon of Gergesa, the final narrator, hears rumours and assumes that the female disciples are Jesus' sexual slaves: "It seemed he had taken a liking to the women of Magdala, and had even chosen a couple of them as his concubines" (346). Simon is not alone in this assumption; Judas describes how some Syrians saw him as "some remnant of the fertility cult they had had in their Asherah" (90).¹⁰⁵ Unlike the characters in *The Da Vinci Code*, who also make connections between Jesus Christ and fertility cults, Judas is clear that these assumptions are unwarranted. In one statement, he counters speculation (both within the text and among twenty-first century readers) about Christ's relationship with Mary Magdalen: "He had never shown any particular favour to one or the other of his women or given reason to believe he might choose one as his wife, so I might almost have wondered, if it were not so uncommon among the Jews, whether his desires did not run in another direction" (90). While he discredits ideas that Jesus and Mary were sexually involved, Judas speculates that Christ might be homosexual simply because he does not indulge in sexual relationships with the women. This speculation is gendered and problematic, assuming that men who do not sexually exploit or pursue women must be gay. Throughout *Testament*, assumptions are made about Jesus's and Mary's relationship, about Jesus' desires and Mary's crush, all of which, it is apparent from the actual narratives, is unfair and directed by those characters who do not understand their spiritual connection and aims.

¹⁰⁵ Later, some do try to use sexuality as grounds to discredit Jesus as a holy man. In one episode, Jesus is under scrutiny for paying a follower named Ribqah's bride price to protect her from an enslaving marriage (194).

Even so, sexuality does feature throughout the narratives. The “Virgin” Mary’s pregnancy with Jesus is the result of rape by a Roman soldier when she is as yet unmarried. Moreover, prostitution, while not participated in by Miryam of Migdal, figures in Simon of Gergesa’s experience. He and his con-artist companion Jerubal are tempted by prostitutes on more than one occasion, and once they do give in to this desire. The men are taken “to a private room where two girls rubbed oil over every bit of us” (354). This description would seem to allude to traditional depictions of Mary Magdalen, known for anointing Christ with oil, and underscores the eroticism of that act. That night, Simon and Jerubal spend so much at the brothel that there is “nothing to count in [their] purses but a bit of lint” (355). This episode does not lend a humanity to these women that might have been possible if a known prostitute had been a central part of Christ’s circle. Contrasting the traditional (albeit unwarranted) image of Mary Magdalen as repentant prostitute with these dehumanized “whores” shows the value of including that feature of Mary in her characterization. While having Mary seek repentance might seem to condemn prostitution, and, by extension, any unrestrained sexuality, this inclusion also shows how far Christ would go to include the marginalized in his vision. Further, it humanizes women prostitutes, who are often treated poorly because of their occupation. Ricci’s rendering does include one episode of Mary’s legendary conflation, again changing it to show what else it might mean. While Judas and Mary Magdalen are rivals, she shows him an act of kindness:

Something happened then, when we stopped to rest once, that surprised me [Simon of Gergesa]—Judas had sat to massage his blistered feet when Mary came, though with a face like a mourner’s, and offered to rub oil on them. Judas

could hardly look at her then for his embarrassment. But still he nodded and she knelt in front of him, and it was the strangest thing then, watching how gently she rubbed his sores and knowing it cost her to do it. (376)

Instead of sexualizing this usually potent scene, Ricci's narrator shows how Mary's anointing (though with an altered recipient) is not necessarily erotic but is an act of great kindness and servitude. There are parallels between Mary's act and the gospel account of the last supper, which has Christ washing the feet of all of the disciples, making himself their servant. Just as she is in medieval legend, Mary is an ideal disciple, a kind-of Christ.

