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There's Just Something About Mary: Constructions and Reconstructions of the Magdalene from the Early Medieval Period through Modernity

TATIANA LUTRA CATANZARITE

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Handmaids and Harlots: Biblical Women in Jewish and Christian Traditions

Barbara Pitkin and Adriane Leveen
Department of Religious Studies
Who was Mary Magdalene? What role did she play in Biblical events? What did she believe? Western religious thinkers throughout history have answered these questions in startlingly disparate ways, gradually constructing the still-accepted persona of Mary Magdalene as the penitent whore, the “grateful fallen woman, probably in love with Jesus” (Winkett 2002, 20). Given the extent to which this characterization of Mary Magdalene has pervaded religious thought, art, and literature, one might be taken aback at the realization that “there is, in fact, no clear Biblical evidence for this character, Mary Magdalene the penitent sinner” (Winkett 2002, 20). So how then, if not through Scripture, has this conception of Mary Magdalene come to be? Some scholars argue that Western Christianity deliberately manipulated interpretations of Mary Magdalene so as to create “an ecclesiastical biography that ‘fulfills the desire…to attach to female sexuality the notions of evil, repentance and mercy’” (Thimmes 1998, 221).¹ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel refers to Mary Magdalene as “the greatest historical falsification in the West,” constructed for the sole purpose of bolstering the patriarchal views of the church fathers (Rushing 1994, 46). According to these sources, the political agendas of Roman Catholicism have distorted the Biblical Mary Magdalene into a virtually fictional figure who fits the mold of feminine vulnerability envisioned by the patriarchy. In this paper, we shall briefly examine the historical forces out of which the Western Church’s vision of Mary Magdalene evolved; throughout the review, we shall employ the lens of religious art to explore the various representations of this rich and complex Biblical figure. Because art often reflects the societal views of its day, examples from religious art will enable us to confirm that the multi-faceted image of Mary

¹ A statement from Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride* seems particularly relevant to the case of Mary Magdalene: “every sober-sided history is at least half sleight-of-hand: the right hand waving its poor snippets of fact, out in the open for all to verify, while the left hand busies itself with its own devious agendas, deep in its hidden pockets” (Kraemer 1999, 105).
Magdalene constructed by the clergy extended into popular imagination; through works of art, this image was further developed and reinforced in the public sphere. As we will see, the manner in which Mary Magdalene has been constructed, re-imagined, and re-invented by Biblical scholarship, legend, and historical bias has left us with a convoluted, contradictory, and multi-dimensional understanding of this controversial saint.

In the four gospels of the New Testament, there exist only twelve references to Mary Magdalene. According to the combined Biblical accounts, the Magdalene appears to epitomize discipleship and faith. Mary Magdalene is healed by Christ of her possession by “seven demons” (Luke 8:2-3), after which she becomes a loyal follower and disciple. The gospels report that she mourns at Christ’s crucifixion (Matt 27:56, Mark 15:40, John 19:25), and attends his burial (Matt 27:61, Mark 15:47). All four gospels testify that Mary Magdalene visits Christ’s tomb on Easter to anoint his body (Matt 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10, John 20:1). In all but one gospel, Mary Magdalene is the first to witness the rising of Christ, although the writers disagree as to whether she is alone or in a group when the risen Christ reveals himself to her (Mark 16:9-11, Matt 28:1-10, John 20:11-18). And perhaps most importantly, in two of the gospels, Mary is specifically appointed by Christ to spread the word of the resurrection (Matt 28:10, John 20:17-8). John provides the most extensive treatment of Mary’s assignment as announcer. In John’s account, Jesus instructs Mary to “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17); as Jesus has requested, Mary “went and announced to the disciples ‘I have seen the Lord.’” (John 20:18). Mary Magdalene is also mentioned extensively in the Gnostic Gospels, particularly in Pistis Sophia, the Gospel of Mary and the Gospel of Philip (Jansen 2000, 25); much of the discussion in these texts articulates the
problematic dilemma of the acceptable role of women in religious leadership.

