2014

Mary Magdalene in the era of Reformation

Arnold, Margaret Lois

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/15409

Boston University
Dissertation

MARY MAGDALENE IN THE ERA OF REFORMATION

by

MARGARET ARNOLD

M.F.A., The University of the Arts, 1997
M.Div., Boston University School of Theology, 2008

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2014
Approved by

First Reader
_______________________________
Barbara Diefendorf, Ph.D.
Professor of History

Second Reader
_______________________________
Phillip Haberkern, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of History

Third Reader
_______________________________
Rady Roldan-Figueroa, Th.D.
Assistant Professor in the History of Christianity
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professors Barbara Diefendorf and Phillip Haberkern, of Boston University’s History Department, and to Professor Virginia Reinburg, of Boston College, for their generous reading and helpful comments on the dissertation through many stages of revision. They have provided inspiring examples of the fellowship of the scholarly life. Many thanks are also due to Boston University School of Theology’s librarians, especially James Skypeck and Stacey Battles de Ramos, for kind assistance in obtaining—and patience in renewing—materials. Participants at the 2012 International Luther Congress in Helsinki offered invaluable responses to an early draft. Professor Deeanna Klepper’s reading suggestions led to the subject of the dissertation. All of these long-suffering persons are excused from responsibility for the many errors within, which are entirely my own.

This work was possible because of the loving support of my family, my parents, John and Kathryn Arnold, my daughters, Rose and Clara, and my sister, Mary Kate. The book is for Christopher: a very base sort of coin, for the gold that I received.
MARY MAGDALENE IN THE ERA OF REFORMATION

MARGARET ARNOLD

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2014

Major Professor: Barbara Diefendorf, Professor of History

ABSTRACT

Scholarly surveys of the medieval Magdalene tend to conclude at the opening of the sixteenth century, dismissing any role she may have had in the teaching of Protestant reformers. Protestant and Catholic attitudes towards sanctity and sainthood have been the object of scholarly work, but my dissertation is the first comparative examination of the different confessions’ uses of the Magdalene tradition through the early modern period.

Mary Magdalene was of one of several scriptural women to whom Protestants in Germany, France, Switzerland, and England referred in debating the legitimacy of female and lay preaching. Lutheran and Reformed pastors, Anabaptists, and Quakers all adapted the medieval Magdalene tradition to advance Evangelical theologies of the forgiveness of sins, the sacraments, and the priesthood of all believers. Early modern women also seized on these possibilities, claiming for themselves the Magdalene’s title as preacher and devoted disciple of the Word.

The Catholic cult of the Magdalene shifted as well, serving the needs of the Catholic Reformation. In reaction to the Protestant specter of lay and female preaching, male authors in their sermons and devotional work set aside earlier descriptions of the Magdalene as “apostle to the apostles” and emphasized instead her identity as a penitent
prostitute. Catholic women investigated the Magdalene’s relation to her sister Martha to
develop new images of female sanctity.

As the medieval separation between clergy and laity was questioned, reform-minded Christians both Protestant and Catholic explored new understandings of the shape of Christian life. The Magdalene’s call to confess the Gospel was a missionary imperative that transcended the boundaries of the ordained clergy. Similarly, the contemplation of Mary’s contemplation and the worldly work of her sister Martha could no longer be divided among different groups, but had to be integrated by each individual. Early modern Christians from Luther to Teresa of Avila discussed the terms of this reconciliation, attempting to understand secular work as a vocation, the fruit and expression of contemplation. What have often been taken to be distinct preoccupations of opponents in reform are revealed to have shared a common dialogue, framed by the life of Mary Magdalene.
Table of Contents

Introduction............................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1. The Medieval Magdalene: Establishing a Cult of Personality.............................. 32

Chapter 2. Lutheran Preaching on Mary Magdalene................................................................. 93

Chapter 3. Evangelical Magdalenes: The Lady Doth Protest...................................................... 134

Chapter 4. The Lady Vanishes? Preaching and Teaching the Magdalene in the Catholic
Reformation........................................................................................................................................... 168

Chapter 5. The Magdalene among Catholic Women................................................................. 221

Chapter 6. The Magdalene of the Reformed Tradition............................................................ 276

Chapter 7. The Magdalene of the Radical Reformation............................................................. 325

The Growing Army: Conclusion & Epilogue...................................................................................... 358
List of Abbreviations


Introduction

Happy Magdalene, to whom
Christ the Lord vouchsafed to’ appear!
Newly risen from the tomb,
Would He first be seen by her?...

Highly favour’d soul! To her
Farther still His grace extends,
Raises the glad messenger,
Sends her to His drooping friends:
Tidings of their living Lord
First in her report they find:
She must spread the gospel-word,
Teach the teachers of mankind…

Here for ever would I lie,
Didst Thou not Thy servant raise,
Send me forth to testify
All the wonders of Thy grace.
Lo! I at thy bidding go,
Gladly to Thy followers tell
They their rising God may know,
They the life of Christ may feel.¹

In his 1746 hymn for Easter Sunday, John Wesley celebrates the preaching role given to Mary Magdalene when the risen Christ appeared to her first of all his followers. He applies a title she had been given in the Middle Ages, when she had been the *apostola apostolorum*, the teacher of the teachers of the early church. The great Protestant hymn-writer, church reformer, and founder of Methodism then asks that he might be granted this same role, being sent to testify the Gospel message to future disciples and followers of Christ. It might seem an unremarkable subject for an Easter hymn, except that the

¹ John Wesley, “Hymns for the Lord’s Resurrection,” (no. 3), published in 1746; see http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/wesley-texts.
Magdalene’s place in Protestant piety has gone largely unnoticed in accounts of the
Reformation and the traditions that emerged from it.

Scholarship on the Magdalene has tended to overlook or deny any positive
engagement with the saint on the part of Protestant reformers. Much work has been done
on the Mary Magdalene of the Middle Ages, documenting the tradition of her preaching
to southern France as chronicled in the thirteenth-century *Legenda Aurea*, but most
authors are content with abrupt conclusions about Protestantism’s suppression of saints’
cults. Katherine Jansen’s excellent study of the cult of Mary Magdalene in the Middle
Ages concludes with a tantalizing epilogue on the fate of the saint in the period that
follows, the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation. After describing the rich and
diverse spirituality that grew up around the medieval Magdalene, appropriated by
Christians male and female in different ways, she sketches a brief outline of the
cataclysm for hagiography that was the Reformation. Beginning with the humanist
Lefèvre d’Étaples’s debunking of much of her legendary history, Mary’s descent from
her medieval pedestal is precipitous. As Jansen writes, “Lefèvre’s view added fuel to the
Protestant fire which burned in readiness to consume the cult of the saints. Luther’s
distaste for the saints is legendary, as is that of his followers. They made no exception for
the *beata peccatrix.*”

---

2 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, volume one, William Granger Ryan,
of the Magdalene by the royal house of Burgundy, who used her legendary association with their ancestors,
converted by her preaching, to shore up their authority, see Nancy Bradley Warren, *Women of God and
Arms: Female Spirituality and Political Conflict, 1380-1600* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
3 Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later
Likewise, Susan Haskins’s art-historical survey of the saint dismisses any possible role Mary Magdalene may have had in the spirituality and teaching of the early reformers. In a brief and inaccurate summary of evangelical theology, she credits Luther with a memorial understanding of the Eucharist and with denying the necessity of confession, a position which she implies would undermine one of the Magdalene’s most important functions in the church: as paradigmatic penitent. She claims that the Magdalene’s specific link to the sacrament of penance, as well as her intercessory function in Catholic religious practice, made her unacceptable to Protestants such as Calvin and Zwingli, without any discussion of differences among Protestant traditions on such questions as sacramental theology, the use of imagery, and the role of the saints.

The Magdalene’s life within the Catholic tradition was not unaffected by the Protestant Reformation, as Jansen notes: “The Protestant assaults, and the Catholic response to them, reshaped the persona of the Magdalen.”\(^5\) Larissa Taylor has described the shift in early modern Catholic preaching about the Magdalene as having been made directly in response to Protestantism and the implications of the theology of the priesthood of all believers.

Pre-Reformation preachers, relying on *The Golden Legend*, referred often to Mary Magdalene’s preaching in Aix and Marseilles. But increasing concern with order in the sixteenth century and the spectre of women preaching made Catholic preachers more circumspect in describing the role of the Magdalene, and at times this verged on disparagement.\(^6\)

The dignity of her position as *apostola apostolorum* was replaced by a new focus on the penitent Magdalene, an example for sexual sinners in particular, as she became the patron

---


of countless post-Tridentine religious foundations for reformed prostitutes, and the subject of myriad voluptuous depictions in Baroque art. Haskins acknowledges the Magdalene’s deployment in Counter-Reformation polemics and programs: “Mary Magdalen’s role as exemplar and intercessor brought her into the argument as a prime propaganda weapon against Lutheran tenets, and to uphold the Tridentine doctrine of merit.”\(^7\) She does not, however, explore the problematic truth that it was, as we shall see, the same saint who was being used to uphold and teach those Lutheran tenets, particularly the assertion of justification by faith alone and the priesthood of all believers.