Testament, is, in some ways, an indirect discussion of Mary Magdalen's harlotization. Ricci gestures at the reasons Mary may have been constructed that way and refuses to allow those constructions to stand. He repudiates the speculations that would have Mary as a prostitute, a bride or a lover of Christ, clearing her name on those accounts. His image of Mary Magdalen is much less sexualized and instead credits her for her role as a disciple and friend of Jesus. At the same time, there are consequences for erasing these aspects of her characterization; for one, when she is less marginalized (i.e. by prostitution), her movement towards a greater spiritual function is rendered a little less remarkable. In the wake of Mary's lost role as prostitute, prostitutes are no longer accorded the humanization allowed by the gospel narrative. Brown's use of Mary Magdalen is somewhat more odd. He accuses the Church of being too prudish, using Mary's sexuality and defamation as proof, but he also erases her prostitution in favour of her sexual relationship with Christ within marriage. The proper use of Mary's sexuality is, especially in recent times, being hotly debated. In a public art lecture, art historian Regina Haggos insisted, like Brown, that the Church had defamed Mary Magdalen by

calling her a prostitute. Meanwhile, both send contradictory messages, seeing Mary as a figure-head for powerful female sexuality. Both treatments of Mary Magdalen imply that her sexuality is both valuable and a defamation and that she is only valuable once the label of prostitute is removed.

Ricci's *Testament* is a critical complement to this, having his Christ neither denigrate nor participate in sexuality, but, again, the removal of Mary's whoredom cannot be without its interpretive consequences. Ricci's depiction is closer to the statements made by feminist theologian Ben Witherington III,¹⁰⁶ in his critique of *The Da Vinci Code*. Witherington writes that sex is not seen as defiling by most Christians and that marriage would not be seen as defiling to Christ. Claims about Christ's sexual relationships with these women reduces the power of his actual message: "What is even more shocking is that [Jesus Christ] recruited and traveled with both female and male followers" (Witherington 71). Mary's womanhood and her sexuality are both speculated about in order to discover something about Christianity, either to praise or to criticise it. In the section that follows, I will explore how this sexuality and her relationship with Jesus is used in order to make sense of him, how she is used as a route to the Christ.

¹⁰⁶ Witherington's work on the importance of women in the early church is cited by many, including Jansen (12).

III. Towards the Truth of Him: Mary Magdalen's Relationship with the Christ

An interest in Mary Magdalen often has to do with an interest in Christ; in asking what their relationship was like, we are also asking what kind of man Jesus was, and what kind of friend he could be. For medieval believers, there was obviously an interest in those closest to Christ as a way of becoming closer to him as well. Saints, like Christ, played an intercessory role; through saints like Mary Magdalen, believers might become closer to divinity. The contemporary interest in Mary seems also to be motivated by a desire to understand Jesus Christ, who haunts the Post-Christian era. Witherington, writing about *The Da Vinci Code*, interprets the popularity of religiously-themed texts as a reflection of postmodern pluralism: "Sophie is a symbol for Brown's audience of neophytes, eager to learn the secrets, crack the codes and have their collective religious consciousness raised. She represents the postmodern American public" (19). These texts are certainly not devotional in the sense that the medieval texts were, but they do reveal a desire to become more connected with divinity. However, many of these contemporary authors are more interested in understanding Christ as human than divine. Both Dan Brown and Nino Ricci are especially concerned with exploring his human side. In the final section that follows here, I will look at the various ways Mary's relationship with Christ is depicted; she is a repentant follower, a faithful disciple, privy to crucial details about his ministry, his lover or his bride. Many of these relationships seem to be built as arguments about the essence of Christ in terms of his divinity and his humanity.¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰⁷ Most Christian doctrine accepts as a divine mystery similar to the trinity that Jesus Christ was both wholly human and wholly God. Insisting that Christ was human is not the same as insisting that he is not God.

crux of these arguments is not only the “untruth” of the Christian gospel, but it also relates to a desire to identify with Christ’s life and struggle. Identification with Jesus remains a centrally important task of these portrayals, continuing in a sense the tradition of *imitatio Christi* of medieval devotion; instead of making Christ and the saints exempla, though, the contemporary texts humanize him (imbuing him with more weaknesses and flaws) to heighten this possibility for identification. Because of Mary Magdalen’s positioning, these depictions allow a fresh look at Christ and consider what the Church might have been like if she had been its originator instead of the Simon Peter and the apostle Paul.