Conveniently for early Christian thinkers and unfortunately for Mary Magdalene, Biblical ambiguity opened the door for speculation about her participation in events throughout the New Testament. Through early teaching in Western Christianity, Mary Magdalene became identified as a composite of three figures mentioned in the Bible: the unnamed female sinner who washes Christ’s feet with her tears and dries them with her hair in Luke 7, Mary of Bethany, who convinces Christ to raise Lazarus from the dead in John 11-12, and Mary Magdalene, Christ’s disciple who is cured of possession by seven demons in Luke 8 (Jansen 2000, 33). The interpretation of Mary Magdalene as the conflation of three female figures from the Bible was doctrinized in a famous homily given by Pope Gregory the Great in 591 CE (Thimmes 1998, 221). Interestingly, this understanding of Mary Magdalene is completely unique to Western (Roman) Catholicism, as evidenced by the fact that the feast days of each of these three Biblical women are celebrated separately in Eastern (Greek and Byzantine) Catholicism (Thimmes 1998, 220).

Furthermore, although the Biblical account does not specify the type of sin committed by the repenting sinner in Luke 7, Mary Magdalene’s sin was deemed to be of a sexual nature, simply because medieval thinkers assumed that female sin was almost exclusively expressed through sexuality (Jansen 2000, 34). In his famous sermon from 591 CE, Pope Gregory declared, “she whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected, according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear... that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts” (Winkett 2002, 21). Here, the reader cannot help but notice Pope Gregory’s brash confidence in identifying Mary’s
"devils" as sexual crimes. In her review, Jansen remarks, "thus, by means of a potent combination of implication, insinuation, and ideology, Jesus’ loyal disciple became a penitent prostitute" (Jansen 2000, 34). More radically, Thimmes argues that Mary Magdalene was deviously manipulated by the male-dominated church into a character that "conforms to the demands of the institution: she is ravaged in word and in art, she is a flexible, pliable figure to which everything that is valued and abhorrent sticks" (Thimmes 1998, 195).

Given the historical fascination with Mary Magdalene and the ways in which she has been continually reevaluated and reinvented, it comes as no surprise that depictions of the Magdalene in art are enormously varied. As one source remarks, "the theme of Mary Magdalene has been one of the most commonly utilized themes in religious art, given the rich symbolic plurality that she represents, that is, for the expressive possibilities of the different facets of the biography of this penitent woman saint" (trans. by present author, see footnote for original text).\(^2\) Throughout the remainder of this paper, we shall explore five distinct characterizations of the Magdalene that are clearly manifested both in theology and in art: (1) *apostola apostolorum*, (2) model of vanity and pious rejection of vanity in favor of ascetism, (3) example of penance and self-denial, (4) emblem of the profanity and sexual licentiousness of women, and (5) wife and lover to Jesus Christ.

\(^2\) Original text: "el tema de María Magdalena ha sido uno de los más utilizados por el arte religioso dada la rica pluralidad simbólica que representa, así como por las posibilidades expresivas de las diferentes facetas de la biografía de esta santa penitente y mujer" (Vélez et al 2001, 11).
I. *Apostola Apostolorum* – Apostle sent to the Apostles

The title *apostola apostolorum*, which means “apostle sent to the apostles,” had once been assigned to the Virgin Mary (Jansen 2000, 59). However, it was re-appropriated as a reference almost exclusively for Mary Magdalene, as she was the one selected by Christ to announce the resurrection. The painting pictured here, *La Magdalena en la tumba vacía de Cristo*, lends support to the image of Mary Magdalene as a powerful and unique contributor to the resurrection. Importantly, her role as announcer of the resurrection is explicitly referenced in the New Testament (John 20:1-18, Mark 16:9-10), in contrast to many of the other connotations now associated with Mary Magdalene. The figure of Mary Magdalene as a preacher, who is often depicted speaking to untraditional “mixed” audiences that included women and Jews (Jansen 2000, 67), conflicted with the Church’s stance that women were not fit religious leaders.