Joan Kelly famously asked, sparking the work of a generation of scholars at the conjunction of women’s studies and early modern history, “Did women have a Renaissance?”\(^8\) One could similarly ask, “Did Mary Magdalene have a Reformation?”

This study proposes to examine the two parts of the question suggested above. First, what was the fate of Mary Magdalene in Protestant teaching and devotional life? Was there really no exception made, in movements that could be deeply suspicious of medieval piety, for a biblical saint engaged in so evangelical a task as divinely instructed preaching of the Word? Did she really drop out of sight, past a distant confessional horizon, or were parts of the medieval heritage—including the three scriptural figures conflated in the Magdalene tradition since Gregory the Great—taken up by ordained pastors counseling Protestant congregations and by women arguing for their right to speak as apostles?\(^9\) And if the Catholic response was shaped by the threat of a newly dangerous application of the

---


apostola apostolorum title to early Protestant laity, and to women in particular, how exactly was the Magdalene’s new image formed in the church’s teaching, and how did believers react to the various presentations of “the favorite saint of the Counter-Reformation”?

Patricia Badir’s *The Maudlin Impression: English Literary Images of Mary Magdalene, 1550-1700*, looks at poetry and plays both Protestant and Catholic and manages to correct some of the misleading portrait of a disappearing Magdalene. Even while limited to English literature, her work confirms that the Magdalene continued to feature prominently in the tradition of Passion devotion and in the construction of religious identity on all sides of the confessional divide, into the eighteenth century. Badir argues that Mary Magdalene represented the importance of memory for the followers of the risen and ascended Christ, now absent and made present in Word and Sacrament. Acknowledging the Reformation’s emphasis on the experience of the Word, Badir examines the trope of Mary of Bethany’s devotion to the Christ as the Word incarnate. When Mary was shown reading, as on the frontispiece of an edition of Anglican canon law, Richard Hooker’s *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*, she suggests readers’ own experience of the incarnate Word at a remove. This experience was an intimate yet distant encounter that constituted a perpetual re-enactment of the resurrection narrative, when the Magdalene could speak with Christ but was forbidden to touch him. The frustrations of an intimacy now curtailed were explored by Catholic authors as well: the Jesuit poet Robert Southwell compared Mary’s grief at the empty

---

tomb to his own loss of access to the Host in his parish church. Badir’s discussion of the adaptation of the Magdalene tradition to describe and construct the piety of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations offers an excellent model for my own broader study, while not overlapping because of the differences in genre and geographic focus. I share in Badir’s project of examining the religious culture that emerged from a dialogical relationship between Protestant and Catholic communities. Such an exploration can help to uncover and challenge historians’ assumptions about saints in early modern Christianity, readings that may have led to the myth of a disappearing Magdalene.

Biblical saints continued to be important models for Catholics and for Protestants; this study will show that among those saints, Mary Magdalene was central to the development of core theologies and institutions of both Catholic and Protestant reform.

_Saints and Sanctity_

The recent academic interest in the hagiography of the Reformation era is part of a wider look at the complex process of confessionalization, a historiographical category introduced in the 1980s by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling. Analyses of

---

confessionalization examine developments in popular piety, liturgy and homiletics, education, and the arts in order to understand how Protestants and Catholics defined their confessional identities in opposition to each other during the later sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. A significant area for study includes shifts in the models of religious and devotional life made available to women and how they were adopted or transformed according to the needs and goals of individuals, groups, and institutions.

These shifts involved not only new relationships to traditional saints, but explorations of the saintly life as it was being demonstrated in the era of Reformation. The lives of Catholic holy women, as documented by their male confessors, shaped the image of female sanctity presented to their contemporaries. Jodi Bilinkoff argues that the study of hagiography be expanded to include these accounts of living or recently deceased figures, women who were not canonized but whose characters and biographies nevertheless served as paradigms in early modern Catholicism. In a culture particularly concerned to ensure and promote orthodoxy in the face of Protestant threats, Counter

---


Reformation definitions and redefinitions of sainthood were closely linked to the project of regulating popular piety and suppressing heresy. Yet the genre of saints’ lives was not a simple tool for the promulgation of a single model of holiness. Bilinkoff’s findings about the diversity of lives recorded, including significant numbers of laywomen hailed for their sanctity, supports the efforts of recent scholarship to expose a greater degree of resistance to Tridentine restrictions on women than was previously understood.

Reassessments of early modern hagiography have led to other unexpected discoveries. Alison Frazier and David Collins have investigated the common practice of writing saints’ lives that existed among humanists, a group long associated with the rejection of medieval hagiography. Frazier contends that consideration of how a society’s authors adapted existing source material, how they reproduced their cultural canon, reveals much of the values of that society.

What societies choose to preserve from the past is fully as eloquent as any novelties they contribute to the record. This preservation represents, as historians know, the dialogue of the present with those aspects of the past that can be accommodated, and the terms of that accommodation are themselves historical evidence… People… return to the old for new reasons.

Collins looks at differences between the humanists’ source material and the texts they produced, showing that humanist authors used their hagiographic writing to advance their programs of religious reform and innovation. A particular focus of the lives produced in fifteenth-century Germany was the bishops who had converted the region in late

---

15 Bilinkoff, Related Lives, p. 5.
18 Frazier, Possible Lives, p. 11.
19 Collins, Reforming Saints, pp. 9-10.
antiquity. This backwards look was intended to re-energize the church, as Collins writes, “The lives of the holy bishops articulated the perceived problem and proposed the solution: The German people needed a re-evangelization in the fifteenth century analogous to the evangelization of pagan tribes by missionary bishops centuries before.” Some of this evangelical zeal would fuel the German Reformation, where it found expression in further adaptations of the hagiographic tradition that emphasized those saints from the tradition who had professed and taught the faith, the Magdalene among them.

The early reformers’ engagement with the cult of the saints is described in Carol Piper Heming’s study, Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe, 1517-1531. Heming notes the historiography that has emphasized the Reformation’s rejection of theology and practices from late medieval piety toward the saints. She points to the contribution of recent scholarship on gender and women’s history, which has revealed enduring loyalty to female saints among Protestant women. Heming regards the persistence of the veneration of saints in Protestant communities as a phenomenon ultimately inimical to the teaching of evangelical theologians and pastors, though she cites Luther discussing the benefits of such piety for some Christians and warning his colleagues against an utter dismissal of the saints. His teaching thus did not always represent a blanket condemnation of the saints; Luther sought not to remove the saints from view altogether, but to correct believers’ relationship to them. He promoted

20 Collins, Reforming Saints, p. 16.
21 Carol Piper Heming, Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe, 1517-1531 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2003), pp. 2-3.
22 Heming, Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe, p. 8.
the study of the lives of saints from scripture and from the early centuries of the church, commending them as examples of faith, rather than as supernatural intercessors.  

Luther’s pastors followed his guidance. Heming gives the example of “Johann Diepolt [who] told his congregation at Ulm of the model ‘attributes’ of Mary Magdalene: ‘her faith and trust in God’s mercy’ and her ‘remorse over her sins.’”

Among Luther scholars, reassessment of evangelical attitudes toward saints and sainthood has been going on for some decades. Robert Kolb’s *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* documents the ways in which evangelical leaders fashioned a new piety around those saints whose lives and testimony were in accord with the theological program of the Reformation. The stories of the saints were published in books of martyrs and included in liturgy and preaching. The special case of the Virgin Mary in Protestant culture is explored by Beth Kreitzer’s study, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century*. The mother of God continued to be held up as a model for all Christians and of female virtue especially, though her intercessory role was eliminated and consideration of her own sinlessness or sinless conception was discouraged in favor of a focus on her obedient service in bearing the infant Christ.  

As with the other saints retained in the Lutheran liturgical calendar (including, as I will argue, Mary Magdalene), the Virgin Mary was celebrated for her

---

23 Heming, *Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe*, p. 65.  
24 Heming, *Protestants and the Cult of the Saints in German-Speaking Europe*, p. 66.  
demonstration of evangelical principles. “For Luther, Mary exemplified the newly ‘rediscovered’ doctrine of faith alone, and it is in light of her faith that she is such a powerful figure.” Far from being ignored in the Protestant tradition, the saints of the Bible provided evangelical theologians and preachers with irresistible models for their congregations: familiar, time-honored stories of men and women reacting to the presence and instruction of Christ, offering cautionary tales at need, but also examples of faith and obedience to imitate.