In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a parallel importance is given to Judas and to Mary Magdalen. None of the other disciples gets their own song; in fact, the rest are mostly grouped together with little differentiation. The focus on Mary and Judas as opposed to the other disciples like Peter and John underscores the contemporary and secular interest in questioning Christ’s divinity and on giving voice to those who have previously been marginalized by the Biblical text.¹⁰⁸ Still, in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Mary is mostly presented in traditional ways: she is a repentant (“really changed”) prostitute who has become one of Christ’s followers. While in the medieval texts and sermons, an emphasis on Mary’s repentance would support the doctrine of penance, in the contemporary texts it emphasizes Christ’s charismatic ability to deeply affect those around him. As Mary asks,

I don't know how to take this
I don't see why he moves me
He's a man
He's just a man.

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, this is also Ricci’s focus in *Testament*.

(“I Don’t Know How to Love Him”)

This charisma that moves Mary Magdalen in *Jesus Christ Superstar* can obviously support claims about Christ’s divinity—that he is not “just a man”—but it also arouses suspicions about him. Just as in the gospel narrative itself, detractors claim that Christ is dangerous because of his ability to inspire loyalty; an admission of Christ’s charisma combined with a claim about his “mere” humanity suggests that he is a manipulative political type or a cult leader. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the stance is left fairly ambiguous.

Though Mary here plays a role as a close companion of Jesus, she does so in ways that emphasize her femaleness. She is so nurturing of Christ that at times she seems to be either a lover or a mother; thus, her care for his body might indicate that she is meant to be paralleled with the Virgin. Either way, at least in this production, Mary is only related to Christ in gender-defined ways. Her treatment of him is either eroticised or soothing; she is never given the sort of independent thought that would make her his intellectual companion or match. Judas is the only character here who questions Christ’s actions or motives; if *Jesus Christ Superstar* is attempting to question the divinity of Christ, then Judas is the only one not taken in, rendering the rest of his followers, including Mary, naïve in their obedience. All that can be claimed for certain in this depiction is that Mary is physically intimate with Christ in a way that emphasizes his humanness: she worries over his need for rest and nourishment and he is grateful to her. As it emphasizes his humanness, their relationship in this film also emphasizes his tenderness and appeal, showing that he is not above receiving such small acts of kindness.

The treatment in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a far cry from that of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In this film, Mary Magdalen plays several roles, all of them problematic, all of them helping to characterize Christ as one who may be entirely human, as one whose divinity does not necessarily make him kind. The first of these roles is as thwarted lover; in this relationship, Jesus is a kind of martyr, giving up his love relationship for a greater cause, while Mary is diminished, depicted as a temptation not fit for divinity. In the scene at her brothel, where Jesus again rejects Mary's sexual advances, he also asks her for forgiveness: "I want to you to forgive me. I've done too many bad things. I'm going into the desert and I need you to forgive me before I go." When Mary reacts by blaming God for taking him from her, Jesus repeats his plea for forgiveness. In this treatment of their relationship, Jesus' humanity is emphasized and his divinity is made suspect. He does not have the spiritual gifts to convert Mary at this point. When he tells her to blame him instead of God, Mary responds, "You make me feel this way about God." Mary-as-thwarted-lover-turned-prostitute helps to reveal Christ's humanity; he even admits that he "wanted" her.

Even when Jesus does succeed in converting Mary, his divine powers of persuasion are questioned by the text. He saves her from stoning, which gains him a small following. As he gathers people around him (having Mary sit and listen), the voiceover indicates his uncertainty about his position: "God has so many miracles. What if I say the wrong thing? What if I say the right thing?" To the crowd he says, "Come closer. We're all a family," before giving a modified Sermon on the Mount. When Mary asks if she can come with the group of disciples to help, he again asks her to stay. He

gives her a small role as an evangelist, telling her to “tell people about [him],” but she is not allowed in his inner circle. At this point in the film, Mary plays her traditional role as a reformed prostitute, who now has become a symbol of how progressive Christ is for his humane treatment of her, an ironic position since he has treated her so poorly in their private encounters. Her role now seems to support his divinity in some ways, though her utter change from a strong-willed and hardened prostitute to an acquiescent follower is underdeveloped. While in other depictions, her turn away from sin emphasizes Christ’s egalitarianism and his goodness to those who are most marginalized by society, in *The Last Temptation of Christ* it seems so artificial as to make her appear bewitched or brainwashed instead of converted by her own choice.