In light of her documented role as Christ’s appointed announcer of the resurrection, modern feminist scholarship has called for a reclamation of Mary Magdalene as a symbol of feminine authority. Feminist theologians return to John 20:18, which supports Mary as *apostola apostolorum*, and use Mary’s unique role in the resurrection to reject the notion established by the early church fathers that women should not be allowed to preach (Kraemer
1999, 106). Sandra Schneiders, for instance, argues that Mary Magdalene deserves to be called an apostle as much or even more than the others, because “unlike Peter ‘she was not unfaithful to Jesus during the Passion and unlike Paul she never persecuted Christ in his members. But like both she saw the risen Lord, received directly from him the commission to preach the Gospel, and carried out that commission faithfully’” (Thimmes 1998, 202-3). Thimmes further quotes Haskins in declaring “it is perhaps time to recognize the true feminine model, one which, according to the gospels, embodies strength, courage, and independence, all feminine qualities which the Church has attempted to suppress by subordinating women to the model it has created, the passive virgin and mother” (Thimmes 1998, 222). With respect to Mary Magdalene, therefore, the goal of feminist theology has been to replace the image of the penitent whore with the more Biblically accurate figure of Mary as the courageous and faithful disciple of Jesus, the apostle sent to the twelve, and, indeed, an instrumental leader during and after the resurrection (Kraemer 1999, 105). In this way, feminist scholarship aims to reclaim the Biblical Mary Magdalene, replacing her false identity as repentant sinner with her scripturally-accurate characterization as announcer and leader.

In her reading, Rushing adds another
element to Mary’s dynamic story, offering a fascinating re-reading of Christ’s famous words to Mary Magdalene at the moment of their post-resurrection encounter: *noli me tangere* (do not touch me). On the previous page is Eustache Le Sueur’s famous portrayal of this crucial interaction. In his interpretation of this scene, Aelred of Rievaulx declared that Mary “was forbidden to touch him because her faith in the resurrection has wavered” (Rushing 1994, 57). Alternatively, Rushing contends, Jesus may be guiding Mary’s spiritual growth by forbidding her touch. That is, Jesus’ words allow Mary to transcend “the limited physicality of her previous relationship with the human Jesus... She learns that she can no longer ‘touch’ him; she cannot ‘cling’ to him” (59). Mary must become a leader in her own right, an independent religious figure who will perpetuate the teachings of Christ.

II. Model of Humility, Rejection of Vanity, Religious Transformation

This painting depicts the scene in which “Mary” humbles herself by washing the feet of Christ. It is important to remember, of course, that in the original text of Luke, an unnamed female sinner, not Mary Magdalene, is the one who washes Christ’s feet; this painting is therefore evidence of the pervasive nature of Pope Gregory’s proclamation that Mary Magdalene and this unnamed sinner were the same woman. In this painting, José de Ibarra reinforces the characterization of Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner who has recently learned — and who now epitomizes — humility.

José de Ibarra. *La Magdalena lavando los pies de Cristo* [The Magdalene washing the feet of Christ], 18th c.
Around the 3rd century CE, after the legalization of Christianity, believers began to replace the image of the religious martyr with that of the confessor saint. This shift led to a new focus on the heroic life rather than the heroic death of saints, and vitae were written in order to expand and illuminate the life stories of the saints (Jansen 2000, 37). The vitae composed in honor of Mary Magdalene date from the 9th century onward. As a collective, the legends set forth by these vitae record Mary Magdalene’s deeds after the resurrection, presenting her as a dedicated preacher, a missionary to Gaul and Provence, a desert saint, and a contemplative ascetic. The medieval mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans, identified with Mary Magdalene’s humility in kissing and washing the feet of Christ (Jansen 2000, 86), her impassioned loyalty at the cross (Jansen 2000, 90), and her choice to practice her faith in contemplation rather than in action (Jansen 2000, 116).