While early modern Protestant and Catholic attitudes towards sanctity and sainthood have been the object of scholarly work, there has not been a comparative study of the different confessions’ uses of the Magdalene tradition as they emerged in relation to each other, and which takes particular account of the Protestant articulations of her story. This introductory survey of the historiography of the cult of Mary Magdalene and of hagiography in general in the early modern period challenges the common assessment that all saints fell out of favor in the Reformation. Adding a Protestant component to Magdalene scholarship does more than correct that lacuna. Without an examination of both Protestant and Catholic developments within Magdalene interpretation as they developed in parallel, the picture of the Counter-Reformation identity of the saint is incomplete. A thorough investigation of the Protestant discussions of Mary Magdalene as a lay, female preacher, an interpretation known to Catholic theologians and explicitly cited and disputed by them, casts new light on the Catholic turn to emphasizing the penitent Magdalene, a sexual sinner redeemed by asceticism and incorporation into the sacramental system. This study will provide a more complex picture of Protestant

27 Kreitzer, Reforming Mary, p. 29.
attitudes toward the saints while informing existing work on the Magdalene of the Counter-Reformation, helping the movement’s “favorite saint” to be understood more fully in the polemical context of the era.

*Women in the Era of Reformation*

The question of Mary Magdalene’s place in the Reformation is inextricably linked to the interpretation of the Reformation’s effects on women. The different readings of such a prototypical woman contribute to our understanding of how “woman,” as a class of existence, was constructed in the early modern period, and how women gave form to their own self-understanding as religious subjects. A specific interest in these questions arose in the middle of the twentieth century, with investigations such as those of Roland Bainton, who published narratives of women of the Reformation era. Bainton notes the challenges of bringing these documents to light, and of understanding the protagonists’ perspectives at a great historical distance. One of the chief difficulties he mentions is the dearth of texts by women as compared to the record of male authorship. The historian “can record how they said they felt, provided they said anything at all.”28 The accounts that do survive tend to belong to the lives of elite women, those few who were literate and able to have their work published, or those who were so prominent, socially and politically, that their actions and words were noted by contemporaries and historians. Among those who could be studied, Bainton found evidence for the continued possibility of pastoral ministry for women, while sacramental and preaching roles were denied them.

---

except in the traditions that emerged from the radical Reformation.\textsuperscript{29} He notes that the writing that evangelical women produced tended to be less academic than that of men, and asks why “women wrote devotional literature rather than systematic theology… Have women refrained from theology because they were not supposed to exceed their sphere or because they were not interested?”\textsuperscript{30} Early modern women—and men—themselves debated this question in reference to Christ’s instruction to the Magdalene not to touch his risen form, which was interpreted as a warning against women’s intellectual activity. Bainton sets his presentation of women’s lives and writing in context, observing social changes that would have affected women: educational reform, the emergence of an ideal of romantic love within companionate marriage, and challenges to established cultural authorities.

A more systematic study of the era’s social developments was attempted by Natalie Zemon Davis, in her groundbreaking essay on the French Reformation, “City Women and Religious Change.” She asks directly about the effect of the Reformation for women, what it meant to them, how they participated in its different movements, and what were the results that issued from it for the status of women in society. “Did the Reformation have a distinctive appeal for women? If so, what was it and to what kinds of women? What did Protestant women do to bring about religious change? And what innovations did the Reformation effect in the lives of women of different social classes?”\textsuperscript{31} Her analysis of the urban mercantile and artisan classes finds that these

\textsuperscript{29} Bainton, \textit{Women of the Reformation: From Spain to Scandinavia}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{30} Bainton, \textit{Women of the Reformation: From Spain to Scandinavia}, p. 11.
women were already accustomed to a high degree of independence in business and, to a limited extent, were becoming more educated and literate. Such women embraced the opportunity that Protestantism offered, to read scripture and debate theology and even, at the beginning of the movement, to preach.\textsuperscript{32}

After the initial freedom that proved so attractive, Davis’s narrative describes the turn to clerical authority under Calvinism that reduced the possibilities for women’s public ministry and the hierarchical constraints of Reformed marriage, with the result that women’s status in Protestantism remained “unequal.”\textsuperscript{33} Still unequal but perhaps less limited options existed on the Catholic side. The religious life, closed to Protestants, continued to offer vital vocations and leadership roles for Catholic women. Similarly, models of specifically female sanctity—such as the Magdalene—were still available in Catholic culture, while Protestant women achieved a measure of spiritual equality only by transcending their femininity, as “the Reformed solution did promote a certain desexualization of society, a certain neutralizing of forms of communication and of certain religious places so that they became acceptable for women.”\textsuperscript{34} Davis concludes that while both Protestantism and Catholicism contributed to the modernity that would ultimately recognize gender equality, neither of their early modern incarnations advanced women’s rights in their essential character or through concrete acts of social reform. In fact, according to this reading, the Reformation served to remove some of the more positive female images and practices inherited from the medieval tradition and hastened

\textsuperscript{32} Davis, “City Women and Religious Change,” pp. 79, 81, 83.
\textsuperscript{33} Davis, “City Women and Religious Change,” p. 86.
\textsuperscript{34} Davis, “City Women and Religious Change,” pp. 93-94.
to stifle any potential freedom that may have been promised by the movement’s first, revolutionary years.

This narrative arc, moving from an initial openness toward lay and female ministry to an increasing clerical domination of new church structures, can be found in numerous subsequent studies of the effect of the Reformation on women. Sherrin Marshall’s broad survey of women in early modern religion offered a similar assessment of both gains and losses, with a chronological movement away from early progress:

Women were thus liberated and enslaved during the age of Reformation and Counter Reformation. To the extent that they were forced to accept and fit into the stereotypes that shaped their behavioral options, women were confined. To the extent that they pursued—for themselves individually and collectively in the service of God—new activities and created definitions of spirituality not limited by gender, they were liberated… By the end of the early modern era, religion may… have ceased to provide an opportunity for women’s self-actualization.

Lyndal Roper’s analysis of the German Reformation exposed the inherent contradictions between evangelical theology and the Lutheran Reformation’s teaching on women and the family. Roper asks, “How could a religion which began by exulting in the prophetic talents poured out upon daughters as well as upon sons come to view women almost exclusively as wives, whose sphere it was to be subordinate to their husbands and instructed by their preachers?” She evaluates the total result for women of the reform movements as “deeply ambiguous,” but goes on to characterize the magisterial Reformation as largely constricting for women, both at the practical level and in terms of

the Protestant religious imagination that developed.\textsuperscript{38} Nor was this effect tangential to the Reformation as a whole. Roper finds the conservative stance on gender that was adopted by the reformers to be central to the success and identity of their movement.\textsuperscript{39}

Merry Wiesner-Hanks’s study of conditions for women in early modern Europe confirms the male reformers’ conservatism, while seeking to reveal the ways women found to avoid the limitations placed upon them. “Religious traditions were used by men as buttresses for male authority in all realms of life, not simply religion. Nevertheless, it was the language of religious texts, and the examples of pious women who preceded them, which were used most often by women to subvert or directly oppose male directives.”\textsuperscript{40} Like Davis, she locates most of the opportunity for that subversion at the initial stages of the era of Reformation, in the first decade following a community’s embrace of reform, before the institutionalization of the movement.\textsuperscript{41} She describes the domestic religious roles that would have been available to the majority of women: prayer and the instruction of children, communal worship, and some possibilities for charitable work.\textsuperscript{42} An alternative to domestic life remained open for Catholic women; Wiesner-Hanks outlines nuns’ participation in the mission drives of the Counter Reformation.\textsuperscript{43} She notes the tension that existed between the manifest benefits of women’s efforts in this direction and the Counter Reformation’s expressed ideal of claustration for women’s orders, an ideal that ultimately reduced the sphere of an “active apostolate” for religious

\textsuperscript{38} Roper, \textit{The Holy Household}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{39} Roper, \textit{The Holy Household}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{40} Merry E. Wiesner, \textit{Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., New Approaches to European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 214.
\textsuperscript{41} Wiesner, \textit{Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe}, pp. 222-23.
\textsuperscript{42} Wiesner, \textit{Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe}, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{43} Wiesner, \textit{Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe}, pp. 232-33.
women to “the instruction of girls, and that only within the convent.”

Thus Catholic women’s religious activity, like that of Protestant women, was often defined by a domestic orientation, whether the home was a communal or a marital one. In Elizabethan England, Wiesner-Hanks points out, that very domesticity could provide a haven, when the practice of Catholicism was outlawed for those with public legal identities—men and single women, leaving a loophole for married women, who often exercised remarkable religious leadership.

Susan Karant-Nunn evaluates the institutions that formed the framework for domestic life, looking at the social changes to marriage and the family as they affected women, in her essay, “Reformation Society, Women and the Family.” As the subject of her study is a social structure that affected everyone, rather than the biographies of exceptional individuals (as in Bainton’s earlier volumes), Karant-Nunn’s work helps to explain the mechanisms by which the Reformation’s initial promise of freedom was qualified for women. The focus on the virtues of Christian marriage in early modern Protestant and Catholic preaching and teaching described a fixed sphere for women’s activity: in the home, subject to her husband’s authority. Changes to marriage and family life brought increased attention and expectations for women. Karant-Nunn discusses the additional demands that would have been placed on women with the Reformation’s reduction of the family to the nuclear unit, removing social institutions—monastic orders, confraternities—that had provided quasi-familial relationships. With these changes,

44 Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, p. 234.
45 Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe, p. 239.
“immediate families were thrown back upon their own resources.” While the status of the women who became pastor’s wives was elevated above that of the late medieval priest’s concubine, they were also under pressure to serve as paragons of Christian marriage, mothering, and household management. On the Catholic side, she notes the tension between the Counter Reformation’s renewal of focus on clerical celibacy alongside its recommendation of marriage for the majority. For both Catholics and Protestants, preaching and wedding liturgies delivered a message of wifely subordination and relegation to a domestic role.