Her third and final role in this depiction also helps to establish Christ’s humanity and to discredit his divinity. As a symbol of the “one woman in the world,” Mary Magdalen becomes the first of Christ’s brides and lovers. Here, again, the Mary of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is used in order to emphasize Christ’s humanity: she is Woman, a symbol of the temptation to choose a sexual, mundane and domestic existence over a spiritual one. In all three roles, Mary Magdalen functions to expose the humanness of Christ; in all three, she is characterized in terms of her sexuality, womanhood, embodying the temptation that (supposedly) every man must face. Her only interest throughout the film is in having Christ and in having a baby. In the film’s apparent attempt to get at the essential humanity of Christ,¹⁰⁹ the richness of Mary

¹⁰⁹ Miles asks whether Scorsese is “attempting to give contemporary Christians a ‘hero’ who is accessible, imitable precisely because of his weaknesses and confusions?” (37).

Magdalen's characterization is lost—in contrast to the medieval versions of Mary Magdalen as apostle and contemplative, her rendering in this film is much less appealing.

Mary's roles in the other two films are quite different, which reflects their creators' very different aims. Although the authors of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and of *The Last Temptation of Christ* appear to be interested in disproving (or at least questioning) the divinity of Christ in favour of his humanity, *Jesus* and *The Passion of the Christ* attempt to show the simultaneity of Christ's human and divine natures. In *Jesus*, Mary's relationship with Christ keeps with the medieval and Biblical traditions of emphasizing her repentance and her faithfulness as a disciple. Once she comes into Christ's circle, she is one of his most loyal disciples. Their relationship is not sexualized, and Mary Magdalen becomes his mother's close companion. Together, the women follow Christ to his crucifixion and are first among his mourners. Interestingly, Mary of Bethany plays the role of Christ's thwarted love interest. Since the two (Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalen) are traditionally conflated, one might read this filmic move as a gesture towards the speculation about Mary Magdalen as a lover of Christ.¹¹⁰ Instead of turning to prostitution, as Mary Magdalen angrily does in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Mary of Bethany is at first brokenhearted but later tells Jesus that she understands that his mission kept him from being able to fulfill any familial duties. Fondness but no eroticism is insinuated between them; this Jesus is, while given such human relationships, allowed also to maintain his divinity and greater purpose.

¹¹⁰ As mentioned in an earlier section, one medieval legend had it that Mary Magdalen had been jilted by the newly converted John the Evangelist. Mary-as-thwarted-lover has a long tradition.

In the only one of these four films to depict the story of the resurrection, Mary also plays her traditional and central role at his tomb. The intimacy between Christ and Mary Magdalen at the resurrection, with its erotic charge, is depicted in *Jesus* as the joyful reunion of two close friends. In many traditional works, Christ's words to Mary are interpreted as "Do not touch me" or "Nole me tangere," a phrase that suggests Mary's earthly desire for Christ's body and his rejection of that, as though it would defile him. Most recent translations reinterpret this phrase however, having it as "Do not hold on to me" or "Do not cling to me."¹¹¹ In *Jesus*, Christ does hold on to her, then says, "You must let me go now," urging her to tell the disciples that he has risen. This Mary is, as she is in most traditional understandings, the first witness to the resurrection, privy to knowledge that none of the male disciples have before her. She is again the Apostle to the Apostles. In this film, much less effort is made to connect Mary to Christ in order to reinterpret their relationship as a way of reinterpreting Christ. Instead, Mary plays the role of repentant follower and most faithful disciple.

These roles—Mary as disciple, both saved and loyal—are taken up again in *The Passion of the Christ*. Mary, along with John and the Virgin Mary, follows Christ for the duration of his suffering, from when he is arrested until he dies. While the relationship between the Virgin Mary and Jesus is quite developed—she has memories of Christ both as a young man and as a little boy, imagines herself holding on to him, and finally does hold him in her arms in a Pietà scene—Mary Magdalen is only very thinly connected to him. She has one flashback of being saved by stoning. She relates to him, then, as saved

¹¹¹ John 20:17

follower and faithful disciple. In one scene, she becomes his advocate, protesting to the soldiers that they have arrested an innocent man.¹¹² In these roles, Mary is used to support claims about Christ's divinity rather than his humanity: she is a strong woman who has been compelled in her devotion and belief. If she is to be believed, Jesus is the Christ.