Furthermore, Mary Magdalene’s hair, previously a symbol of her sexual deviance, is the instrument with which she cleans the feet of Christ (Jansen 2000, 132). Thus, her hair is transformed from a reminder of her vanity and sin to an emblem of her humility and spiritual transformation. In medieval Christianity, chastity was valued as the ultimate expression of piety, as evidenced by growing devotion to the Virgin Mother. Because women were considered to have stronger sexual urges than men, coupled with

Luca Giordano. Santa Magdalena renunciando a las vanidades de este mundo [Saint Magdalene renouncing the vanities of this world]. 17th c.
weaker wills with which to resist sensual temptation, pious women were taught that the ultimate goal of spirituality was to achieve some level of masculinity (Rushing 1994, 100). Jesus himself, speaking of Mary Magdalene, declares, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male... For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Gospel of Thomas, quoted in Rushing 1994, 101). In order to be spiritual, then, a woman needed to abandon both her sexuality and her femininity. The painting shown at right, by Luca Giordano, presents the Magdalene at the moment of her conversion, when she discards her vanity, in the form of her jewelry. It is clear that Giordano, in his work, emphasizes Mary Magdalene as an example of vanity and the successful rejection of vanity. It is important to note, however, that even as Giordano depicts a scene of repentance, he also emphasizes the Magdalene’s sensuality (Vélez 2001, 192).

In his description of an ideal reclusive life, Bernardino da Siera includes nakedness, flesh clinging to bones, no human food, and “an awareness that the whole world has been... forgotten” (Jansen 2000, 136). Because the legends of Mary Magdalene incorporate all of these elements, medieval hermitages looked to her as a mentor and patron (Jansen 2000, 137). Thus, Mary Magdalene came to be recommended by the friars “as a model to both the laity and women” (Jansen 2000, 142). The friars admired Mary Magdalene’s closeness to Christ, her ascetic mysticism, and her steadfast, passionate faith.

Therefore, Mary Magdalene became, through the legends of the vitae, an example of humility, pious self-denial, and rejection of vanity at the moment of spiritual conversion.
III. Model of Penance

In the painting below by Domenico Robusti, we begin to perceive another side of the Magdalene. Here, she is portrayed during her legendary ascetism, surrounded by symbols of her piety and self-denial. Additionally, the painting shown on the next page by el Guercino illustrates in yet a more dramatic way the drastic penance expressed by Mary Magdalene in the desert. Guercino depicts Mary Magdalene in the act of self-flagellation in reverence to Christ. One interesting point about this piece, in contrast to many of the others, is that the Magdalene’s arm covers her nude torso, leading to a de-emphasis of her corporeal sensuality (Vélez 2001, 202).

How, one might ask, did the characterization of Mary Magdalene as an emblem of penance come to be repeatedly portrayed in works of art? Who popularized the notion of Mary Magdalene as the penitent sinner? A plausible answer to these questions comes directly from theological history.

In 1215, Pope Innocent III called to order the Fourth Lateran Council, which resulted in a decree of mandatory confession and completion of prescribed penance (Jansen 2000, 199). In light of this decree, the friars began to emphasize penance in their sermons. Given that “medieval preachers were great proponents of teaching through exempla” (Jansen 2000,