In tandem with this work in social history, Karant-Nunn has collaborated with Merry Wiesner-Hanks to trace the theoretical sources of the Reformation’s attitude toward women. In their analysis of Luther’s own pronouncements about women, they examine polemical and pastoral texts as well as his interactions with the women in his life, as documented in letters. They find him providing both “conservation and innovation,” though with an emphasis on the former. For Luther’s conservative thought, they point to his acceptance of the Aristotelian understanding of women as physically and intellectually inferior, a claim which was used in support of the social hierarchy. More innovative was Luther’s embrace of a humanist emphasis on romantic love within companionate marriage, an expectation that presumes a responsive partner, physically

52 Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, Luther on Women, p. 9.
53 Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, Luther on Women, p. 10.
and intellectually.  They conclude, however, that Luther was on balance “a force for tradition rather than an innovator.” Their focus is on the reformer’s teaching about women as belonging in the home; they do not explore instances of his commendations of women’s public religious testimony, which were frequently expressed in discussions of female saints. Here, attending to Luther’s interpretation of the Magdalene can inform our understanding of his theological anthropology, shedding light on his reading of the role of women and of all believers in confessing the faith.

Margaret King and Albert Rabil’s introduction to their survey of women and early modern religion characterizes women as largely recipients of a Reformation that was made by men. The reform movements produced a chaotic era whose divisions affected women, often adversely. For those in areas dominated by Protestants, or by open conflict between different confessions, the focus is on women’s vulnerability: “They were battered by its violence; it impacted their lives, and their experience of faith was permeated with their experience of social disruption.” In the Catholic south of Europe, where open conflict was less common, women were instead subjected to the oppressive forces of the Inquisition. In publishing texts produced by women as they reacted to the changes that they encountered, King and Rabil insist on attention to women’s religious experience and production as an “other voice,” separate and distinct from that of men.

54 Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, Luther on Women, p. 12.
55 Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, Luther on Women, p. 12.
57 King and Rabil, Jr., Teaching Other Voices, p. 14.
58 King and Rabil, Jr., Teaching Other Voices, p. 17.
59 King and Rabil, Jr., Teaching Other Voices, p. 22.
What happened when that voice was lifted in a community that was particularly attuned to the individual’s religious experience and expression? Sylvia Brown’s study of women and the radical Reformation traditions inquires into the particular character of those movements’ effect on the status of women. Again, her approach owes a debt to Davis’s original inquiry into whether religious freedom and women’s freedom were allied or opposed. Davis’s thesis about their basic opposition could be tested by examining the reform traditions that claimed the greatest degree of spiritual liberation, those of the Radical Reformation. Brown asks, “Were radical religious beliefs typically accompanied by radical gender thinking? Or, on the contrary, did radical reconfigurations of religion sometimes depend on a reinscription of social norms?”60 This question will touch directly on the interpretation of the Magdalene among the communities of the Radical Reformation, on whether her role as evangelist, as teacher of the teachers of the church, would be taken up as a model for the laity and for women in particular.

The study of early modern women and religion therefore continues to be animated by Davis’s formative questions even as the conclusions about the Reformation’s effect have been nuanced or even challenged.61 Recent scholarship has pushed the exploration of women’s experience ever farther beyond the small circle of exceptional women, in an attempt to gain access to the operative world-views and motivations, as well as the actions and recorded testimony of more ordinary women in the early modern period. Sherrin Marshall observed the frustrations inherent in trying to bring that obscure record to light and the surprises that have attended the work. “Historians have difficulty

understanding, visualizing, and gaining access to information on activities that occurred behind closed doors within the family circle… And women’s activities within the family are revealed to be different than earlier historians have supposed.”62 Constructing such a detailed and rich portrait makes broad conclusions more difficult, as Kirsi Stjerna notes,

The Reformation for women was not necessarily in every regard the same as it was for men. The “good news” proclaimed about the gospel and the structures built around it were not necessarily equally good for women and men. At the same time, hasty conclusions about gendered roles, views, and experiences in the Reformation movements are not warranted. For instance, it is not true that men were always active or leaders and women always passive bystanders or receivers, or that women adopted the gendered world with its gender-biased opinions and parameters without scrutiny. The truth is much more complex.63

The study of women and early modern religion is increasingly like a Bruegel market scene in which it becomes almost impossible to find a focal point: wandering among the infinite variety on view appears to take the place of a linear iconographic program in a more traditional composition. But the crowded Bruegel remains, nevertheless, itself an artificial construction. There is a discernable path on which the viewer is being guided through its tortuous scenes and multiple anecdotes. Any reading of history does and must do the same. Thus, in this survey of early-modern Magdalenes, we will attend to the variety of options on offer and also look for insights into why particular interpretations were chosen and what might have made them convincing or popular in different communities.

The present study examines the early-modern presentations of St. Mary Magdalene as an ideal for women and for people of faith in general. Considering the shifts in her identity will lead us to the heart of the debate over women in early modern

63 Stjerna, Women and the Reformation, p. 4.
religion. Stjerna notes the “ambiguity” of the Protestant Reformation in its effects on women: the potential equality embedded in the evangelical theology of the priesthood of all believers was balanced by the loss of the mystical and saintly patterns of female holiness that had existed in the medieval church. The Protestant reformers’ promotion of domestic life as the only vocation open to women denied women the option of public ministry, either as prophetic witnesses in society, or as leaders within a women’s religious order. Those women that did protest against this limitation, or whose martyrdom opened a brief window for public testimony, stand as the few exceptions documented in Stjerna’s survey, as they had been in Bainton’s. Perhaps the signal development in women’s religious history, as it has been influenced by Davis’s work, has been to begin writing the stories of the unexceptional women and to devise means of accounting for their work and witness. As Stjerna contends, those women who did not protest but who accepted and perpetuated the model of a female domestic vocation also served as active participants in shaping the culture of the Reformation.

The movement(s) flourished and endured from roots that were both male and female: the product not just of the male theologians but of women who as daughters, sisters, spouses, mothers, widows and as believers espoused the new faith and ‘taught’ it and ‘preached’ it in their own domains, so participating concretely in the new Protestant mission.

Women made decisions in the home about what feasts and fasts to observe, which businesses to patronize, what stories to tell and which songs to sing, how to educate their smallest children, and which saintly models to follow as Christian women. All of these decisions contributed to the successful establishment—or rejection—of different religious

---

64 Stjerna, Women and the Reformation, pp. 11-13, 214.
65 Stjerna, Women and the Reformation, p. 214.
movements during the centuries that followed Luther’s initial reform, the period that has come to be identified as the era of confessionalization.\footnote{Stjerna, \textit{Women and the Reformation}, p. 218; King and Rabil, Jr., \textit{Teaching Other Voices}, p. 20.}

\textit{Methods and Sources}

Susan Karant-Nunn and Beth Kreitzer have both written about the kinds of texts that are most helpful in studying the spiritual lives of those who may not have been able to write about themselves. Sermons can provide a means of understanding what theologies, images, admonitions, and practices were being conveyed to congregations. As Karant-Nunn argues,

Sermons are a major source of information on the new churches’ intentions toward their adherents… It lay upon the clergy to communicate precisely, in simple yet unmistakable terms, what the godly person should believe and how he should behave… Before lay hearers, astute preachers sifted out the essence of otherwise complicated teachings, striving, in the early generations, to persuade, to sow the seeds of conviction deep, to mold behavior, and… to generate those feelings that would undergird faith as well as sustain all aspects of the aspired-to Christian life-in-the-community.\footnote{Karant-Nunn, \textit{The Reformation of Feeling}, p. 6. See also Pettigree, ed., \textit{The Reformation World}, pp. 440, 458; Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, eds., \textit{Luther on Women}, p. 13.}

In documenting the emergence of Protestant devotion to Mary Magdalene, this study will explore the sermons presented in postils–collections of sermons published as guides or even as stock homilies for use by unprepared or poorly educated clergy–as a means of understanding the identity of the saint that was being taught to ordinary members of congregations. Postil collections can be especially useful in that they represent not only a widely approved and popular range of homiletical images as they were received in parish preaching but also a teaching tool for the clergy, as they learned
how to preach an evangelical message. Preaching on the Magdalene can be found in postil collections directed toward specific portions of the church year, in sermons on the lectionary texts in which she features, particularly those of the Passion and resurrection. Some Protestants, including Lutherans, continued to observe Mary Magdalene’s feast and so preached on texts related to her on at least one other Sunday of the liturgical year. To meet this need, postil collections of festival sermons for saints’ days were also among the output of many Protestant sermon writers. Congregations, and the priests and pastors who ministered to them, were influenced as well by a milieu that could include other kinds of spiritual reading, visual imagery, music, and liturgy both formal and domestic. I will set the reading of postils within the wider context of exegesis, devotional literature, and religious art, to map the diverse appropriations of different elements of the Magdalene tradition in the early modern period.