The main role played by Mary Magdalen in *The Da Vinci Code* is one that draws on the Gnostic imagination. She is envisaged by Brown's characters as a counterpart to Christ. While the text does not tend to emphasize Mary's intellectual equality with Jesus Christ (she is "the chalice the womb. . . the vine [of his] sacred fruit" (249)), she is rendered his female counterpart in the textual emphasis on returning the feminine to Christianity. This doubling or balancing (derived from ideas like the Chinese yin and yang) allows Mary to have a privileged position next to Christ; it is made possible by the characters' readings of Gnostic texts. Langdon and Teabing's readings of *The Gospel of Philip* and *The Gospel of Mary* show that Mary is Christ's most beloved disciple and conclude that she is his spouse (246). By the verses they cite, the discontent that this relationship (whether it is a married one or not) causes among the disciples is underscored. In the first example, "the rest of the disciples [are] offended . . . and express[. . .] disapproval" (246). In the second, Levi defends Mary against Peter's disapproval (247). The discontent among the disciples and their desire to reject Christ's love of Mary would support the characters' arguments; according to these passages, the male disciples were angry about Mary's importance (probably because she was a woman)

¹¹² See p. 78 for a more detailed description of this scene.

and about Christ's possibly sexual intimacy with her. Such evidence suggests that in building the Church after Christ's ascension, the male apostles worked to cover up both Mary's role among them and her relationship with Christ.¹¹³ Thus, the Gnostic Mary Magdalen is used in Brown's text to argue against the institutional power and the traditional doctrine of the Church; she is used to make the doctrinal point.

Aside from using Mary Magdalen's relationship with Christ to make claims about early Church development, the marriage between them purported by *The Da Vinci Code* is also used to prove that Christ was only human and not divine. Not only is Mary made a spiritual counterpart to Christ, she is made his physical partner, his bride.¹¹⁴ It is quite clear that this essential humanity is a conclusion of Brown's text. Teabing claims that Christ was not treated as divine by his earliest followers, that this was added to his characterization much later:

“Until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet Many scholars claim that the early Church literally *stole* Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power.” (233)

At Langdon and Teabing's climactic revelation that Mary Magdalen was indeed Christ's bride, romantic partner, and the mother of his children, these claims are all used to further establish Christ's core humanity. Neither when Mary Magdalen is depicted in *The Da*

¹¹³ Teabing explains Peter's disapproval thus: “The stakes were far greater than mere affection. At this point in the gospels, Jesus suspects He will soon be captured and crucified. So He gives Mary Magdalene instructions on how to carry on His Church after He is gone. As a result, Peter expresses his discontent over playing second fiddle to a woman. I daresay Peter was something of a sexist” (Brown 247-8).

¹¹⁴ But she is not his intellectual counterpart. She represents a different kind of knowing or “gnosis” of which men were seen as less capable. Her intuitiveness connects her (problematically) to less rational ways of thinking: “Whether Luke created her seven demons, or they were traditional, Mary Magdalene is the madwoman in Christianity's attic” (Schaberg 79).

Vinci Code as both a spiritual counterpart and not when she is “revealed” as the married partner of Christ is her actual equality or value as a person and disciple emphasized. This seems to be the ostensible purpose of these characters, to give women their equal place in religion. Instead, her essential femininity is emphasized and her roles as beloved disciple and/or bride are underlined mainly to get at some truth about Christ’s mortality. Again, much like *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Da Vinci Code* makes of Mary a symbol in her relationship with Christ.