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3 Notable symbols in the painting are the night-time setting, which tends to be considered most conducive to reflection and meditation, the hair shirt, which symbolizes penance in the form of denial of the flesh, the skull, which is a commonly-used allegory of earthly vanity, the book, which represents Biblical study, and a crucifix, the symbol of eternal redemption (Vélez 2001, 203).
205), they extolled the Magdalene as the paradigmatic sinner turned saint through repentance. Mary Magdalene recognizes her sin of luxuria, begins the process of absolution by humbly washing the feet of Christ, becomes the favorite follower of Christ, and ultimately spends three decades in ascetic isolation. As mentioned in an earlier section, Mary’s contemplation in the desert was conceptualized and elaborated upon not in the Bible, but in the vitae written for her. Given the phenomenal degree of self-denial reported in the legends of the Magdalene, it comes as no surprise that she became for the friars the poster-child of penance. Once they had reinvented Mary Magdalene as the repentant prostitute, preachers were able to present two alternate paths to salvation: the way of innocence and the way of penance, exemplified by the Virgin and the Magdalene, respectively (Jansen 2000, 239). The Magdalene also became for the friars a model for the ideal manifestation of faith; they looked to her solitary reflection as an effective and valuable manner in which to express both penance and profound spirituality (Jansen 2000, 124-9).

In her reading, Rushing criticizes the traditional misogynist attitudes that led scholars to label Mary Magdalene as a passionate penitent. In Rushing’s view, this characterization of the Magdalene was fabricated in order to bolster the patriarchal structure and theological teachings of the Church (Rushing 1994, 46). Rushing identifies two implications of Mary’s
characterization as passionate penitent. First, Mary’s penance stands to validate the belief perpetuated by the friars that open sexuality directly clashes with spirituality, and must be cured by repentance, chastity, and sacrament. Secondly, the example of Mary Magdalene was used in a transparently political manner to legitimize the recent Church requirements of mandatory confession and subsequent completion of penance (Rushing 1994, 48). Rushing argues that, just as popular art has invented an image of a young, exquisitely beautiful Mary Magdalene with long golden hair (despite the absence of any physical description in the Bible), so too did the Church leaders invent for Mary her identity as “blessed sinner” (Rushing 1994, 50).

IV. Emblem of Profanity and Sexual Licentiousness of Women

This provocative painting by Jan Massys fits squarely in the category of “Magdalena Profana” [Profane Magdalene] to which it is assigned in the art exhibition of the National Museum of San Carlos (Vélez 2001, 194). The viewer’s eye is drawn to the Magdalene’s virtually nude torso, her luxurious hair, and particularly to her direct, unapologetic gaze. Somewhat ironically considering the title of The Penitent Magdalene, the artist presents the Magdalene as “elegant, with an exquisite face and slender hands that combine sensual loveliness with coldness” (trans. by present author). 4 By emphasizing her voluptuous

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4 Original text: “elegante, de rostro primoroso y manos finísimas, en las que se juntan belleza sensual y frialdad” (Vélez 2001, 194).
beauty, this work illustrates the characterization of Mary Magdalene as a symbol of the sexual depravity of women.

The mendicant friars balanced their admiration of the post-conversion saint with their criticism of the vanity and sin of the pre-conversion Magdalene. Just as legend created a devoted life of hermitage for Mary after the resurrection, the friars imagined the pre-transformation Magdalene as a sinner of the worst degree. In Jansen’s view, “preachers and moralists invented a Magdalen in order to address what they perceived to be a woman-problem” (Jansen 2000, 146-7), namely, the intertwined evils of vanity, lust, and independence. Mary Magdalene was believed to be descended from royalty, and therefore was assumed to have been very wealthy (Jansen 2000, 149-50). She was also independent of male control, due to the death of her father and the occupation of her brother, Lazarus (Jansen 2000, 150); calling Lazarus her brother, of course, implies acceptance of Pope Gregory’s conflation of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany. By embellishing Mary Magdalene’s story to include independence and financial status, medieval preachers turned her into a powerful symbol with which to warn their congregations about the inevitable sin that results when women are wealthy, idle, and unsupervised by men (Jansen 2000, 149-51). Furthermore, the Dominican scholar Domenico Cavalca proclaimed that Mary Magdalene was “the most beautiful woman that could be found in the world, excepting the Virgin Mary” (Jansen 2000, 154). This created for Mary Magdalene the additional danger of sexual temptation, as an exceptionally beautiful woman was likely to be approached and “harassed by many people” (stated by Luca da Bitonto, Jansen 2000, 153). In essence, the friars constructed a life for Mary Magdalene that accounted for her sin in such a way as to strengthen patriarchal conceptions of gender. In other words, the friars continually “used the
symbol of the Magdalen to attack the vanity, folly, and sexual licentiousness ascribed to all
dwomen. In the name of social amelioration the preachers tried to control and subjugate the
female sex through the symbol of Mary Magdalen” (Jansen 2000, 142).