An investigation of early modern preaching about the Magdalene raises the question of preaching itself. The Magdalene, the first witness of the resurrection, was used as a model for male preachers during the Middle Ages. Her scriptural role caused theologians of the era of Reformation, both Protestant and Catholic, to debate the possibility of lay and female preaching. That activity had been explicitly banned by canon law as part of the suppression of the Cathars and Waldensians, movements that had promoted female preaching and lay religious leadership in general. Early modern reformers reopened the question as part of their attack on clerical authority. Luther’s Bible translation and exegetical preaching used terms for preaching and preacher to describe activities divinely instituted in scripture for lay persons and women, roles that
had been translated in the Vulgate with less weighted words for ordinary communication. The open debate over who was authorized to preach is paralleled by a discussion in the historical scholarship about how to evaluate the speech and work of early modern women. Can such activities as conversation and letter-writing, hospitality and public support of the church, prophetic utterance or mystical visions, and the testimony of martyrs be considered preaching? Were they ever so understood by early modern women or their audiences? In exploring these questions it will be useful to identify two main functions of preaching: converting hearers to faith in the Gospel and conveying the authoritative teaching of the church from a publicly-acknowledged office. As they considered the nature of preaching and who might do it, early modern authors tended to distinguish or emphasize these functions in different ways according to their different understandings of the vocation of the believer and the relationship between the clergy and the laity. These differences would affect the kinds of roles that early modern women were encouraged in or refused access to, as well as the roles that they envisioned and sought for themselves.

*Structure of the Dissertation*

Chapter One provides a survey of the development of the Magdalene cult through the medieval period, with a focus on the late medieval background to the era of Reformation, taking up where Katherine Jansen concludes. Christine de Pizan’s employment of the Magdalene in the *querelle des femmes* foreshadows the way in which Protestant women authors would appeal to the resurrection narrative in their arguments
for female preaching. The Digby Mary Magdalene of late fifteenth-early sixteenth-century England confirms that the apostola apostolorum trope did not die a natural or gradual death, but was still popular on the eve of the Reformation. The “three Marys” controversy between Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples and John Fisher displays the concern of humanists and reform-minded clerics, at the very beginning of the sixteenth century, to establish accurate identities for saints and to reduce the accretions of human tradition; Fisher’s counter-arguments reveal the continued loyalty felt to the saint and the stakes involved in potential changes to devotional practice.

Chapter Two explores the theology and preaching about the Magdalene that emerged from the Wittenberg reform movement. Luther’s preaching on the Johannine passion narrative included an extended discussion of Mary’s vigil at the tomb, praising her tears and commending her ardent devotion to Christ and her eager announcing of the news of the resurrection as examples for all Christians, and especially preachers, to follow. This chapter investigates how Luther’s preaching on the Magdalene was interpreted in the postils written by his followers. My research looks at collections published before 1620 that ran to ten editions or more, indicating work of some influence and popular reach. The feast of the Magdalene was observed on the Sunday following July 22 and the resurrection narratives would have featured annually in the Easter lection cycle, so I look at postils published for the summer liturgical season, which begins with Easter Sunday.

In Chapter Three, I assemble the evidence that prominent women of the magisterial Reformation, including the early evangelical authors Argula von Grumbach
and Katharina Schütz Zell, laid confident claim to the title and legacy of the Magdalene. John Bale’s characterization of English Protestant martyr Anne Askew as a figure comparable to the Magdalene, though not a self-identification, was influential for Protestant female spirituality as it was published in one of the most popular works of early Protestant martyrology and attaches to a woman who continued, throughout the first centuries of the Church of England, to have considerable spiritual authority.\(^68\) I also explore the impact of Marie Dentière’s 1539 treatise proclaiming women’s right to preach, in particular the provocative response of Catholic preacher François Le Picart, whose own sermon, published two years later, explicitly denounces “Lutherans” who use scriptural figures to claim that women have the right to speak in public.\(^69\)

Le Picart’s sermon represents an early reaction to the possible use of Mary Magdalene in defense of female preaching that would, I argue, become paradigmatic for Counter Reformation Catholicism. Chapter Four documents the Magdalene imagery present in early modern Catholic culture created by male authors. I look at the teaching and cultural production of the Catholic Church as shaped by preachers, church administrators, poets, visual artists, and broadly influential devotional authors such as François de Sales. While establishing that a variety of interpretations of the saint were still available, I observe a tendency in the authors’ redaction of the Magdalene tradition to focus on her conversion from sexual sin to a piety of extreme penitence and devotion to the sacraments.

---


The environment of Magdalene piety these authors created was inhabited and renovated by early modern Catholic women in response to its possibilities and limitations. A study of this dialogic process provides a fuller picture of Counter-Reformation Magdalene piety. Chapter Five examines Catholic women’s use of the Magdalene: devotional practices and liturgies in houses founded for reformed prostitutes and other convents associated with the saint; sacred and secular iconographic programs reflecting diverse appropriations of the Magdalene legend; and above all the theologies developed by women, such as Teresa of Avila, to discern their own vocations through reflection on Mary Magdalene’s different identities. These images and practices are examined in tension with the messages about the saint that women received from their male colleagues. Particularly interesting is the question of gendered appropriation: was the sexualized Magdalene, so appealing to male authors and patrons both within and outside the ecclesiastical hierarchy, equally compelling as a focus for women’s own piety? Katherine Jansen observes a difference in how much sexual shame was included in the Magdalene devotion of the twelfth-fourteenth centuries, based on the gender of the author or consumer of the tradition; can any parallel patterns be observed for the saint in Counter-Reformation spirituality?

The religious climate of the Counter Reformation influenced much in the culture of the Reformed tradition as it defined itself in opposition to Catholicism. Chapter Six looks at the theological roots of the Reformed Magdalene, revealing Calvin’s ambivalent relationship to the Magdalene pericopes. Calvin took up Lefèvre d’Étaples’s deconstruction of her legend and therefore only addressed himself to the figure identified
by name in the Gospels as Mary Magdalene. Though he acknowledged some positive elements in the Magdalene’s character, he used his commentary on the Johannine Passion narrative to argue vigorously against women’s public preaching, refusing to allow that Mary Magdalene was anything but an exception in this regard while criticizing her maudlin behavior and general unsuitability for discipleship. A study of other Reformed authors’ writing and piety related to the Magdalene highlights the diversity among Reformed communities, revealing both Calvin’s influence and the extent to which members of that tradition departed from his interpretation, seeking to redeem the saint for devotional use.

Chapter Seven looks at Protestants of the Radical Reformation, as they asserted comparisons to the Magdalene that made claims about women’s public role in the church. Although the hagiographic tradition was substantially rejected in the Anabaptist movement, there are references and allusions to the Magdalene’s character in Anabaptist martyr narratives. Her example of faithful dedication to Christ above all else, even above the duty to family, was used by imprisoned men and women, often mothers and fathers leaving young children, to encourage each other as they prepared for a holy death. The Quakers Margaret Fell and George Fox invoked Mary Magdalene alongside other prominent female scriptural prophets to establish a theological foundation for women’s leadership in the Society of Friends. Here we can find compelling evidence that even those traditions that do not acknowledge sainthood apart from the lives of ordinary believers still interpreted the Magdalene’s hagiographic legacy and derived spiritual authority in doing so.
The conclusion functions as an epilogue, looking ahead to the nineteenth century, when the exegetical interpretation of Lefèvre d’Étaples was officially recognized by the Catholic Church and a severely curtailed cult of Mary Magdalene, limited to her scriptural identity, was propagated. Was it then the modern period, rather than the era of Reformation, which witnessed the decline of the influence of the diverse Magdalene heritage? On the contrary, the tradition of the *apostola apostolorum* was seized upon anew by the emerging feminist movement among African American Baptist activists arguing for women’s right to public testimony, leadership, and recognition. The so-called resurgence in interest in the saint in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is really the continuity of a legacy that has persisted in the work and words of women and men from the early church to the present day.

By surveying the testimony of voices from across the early modern period’s confessional boundaries, I hope to contend that there is wider evidence for what Patricia Badir has called the “lively early modern history of Mary Magdalene… a figure whose embeddings in the medieval imagination help us to think across the rupture between old and new forms.”70 The interest and significance of this study will be in chronicling the emergence of those new forms as they are shaped by the enduring appeal of the Magdalene tradition, and by the religious controversies of the era of Reformation. The adaptation of beloved traditions into vigorous new forms expressed profound theological understanding and commitment on the part of the men and women of the era of Reformation, demonstrating the seriousness with which they took the project of discerning and living according to God’s will. The Magdalenes that they produced ranged

---

from daring preachers to devout contemplatives, revealing the deepest hopes of their authors for a renewed church and a life of integrity.
Chapter 1

The Medieval Magdalene: Establishing a Cult of Personality

Wanting to hear the news of the resurrection from its first witness, the disciples plead, “Dic nobis Maria (Speak to us, Mary).” This formulation appears in medieval Passion liturgies and dramas and is echoed in “Zu Ostern/das Victimae,” the hymn for Easter Sunday by sixteenth-century Lutheran hymn-writer Nikolaus Herman: “Speak to us, Mary. Ah, Mary, tell us without shyness, whom you met on the road.”