Although some of the beliefs underlying Ricci’s *Testament* would seem to be identical to those of Brown’s novel, in giving Mary Magdalen her own narrative (even as it is ventriloquized by Ricci), Ricci insists far less on what he sees as the facts of Christ’s humanity and focusses instead on the effect of his teachings. In her relationship to Christ, this Mary is a spiritual *and* intellectual counterpart to Christ, but is not his bride. There is a suggestion that Mary is more spiritually intuitive than the male disciples: “In my pride [I] thought that they couldn’t fathom Yeshua as I did, and that Yeshua too had understood this” (155).¹¹⁵ They are spiritually intimate; as well, she is one of his closest followers and they often go on long walks, learning from each other. The mutuality of their relationship suggests Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of an *ekklēsia* of women, a discipleship of equals, in which the patriarchy would be decentred. (*But She* 5).¹¹⁶ In Ricci’s construction, Mary no longer reflects misogynist ideas about women and sexuality but shows how she might be a symbol of the hope that Christianity has been and will one day be a discipleship of equals. Often, Miryam cannot comprehend Yeshua (for

¹¹⁵ Another interpretation might be that Mary only sees herself as more spiritually intuitive.

¹¹⁶ She first articulates this idea in *Bread Not Stone*.

example, when he tells her a parable (134)), but she is eager to learn from him and becomes more learned through their relationship: “I thought of the girl I had been when Yeshua had first come, so coddled then and innocent, when now I had traveled half the roads of Galilee, and had respect, and saw things differently” (210). Through her relationship with Christ, this Mary becomes more thoughtful and respected. He does not treat her as if she cannot understand: he “talked to me in such a way as no man had ever spoken to me before, as if every subject was permitted” (128). At times, she questions him, as Christ himself has allowed (129); she warns him about Yihuda, who she feels means them injury, certain that Jesus is making a mistake by keeping him in their company (164). While just as in *The Da Vinci Code* there are some power struggles between Mary and the other disciples, these are not used in *Testament* to prove that the male disciples were wrong. Instead, it maintains the humanization of the gospel story.

In *Testament*, Mary is never used to question Christ’s divinity. Of all the narrators in the text, she is the one with the most unwavering faith. At the end of her narration she does imply that she is uncertain about how to interpret her experiences: “He seemed like a glimpse I’d had of something that I could not put a name to, and which always slipped from my gaze before I had a chance to know it, like the great bird I had seen as a child when I traveled into the mountains and imagined a god” (223-4). The revelation of Christ’s humanity is left to his mother, who depicts him as difficult and even mean, and to Simon of Gergesa, who, though he depicts Christ raising a man from the dead, reinforces the “fact” of his bastardization and what that means about his status. By comparison, Mary’s dedication to and fierce desire for Christ’s companionship develop

her as a character similar to that of medieval teaching. She is more persevering and devoted than the male disciples. Ricci does not go so far as to endorse the resurrection, but he does have Simon of Gergesa depict how the resurrection legend was spread: “Then there was the story that went around that the morning after Jesus was killed, Mary and Salome went to the grave and his body was gone” (453). In this devotion to Christ throughout his ministry, at his death and then at his (possibly fictitious) resurrection, Mary’s role is one that supports the power of Christ as a leader and teacher, if not as divine. I read her as the Simon Peter or “Rock” of Ricci’s depiction, which might also suggest that she is the rightful inheritor of Church leadership. She is as fierce in her love and as bold in her statements as is the Simon Peter of the New Testament; meanwhile, Ricci’s “Rock” loses his faith in the face of Christ’s bastardization. Ricci mixes tradition with his own interpretation to give Mary a hybridity not seen in any of the other contemporary depictions. This Mary is much more like the medieval Magdalen; Ricci restores her faithfulness, her love of Christ, and her eloquence.

The medieval legends and Ricci’s *Testament* both make Mary Magdalen a central figure in their narratives; through this development, her image is put to less explicit use in their testimony about Christ. Even so, the legends are meant to support faith and Ricci’s text is, after all, a testament about Christ; neither allow Mary Magdalen to be an end in herself. It is clear that secular “scriptures” or versions of the gospels are not immune to being doctrinaire or to manipulating their stories to make one point or another. Each version is affected by its author’s biases. Regardless of how Mary Magdalen will be used, however, any time she appears in narrative, her story is kept from becoming mere

doctrine. She is an effective outsider since she is not considered by the official Church the way Peter is—she is a way to reconceive Christ, that, as Ricci says, is not as beholden to tradition. Any of the depictions I have analysed allow for more than one interpretation or emphasis;¹¹⁷ it is this quality of narrative that keeps her story as part of the opening-up of radical typology instead of as part of the rigidity of doctrine. She means more than one thing in every text; she is never contained by a particular agenda, even when she is used that way. In fact, that she is a symbol with so many meanings makes it difficult for her image to fully endorse any of these competing theories of her relationship with Christ.