V. Wife/lover of Jesus Christ

This photograph is taken from a stage version of Jesus Christ Superstar, a rock
musical written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. It portrays the extremely human
love affair theorized by some to have existed between the human Jesus and Mary Magdalene.
According to one source, theater directors began to acknowledge and depict the political climate of
Jesus’ era sometime around the 1960s. In the 1970s, the first “truly heterodox” films and
musicals were performed, providing Broadway and Hollywood accounts of Jesus’ earthly life (C
Kraemer 2004). With its release in 1973, Jesus Christ Superstar became one of the first shows to
boldly portray the romantic intimacy between Jesus and Mary Magdalene; moving from stage to
film, Martin Scorsese established himself with The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) as “the
first filmmaker to attack the problem of Jesus’ simultaneous divinity and humanity head-on,
giving us a saviour who longs for the love of a woman” (C Kraemer 2004). Although the
explicit portrayal of a relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene seemed novel at the
time that these works were released, speculation as to the possibility of such a relationship was nothing new.

In fact, the Gnostic Gospel of Philip is rife with suggestive language, raising a very natural question as to the nature of the "companionship" of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. In this Gospel, the Magdalene is referred to as "the one who was called his companion" (Kraemer 1999, 119). In this context, the word "companion" can be interpreted as bearing both friendly and intimate connotations (Kraemer 1999, 119). The Gospel of Philip further describes Mary as Jesus' favorite, who he often kissed on the mouth (Kraemer 1999, 119-120). While the kiss could have been a common gesture between teacher and student at the time, it is likely also to carry sexual meaning. This interpretation is, however, a matter of considerable dispute. Scholar Robert Price (1990) contends that, although kissing often did symbolize sexual intimacy within the literature of the day, in the context of the Gnostic texts, a kiss "implied sexual intercourse as purely spiritual and metaphorical in nature" (Thimmes 1998, 214).

Also, d'Angelo suggests another interpretation of "noli me tangere," remarking, "it cannot be excluded that the danger of a touch between Mary and Jesus involves the sexual connotations of the word 'touch'; they are well attested in the period" (Kraemer 1999, 120). In rebuffing Mary's touch, Jesus may have been resisting the embrace of his former lover.

In her work, Rushing presents several pieces of evidence for the notion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were indeed spouses and lovers. First, within the potently homophobic environment of the Jewish community during this time period, the absolute norm for Rabbis was to be married; in fact, an unmarried Rabbi was likely to be mistrusted (Rushing 1994, 147-8). Also, it would make sense for the church to conceal such a relationship, in order to
uphold the dogmatic connections between sexuality and sin, chastity and righteousness (Rushing 1994, 148). Also, upon seeing Christ after the resurrection, Mary runs to embrace him; in the orthodox society of her day, this action would truly only be appropriate for his wife (Rushing 1994, 148). Rushing further argues that Jesus “cannot be ‘fully human’ without the ‘lover’ archetype, with all the rich, erotic components implied by this archetype” (Rushing 1994, 149). Finally, if Jesus was married then God is also married, which would strengthen the conceptualization of marriage as a divinely sanctioned institution (Rushing 1994, 149). Thus, the marriage of Jesus would not weaken his status as a spiritual leader, but, rather, would underscore his participation as a truly human individual. Rushing expresses firm conviction that the marriage between Magdalene and Jesus has been kept secret for two thousand years due to the belief that spirituality and sexuality are incompatible (Rushing 1994, 149-50).