Through such practices were the images of Mary Magdalene’s medieval cult carried into the era of the Reformation by preachers and authors eager to transform one of the central figures of popular piety into an exemplar of evangelical theology. This chapter will examine the features of the medieval legacy of Magdalene hagiography, surveying its development from the Patristic period and assessing its character on the eve of the Reformation in order to establish the ground on which sixteenth-century interpreters of the Magdalene were working. The medieval tradition included many different understandings of who the Magdalene was, but it is possible to identify some key themes that would inform the early modern dialogues about her character and activity.

The Magdalene had developed a rich legend over the course of fifteen hundred years of the Christian tradition, particularly rich given the paucity of descriptive material about her in the New Testament. With the important role she has in the Easter narrative, as the first witness and preacher of the resurrection, exegetes and theologians were

---

naturally inclined to muse on her identity: who was this figure, a woman with such unusual prominence, and why had she been chosen for this task from among all of Jesus’ early followers? What Katherine Jansen has called the “awkward[ness]” of the fact of Mary Magdalene’s gender led to a kind of anxious volubility in the medieval hagiography. The need to explain her character, to fill the enigmatic void left by those scant scriptural verses, produced myriad elaborations of her life both before and after her encounter with Christ on the road. Over the centuries Mary was made to speak not only her good news, but also her whole story, a chronicle of sin and redemption that contains within itself humanity’s fall and salvation. Her progress from sinner to penitent, from prodigal to ascetic, from witness to missionary, describes the arc of the church’s founding narrative. The varying emphases that can be found in different iterations of her story point to the preoccupations of those who gave her voice, to the questions that interested, inspired, and infuriated them most.

The hagiographic canon includes the preachers and authors who used the Magdalene legend in orthodox and unorthodox ways to shape the piety of their audiences, as well as the many holy women who saw themselves as descendants of Mary Magdalene. While devotion to the Virgin Mary remained central to popular piety, her almost supernatural status made her a somewhat presumptuous model for claims about one’s own spiritual life. Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, offered the hopeful example of an ordinary woman, even one with a sinful past, who had renounced the flesh for

---

contemplation and pious attachment to Christ. The different features of her story permitted women from many walks of life, whether married or celibate, to find points of comparison with their own experiences and aspirations. The various interpretations of her role also proved useful in women’s apologetics for their vocations, allowing both spirited defenses of public ministry and postures of humility in which women excused themselves as doing something other than preaching, like the testimony Christ commanded of the Magdalene.

The list of medieval women who identified themselves in some way with Mary Magdalene reads like a survey of high and late medieval female mysticism. Teresa Coletti presents one by no means exclusive catalogue: Christina of Markyate, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Margaret of Cortona, Ivetta of Huy, Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Margery Kempe. Much that was familiar in these authors’ works would find new life in discourses of reform that emerged in the late Middle Ages alongside the more traditional expressions of piety that continued to exist into the sixteenth century. Christine de Pizan’s employment of the Magdalene in the literary querelle des femmes foreshadowed the way in which Protestant women authors would appeal to the resurrection narrative in their arguments for public female preaching. In the less esoteric world of liturgical drama, the Digby Mary Magdalene Passion play from England at the turn of the sixteenth century confirms that the apostola apostolorum

---


trope on which Christine drew still held strong appeal at the popular level on the eve of the Reformation.⁵

Adding to the almost too fertile climate of Magdalene piety, a debate over the authority of her long-established legend broke at the opening of the sixteenth century. The controversy, initiated by the humanist biblical scholar Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples with the opposition led by the Bishop of Rochester, John Fisher, displays the concern, at the very beginning of the era of Reformation, to establish accurate histories for saints and to strip away the accretions of human tradition.⁶ Fisher’s counter-arguments reveal the threats perceived in changes to devotional practice and the continued loyalty felt to the saint in her medieval guise. The contradictions that Mary Magdalene’s multiform identity had held in creative tension through the medieval period would be reasserted with the dawning of the early modern era, exposing a question at the heart of Christian theology: the place of the human—sexual, sinful—in the divine economy.

The multiplicity of Magdalenes available to believers in the Middle Ages is not an incidental feature of her tradition, but helps explain her popularity over that long and complex era, as well as her adaptability to the changes of the era of Reformation. Helen Meredith Garth described the medieval Magdalene as a woman of extremes, suited to an age of extremes: great sin caused by the temptation of great delight in the world, and great penitence which fostered great love for God and compassion for Christ’s suffering.⁷

---

⁵ The title had come into use by the twelfth century, though its exact origins are unclear; Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, pp. 19, 62.
⁶ On Luther’s concern to purify the hagiographic tradition, see his Preface to Georg Major, Lives of the Fathers (1544), LW 60:316-17.
Garth analyzed the different medieval interpretations of Mary Magdalene, the most important of which were: as the patron of sinners and contemplative penitents; as a figure of symbolic identification for the Christian church as a whole and for individuals; and as the first preacher of the Gospel. Recent scholarship has explored the ways in which the contemplative and active modes of the Magdalene’s identity were each seen as forms of witness or testimony in the Christian narrative of salvation, serving the vocation of preaching. We will now turn to examine the ways in which these interpretive categories were used by the men and women of the medieval church.

The Development of the Medieval Cult

Scholars of late antiquity have traced the role of Mary Magdalene in the early centuries of Christian tradition, including her significant presence in the Gnostic gospels. Although some strains of the Gnostic Magdalene would endure in later historiography, most of her identity in that movement was lost with the suppression of texts such as The Gospel of Mary. The chief influence on the saint as she developed in medieval piety was Gregory the Great’s conflation of three biblical women, in a sermon from 591. Mary Magdalene is mentioned by name only twice in the Gospel accounts. She was a woman healed by Jesus of seven demons, who went on to support his ministry in the company of

---


9 Homilia 33 in Homiliarum in evangelia, PL 76:1239; see Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, pp. 32-35.
other women.\textsuperscript{10} She is also described as one of the women present at the Passion, witnessing Christ’s crucifixion and burial, and going to the tomb to anoint his body, only to discover that he had been raised from the dead.\textsuperscript{11} Not content to leave so important a figure with so meager an outline, Gregory chose the most conservative possible method for providing her with a more fully articulated personal history. Rather than invent a past, he simply identified her with two other characters in the New Testament: the sinful woman who washes Christ’s feet with her tears and is forgiven her sins, and Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, who is praised for her attention to Christ’s preaching, even at the expense of her household duties.\textsuperscript{12} The conflation of these three women, and sometimes others, would become ubiquitous throughout the medieval tradition, and the explanations of how one woman could have been sinfully debased and yet passionately devout, notorious and yet the chosen messenger of the resurrection, would occupy countless sermons, exegetical treatises, dramas, and mystical works.\textsuperscript{13}

Common among these legendary inquiries were a stock set of interpretations and elaborations of Mary Magdalene’s (and the associated women’s) appearances in the scriptural canon. She had been the privileged and beautiful daughter of a wealthy landowning family in Galilee, in a town called Magdala. Engaged to the young man who would become John the Evangelist, her wedding at Cana is the stage for Jesus’ first miracle, and also of her undoing: John is converted to discipleship and abandons the

\textsuperscript{10} Luke 8:1-3.
\textsuperscript{12} The story of the sinful woman is in Luke 7:36-50. The comparison between Mary and Martha is in Luke 10:38-42.
\textsuperscript{13} The other women with whom the Magdalene was associated were the woman taken in adultery of John 7:53-8:11, the bride in the Song of Songs, and the eremite Mary of Egypt, and also, less frequently, the Virgin Mary.
marriage at its inception. Frustrated, she succumbs to the temptations of the flesh and the powers of her own attractions, and gives herself to sensual gratification. At the urging of her sister, Martha, Mary finally heeds Jesus’ preaching, making a dramatic confession of her sins at the house of Simon the Pharisee, in the scene where she weeps over Christ’s feet and anoints him. After that she becomes his devoted disciple, even to the point of irritating the now perhaps regretful Martha, who would like some assistance with the housework, but Mary’s attentive contemplation is rewarded as being “the better part.” Finally, she remains faithful to Christ when the other disciples have fled in fear during the Passion and witnesses not only his suffering and death but his rising again as well. Thus is an abject sinner selected to bring the news of the resurrection to the rest of Christ’s followers.