¹¹⁷ A possible exception to this is *The Da Vinci Code*, since its interpretation of Mary Magdalen is already mediated by his primary characters. Still, his text as a whole adds to the tradition of re-contextualizing old stories.

Conclusion:

The contemporary treatments are no doubt different in content than the medieval ones, but Mary Magdalen continues to be used to both raise questions and support opinions about the roles of women, sexuality and Jesus Christ within Christianity. In comparing the two archives, we can see that it is not the presence or absence of religious beliefs or purposes that dictates whether a text will be misogynist or feminist, progressive or oppressive. Instead, all of the texts are affected by the assumptions that guide them. Although the medieval texts come out of a less fluid and less plural ideological foundation than do the contemporary ones, their interest in gospel characters is both analogous and inherently connected: both traditions add to the stories contained in the Bible. In this way, both traditions participate in what Coupe calls radical typology, which is related to intertextuality according to the French structural school of semiotics; it is the process “through which one text in referring to another text [type] both displaces this other text [type] and receives from it an extension in meaning” (Ricoeur “Bible” 148). From de Voragine’s *Golden Legend* and the Digby *Mary Magdalen* to contemporary films and novels, all of the texts I have considered participate in building upon and rewriting Mary’s story, which prevents the stasis of doctrine.

Mary Magdalen is an enduringly popular and powerful character. Schaberg writes that “the continuing value of her legends and art is due [in part] to the depiction of an exuberant and irrepressible female sexuality, of a transcendent and spiritual dimension of the beauty of the body. She is the only official saint . . . who represents that” (114-5). I suspect that Schaberg is correct, that Mary’s potency has something to do with the clash

that her opposing representations cause (creating a mystery or paradox) as well as her marginality, which gives her the means to speak from a different perspective on official events (when she is allowed to speak, of course). My conclusion, even after sifting through so much misogyny, is positive about the way Mary Magdalen is represented and about representation in general. Haskins bemoans the misogyny in Magdalenian traditions that continues into the present:

If there is still need for symbolism, would not the true Mary Magdalen, the disciple by the cross and herald of New Life . . . serve women better as a symbol for today? Nietzsche wrote that every culture needed myth and was impoverished when it lost or lacked myth. In losing the myth of Mary Magdalen, however, has not our culture not only nothing to lose, but also everything to gain? (400)

I disagree that erasing the mythology of Mary Magdalen, regardless of how impoverished we may judge her symbolic weight to be, would be a gain for our culture. Mary Magdalen is not merely marked by her function as a symbol used to serve a patriarchal agenda, but she is also rendered with such plurality and ambiguity that she challenges the very agendas she is meant to serve. In fact, it is the symbolic use of Mary Magdalen that gives her the powerful (even as it is marginal) position in relation to ideas about women and sexuality in the church and about the truth of the gospels. She is the rightful Simon Peter, a rock upon which to build a liberating Church, a society of outsiders, a discipleship of equals. In some senses, Mary Magdalen is the Holy Grail—not because she is a holy vessel or womb, but because in all of her roles she represents the deep mystery of the gospels that is persistently sought for and always just out of our reach.

Appendix A



Angelic Levitation (ca. 1400). Fresco from Cappella della Maddelena, Church of S. Domenico, Spoleto. (Photo: Hutzell Collection). Source: Jansen, figure 20.

Appendix B



Angelic Levitation (14th c.). Miniature from a German devotional manuscript, British Library, London. (Photo: The British Library). Source: Jansen, figure 21.

Appendix C



Symbol of Hope (ca. 1280). Panel painting by the Magdalen Master, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence. (Photo: Soprintendenza). Source: Jansen, figure 40.

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