After all of this analysis, what can we correctly conclude about Mary Magdalene? First of all, she was not likely to have been a purely fictional character, as d’Angelo points out, because “the authors of the gospels could have had no reason for making up stories that create women witnesses” (Kraemer 1999, 120), in light of their obvious doubts about the ability of women to teach in the Church. However, Mary’s presence and public grieving at the crucifixion was probably unrealistic, as “it is ... less than likely that the Romans would have allowed any demonstrations of sympathy for a seditious criminal during the execution, even by women” (Kraemer 1999, 123). Several sources also propose the possibility of Mary Magdalene as an elder and teacher of Jesus, contrary to the popular assumption that she was a young follower; the Bible, it is important to point out, describes neither Mary Magdalene’s age nor her appearance (Kraemer 1999, 123). Thus, although Mary Magdalene probably
lived, she may not have had the appearance or performed the deeds that we commonly associate with her today. It would seem that, due to the Biblical vagueness about this character and the extent to which her Biblical and legendary personas have become confused, a complete picture of the Magdalene may be, in reality, impossible:

If the investigation multiplies the nuances of reconstructed Mary, it does not increase the security with which a picture of a “real” Mary can be drawn. Whether the feminist historian evokes Mary of Magdala, companion of Jesus, a wandering wise woman, a prophet of God’s reign, a visionary and revolutionary, apostola apostolorum, diakonos, and missionary, any version of Mary Magdalene she constructs is pieced together out of snippets. Nor are they snippets of fact, but rather snippets of the memories and expectations embedded in the distant conversations of long-dead authors with long-dispersed communities (Kraemer 1999, 125).

In her analysis, Rushing agrees that, due to the sparse details provided by the Scripture about Mary Magdalene, all we can glean from the original text is a rather “cloudy image” of the real Mary Magdalene, if she indeed existed at all (Rushing 1994, 49). This ambiguity about her true identity may appear to undermine the importance and influence of Mary Magdalene; however, this same ambiguity can also be identified as the precise reason for her historical role as one of the most intriguing and meaningful figures in Christianity. The elusive “cloudiness” of her image has enabled Mary Magdalene to be sculpted by interpreters in numerous directions, which in turn has caused her symbolic significance to change again and again. The impressive range of connotations now associated with Mary Magdalene plays a dual role. First, it further obscures the true identity of Mary Magdalene, burying her Biblical description under layers of legend and speculation. Secondly, however, her convoluted symbolism transforms Mary Magdalene into an extremely valuable figure for people of faith, a figure from whom much can be learned.

Ultimately, since we cannot fully reconstruct the true figure of Mary Magdalene from the remnants about her in the Bible, it is possible that “who was Mary Magdalene?” is actually the wrong question to ask. After all, the various representations of Mary presented
in this paper beg several interesting and perhaps far more relevant questions: is there a way to reconcile the various facets of her constructed personality? Could she in fact have been the wife of Jesus, the announcer of the Resurrection, and a sexual being? The painting below, although it depicts Mary Magdalene at the height of religious ecstasy, seems to carry sexual undertones as well, due to the Magdalene’s suggestive positioning and revealing clothing.

Since the deeply-ingrained legends that have endured and evolved over the ages are not likely to be undone, perhaps the closest we can come to recreating an accurate impression of the Magdalene would be by fusing her Biblical spirituality with her imagined sexuality. As such, Mary Magdalene could represent “a prototype for those who intuitively know that spirituality and sexuality are deeply and acutely interwoven” (Rushing 1994, 10).

Perhaps, as feminist theology tends to argue, the “conflict” between Mary Magdalene’s piety and her sexuality was contrived by the friars as a scare tactic to suppress the sexuality of women in their congregations. Modern women can therefore look to Mary Magdalene not as an example of salvation by repentance, but as a fully human saint who simultaneously embodied expressive sensuality and commendable faith.
References