The medieval legend did not conclude there, however. Speculation grew as to the activities of the disciples after the end of the scriptural record. Most older accounts have her travelling to Ephesus and dying there. By the ninth century a different history had taken shape, first appearing in a biography long attributed to the Carolingian scholar Rabanus Maurus. In this legend, which achieved wide popularity in the west, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are expelled from Jerusalem by opponents of the Gospel, journeying to the south of France, where they preach to pagans. Mary converts a king by a series of miraculous interventions that allow him and his barren queen to produce a child, and then she saves the apparently dead mother and baby after a disaster at sea. Following these

---

evangelical triumphs, Mary retires to a life of ascetic solitude in the mountains outside of Aix-en-Provence, where she is daily elevated by angels to be nourished on heavenly music and the Eucharist. After being given a last Communion by Bishop Maximus of Aix, her confessor and companion in the evangelizing of the region, she dies. Her relics (and the rapidly accumulating stories of their miraculous works) were claimed by churches in Marseilles, the reputed site of her preaching and burial, and Vézelay abbey in Burgundy, where they were supposed to have been brought to keep them from Muslim invaders in the ninth century. The first official record at Vézelay specifying the Magdalene as the abbey’s patron dates from 1050; papal recognition of Vézelay as the site of her relics was granted in 1058. The northern monastery experienced a corresponding surge in power and influence in the twelfth century. By 1279, however, St. Maximin’s shrine of Ste Madeleine de la Baume, near Aix-en-Provence, had staged an official discovery of the relics under the leadership of Prince Charles of Salerno and with the approval of Pope Martin IV, cancelling Vézelay’s claim. Thereafter, the abbey of Vézelay went into a decline, while the Provencal shrine, overseen by the Dominican Order, increased in prominence. As Katherine Jansen has noted, some of the hagiographic tradition thus developed to support local practices of piety and claims that met economic and political needs, as well as nurturing regional senses of spiritual

identity.\textsuperscript{19} At the same time, Mary Magdalene’s story would provide an occasion to define and defend particular expressions of monasticism.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{The First Penitent: The Magdalene as Ascetic Contemplative}

The sketch of her legend displays the principal themes of her cult: her great compassion for Christ in his suffering, born of his own forgiveness for her sins as well as of a specifically feminine affection with which the faithful could identify; her association with the contemplative life; and her preaching of the good news of Christ’s resurrection, in her role as \textit{apostola apostolorum}, which was then carried on beyond the time and place of his death. According to the account attributed to Rabanus Maurus,

She preached to unbelievers and strengthened believers… she was an example of conversion to sinners, a certain home of remission to penitents, a figure of compassion to the faithful and to all Christian people a proof of divine mercy… There was in the countenance of both Mary Magdalene and Martha a beauty to be venerated, honor in habits, and most swift grace for persuading in words. There was scarcely or never anyone found who returned unbelieving, or without weeping, from their preaching.\textsuperscript{21}

That which gave force to the preaching of both Mary and Martha was their relationship with Christ, who had stayed in their home and loved them and their brother as friends.

This intimacy was expanded on by yet another identification of Mary Magdalene with a scriptural figure, the bride in the Song of Songs. This work of erotic poetry became one of the most popular texts for allegorical and devotional interpretation in the Middle Ages. Mary Magdalene’s imagined speeches were often given in the romantic language of the \textit{Cantica Canticorum}, giving theologians and preachers a means to

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} Jansen, \textit{The Making of the Magdalen}, p. 45.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} Jansen, \textit{The Making of the Magdalen}, p. 46.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} PL 112:1495-96, translated in Garth, \textit{Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature}, p. 53.}
express and recommend a deep devotion to the person of Christ. Such piety was
inextricably linked to participation in the sacramental system of the church, with the bride
and, by extension, Mary Magdalene, seen as types of the church itself and models for the
individual’s encounter with church doctrine and practice. Entry into the life of the church
was constructed in the terms of a marriage: sacraments were the physical consummations
of the verbal pledges made by the penitent seeking union with the divine.

In the contemplation of that union, the penitent could be transformed into an
ecstatic contemplative according to the different patterns that developed for
contemplation over the course of the medieval period. The author of the life attributed to
Rabanus Maurus inserts a Song of Songs reference in the Mary-Martha comparison story,
as part of Mary’s self-description. “I sit in the shadow of my beloved, and the fruit of his
lips is sweet to my taste.”22 Further references proliferate: In the episode of the second
anointing, he writes, “While he was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance;” and
again in describing her preparing perfumes for the final anointing, in the grave: “My
hands dripped with myrrh; my fingers were covered with the choicest myrrh and aloes
and with the finest spices.”23 The earlier attribution of the life has been challenged by
modern scholars, who now suggest that the text is likely of Cistercian authorship, based
on similarities to texts by Bernard of Clairvaux, including Bernard’s Commentary on the

23 The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, pp. 56, 65. Cf. Song of Songs 1:12,
Song of Songs. According to this reading, the text represents a Cistercian form of Magdalene spirituality, with an emphasis on the contemplative life.\textsuperscript{24}

The interpretation of the Magdalene that develops in the text is a largely positive one, arranged so that her identity will support the character of Cistercian monasticism. \textit{The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha} includes evaluations celebrating the saint that will be observed as influential on other narratives in the tradition. For example, Mary Magdalene is favorably compared with the disciples who abandon Christ in the Passion.\textsuperscript{25} A connection is also made with the Virgin Mary, elevating the Magdalene by association; the author writes that the Magdalene’s soul was pierced when she witnessed the crucifixion.\textsuperscript{26} David Mycoff describes the particular character of this \textit{vita} as expressing the aims of Cistercianism’s twelfth-century monastic reform movement, though each of the themes Mycoff outlines resonate with the larger Magdalene tradition. For the Cistercians, charity was the “aim and intention of all speech;” it was the Magdalene’s great love for and intimacy with Christ that found necessary expression in her public speech, as in the speech of those inspired by her example.\textsuperscript{27} The Cistercian theological focus on prevenient and indwelling grace in relation to the story of the sinful woman of Luke 7 is an early exploration of the nature of salvation, which would be debated in interpretations of this text in late medieval and early modern preaching.\textsuperscript{28} Mary Magdalene was so strongly identified by the Cistercian

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha}, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha}, pp. 15-6.
tradition with contemplative withdrawal that her more active miracle stories are elided, while one of Martha’s is given instead.29 The biblical account of the two sisters was the *locus classicus* for the medieval separation of the contemplative from the active life. The emphasis on a rigorous distinction between the two vocations is clear as the text begins, “The contemplative life of that sweet lover of Christ, dearly loved by him and worthy to be named with reverence, the blessed Mary Magdalene; the active life of her glorious sister, the servant of Christ, Martha.”30

The Cistercians’ adaptation of the Magdalene in forming their identity and spirituality led to similar efforts by other monastic orders, as they emerged. The British Franciscan, Nicholas of Bozon, writing in the late thirteenth-early fourteenth century, produced an exploration of Mary Magdalene’s life as a redeemed penitent, blessed by intimacy with Christ. Bozon offers a theme of comfort and assurance for the sinner: “For this [reason] have I put it in the vernacular/In order to comfort the repentant/Through her who was a sinner–/So that despair may wound no heart.”31 The vernacular message of solace reflects the program of the new mendicant order, oriented toward the laity rather than the otherworldly cloister. In her very worldly early life, Mary Magdalene would have reminded Bozon’s audience of their founder’s own youth; St. Francis had been born into a wealthy family in Assisi and was converted in the midst of youthful exploits. Bozon gives a lengthy explanation for how a young woman of means and good family came to be a notorious sinner, beginning with the background to the anointing at

---

29 *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*, p. 21.  
30 *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*, p. 27.  
Bethany. The family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are rich landowners, so Mary is not a prostitute working for money, but rather sins for pleasure. “She had plenty to spend;/ She did not sin to obtain recompense.”\cite{32} She is converted by Christ’s preaching, which gives Bozon an opportunity to recommend to his listeners that they attend sermons as well, serving the cause of the Franciscan preaching order.\cite{33} The substance of Franciscan preaching, repentance and amendment of life, is also handily conveyed by the Magdalene’s story. Works of penitence, such as Mary’s washing of Jesus’ feet with her hair, are justly rewarded, as is confirmed by Bozon’s version of Christ’s words to Simon the Pharisee: “Therefore I say to you that he who loves more/ By right claims more reward.”\cite{34}

A late medieval chronicle of the saint, from fourteenth-century Florence, presents the concerns of its place and time as clearly as did the Cistercian and Franciscan lives; here the context is the secular city, with its threats to morality.\cite{35} The author contends that moral standards were very high in the first century and compares sinners of the early Christian era to promiscuous women of fourteenth-century Italy, claiming that the modern women are much worse. “I have thought many times of the women of today, seeing their graceless carriage, that had they lived in the time of the Magdalen, they would have been called more than sinners… Certain I am that the Magdalen did not uncover her bosom as they do.”\cite{36} In explaining the Magdalene’s immorality, the author

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Three Saints’ Lives by Nicholas Bozon}, p. 3.
\item \textit{Three Saints’ Lives by Nicholas Bozon}, p. 4.
\item \textit{Three Saints’ Lives by Nicholas Bozon}, p. 5.
\item \textit{The Life of Saint Mary Magdalen}, trans. Valentina Hawtrey, p. 9.
\end{itemize}
follows the traditional identification of Mary Magdalene as the disillusioned bride at Cana, giving him an opportunity to evoke a scene that would have resonated with his readers: an urban, upper-class wedding banquet. The familiar setting is peopled with a family and its friends as the author links numerous scriptural stories and characters together, making the Gospel events seem like nothing so much as the saga of a large and influential Florentine clan. Mary’s sister Martha is cast as the woman with the flow of blood, and her healing is what ultimately persuades the Magdalene to repent and seek out Christ. As she contemplates a conversion, the Magdalene is plagued by seven devils, still trying to tempt her away from a good life. After she receives forgiveness at the house of Simon the Pharisee, she resembles a fourteenth-century flagellant, attempting to take revenge on her body for her sinful past, scratching her face, tearing her hair, and stripping naked to beat herself bloody. She eats bread and water, and dresses in sackcloth; “she believed that no suffering could be sufficient satisfaction for her sins… and she began to… [ask] for fortitude to be able to do great and consummate penance.” Just as Mary becomes a contemplative ascetic, Martha busies herself with performing the charitable works of a more active order, like a fourteenth-century Italian confraternity, taking the poor and sick into her home, and going out to care for them. By the time she poses her fateful question comparing the two vocations, then, Martha is already established as a

tertiary, and she is asking Christ if Mary should be involved in these civic works, not pleading for help with mere housekeeping.  

Whether the focus is on ascetic discipline or works of penance, the parallel thus drawn between the saint and the ordinary sinner dominates the life presented here and suggests a central role the Magdalene played for late medieval piety. Vernacular texts such as the Italian life were aimed at lay and female audiences who could find themselves in stories recounted with immediacy and heightened emotion. Mary’s responses or soliloquies on the events of the Passion provide a script for the ordinary penitent’s experience during Passion Week, calling forth a sense of the believer’s own culpability in the death of Christ, shock at the insult to the divine majesty, and such deep compassion for Christ’s suffering that one enters, at least for a time, an altered state of consciousness, as does the swooning saint in the Italian chronicle.

Anne Thayer has examined the role of the identification with Mary Magdalene in preaching on the sacrament of penance in the late medieval and early Reformation eras. “Different sermon collections present the ideal penitent, often exemplified by Mary Magdalene, differently. Some stress her deeds of satisfaction, some her contrition; others portray her as making a powerful confession. These portraits convey varying expectations to hearers being urged to penitence.” The different portrayals of the Magdalene as penitent, Thayer argues, bespeak the theological value given to human versus divine action in justification and would influence which local theological traditions produced

---

41 The Life of Saint Mary Magdalen, trans. Valentina Hawtrey, p. 94.
42 The Life of Saint Mary Magdalen, trans. Valentina Hawtrey, e.g., pp. 171-72, 176, 197-98. See also Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, pp. 91-96.
which kinds of reaction in reform movements. The saint’s prominence in sermons on penitence was owing to her centrality in one of the pericopes most often used in defending the theology of the penitential system, Luke 7. The text clearly shows Christ bestowing forgiveness of sins and pronouncing absolution, therefore the woman was analyzed as a model of conduct that all penitents should adopt. But which of her actions were the salutary ones—her tears and service, or her internal sorrow and decision to seek Christ’s pardon? Any interpreters who thought that the theology of the sacrament of penance emphasized the wrong aspect of her example therefore felt a need to address and reform the public perception of “the saint most frequently cited” to provide assurance of the forgiveness of sins.  

Thayer explains how medieval saints, in particular Mary Magdalene, were used to undergird the penitential system:

> The saints were mentioned in the more frequently heard de tempore preaching. Their use betrays the late medieval concern for penitence. In general, the saints provide hope to the penitent, but they are always presented in ways that support and reinforce the church’s penitential system. As intercessors they pray to God for the penitential success of those still on their earthly pilgrimage. As models of penitence, they show the Christian how to proceed through the penitential process. And here Mary Magdalene has a most prominent place. On her feast day, 22 July, a day on which work stopped and many would attend the sermon, preachers ‘worked out the practical implications’ of the Church’s penitential theology; throughout the year, her familiar story provided a penitential point of connection between the preacher and his audience.

This homiletic practice is demonstrated in a thirteenth-century sermon for the feast of the Magdalene by the Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, “Such Love.” Bonaventure claims that “Mary Magdalene, then, is shown us as our model for repentance.” He portrays her

---

44 Thayer, Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation, p. 83.
45 Thayer, Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation, pp. 80-81.
as the one who loved Christ more than anyone else did. Amid its Franciscan concern for repentance, the sermon, like the Cistercian life of the Magdalene, includes many comparisons of her love to that described in the Song of Songs, reflecting the common currency of this medieval trope. Finally, Bonaventure encourages all Christians to imitate the Magdalene’s affective piety, and to have such love for Christ. To borrow another of Bonaventure’s metaphors, human love becomes the ladder by which the sinful soul ascends to God.

Later medieval authors of sermon collections also presented the emotional manner of the Magdalene’s contrition as exemplary, drawing on the typical characteristics of her legendary identity, as well as the sparer descriptions in the scriptural record. Johannes of Werden, in his 1494 sermon collection, *Sermones dormi secure de sanctis*, praises Mary’s tears, saying that many weep over other things, but too few weep sufficiently over their sins. Paratus (pseud.), in his 1492 *Sermones parati de tempore et de sanctis*, praises her eagerness in confession, as she hastens to the house of Simon the Pharisee immediately upon Jesus’ arrival, without waiting. This salutary sense of her guilt continues to affect her behavior even after her forgiveness, as Paratus commends the Magdalene’s persistent penitence, expressed in ascetic living for over thirty years after the Ascension of Christ.

---

47 Bonaventure, *Rooted in Faith*, p. 54.
49 Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 55. The saint’s tears were also praised by Michael of Hungary, in his collection, *Sermones praedicabiles per totum annum, licet breves, s. Sermones tredecim* (Strasbourg: Georgius Husner, 1494), Sermon 7, here p. 113.
51 Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, pp. 105-06.
In addition to describing the attitude of her confession, preachers addressed themselves to the question of how that confession effected her forgiveness. Some stressed Mary Magdalene’s contrition and God’s grace, while others emphasized the works of satisfaction in which her contrition was expressed. The German Johannes Herolt, author of a collection published in 1494, represents those who focused on the labor of satisfaction.\(^{52}\) Herolt’s Sermon 14 makes his position clear: “Mary Magdalene exemplifies those who ‘through penal works fulfill the satisfactions for their sins’” and therefore do not have to go through Purgatory.\(^{53}\) In Sermon 27, Herolt lists the parts of her body (eyes, hair, mouth, perfumed skin) with which she had sinned against God, and which she then uses to perform the satisfaction for her sins.\(^{54}\) It is up to her to correct the perversions of the will that had corrupted her body, by forcibly turning each part to its proper use. After she had worked out her own salvation, she could then intervene on behalf of others. Herolt goes on to offer two stories of the saint assisting in the penitential process: one in which she asks for forgiveness for a sinner who confesses to her in writing, another in which she aids a dying sinner to confess to a priest.\(^{55}\) Like Herolt, the English preacher John Mirk urges listeners to repent and do penance, as the Magdalene did. “For she was the [one] in the time of grace that did penance for her sins, and so again recovered, by doing penance and repenting.”\(^{56}\) For Mirk, unlike for many embroiderers on the traditional hagiography, she is silent: “But she spoke no word that man might hear,

---

\(^{52}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 84.

\(^{53}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 85.

\(^{54}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 85.

\(^{55}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, pp. 82-3.

\(^{56}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 88.
but in her heart she cried vigorously to Christ for mercy."\(^{57}\) This may reflect discomfort with female speech, or the fact that late medieval confession was private, rather than public, and so a purely internal disposition of penitence was being modeled for his audience.

By contrast with these commendations of the works and outward ceremonies of penance, Robert Caracciolo in Italy used the Luke 7 text to contemplate and hymn divine mercy. In his 1472 collection of penitential sermons, he portrays Jesus’ “sweet” kindness to the sinner, and gives the woman—admittedly, silent in the scriptural account in Luke 7— an imagined, passionate confession, to which Jesus responds with language of absolution.\(^{58}\) Thayer contends that this exchange not only embellished the evangelist’s description, but also set up a model for contemporary believers receiving the pastoral office. “The relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is likely to mirror the ideal Caracciolo envisions between confessor and penitent.”\(^{59}\) Caracciolo encourages participation in the sacrament of penance, just as Mirk had, but describes a more emotive engagement with the ritual. The enacting of a sacramental scene familiar to the audience would have served to support the practice, guiding the penitent’s experience and reinforcing the role of the priest with the comparison to Christ.

A similar rehearsal of confessional practice can be seen in an altarpiece by the fifteenth-century Flemish artist Dieric Bouts, *Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee*. In keeping with the generally heightened interest in penitential spirituality toward the end of the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene’s role as the penitent sinner of Luke 7 was

\(^{57}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 89.
\(^{58}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 87.
\(^{59}\) Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 88.
increasingly the subject of depiction in the visual arts. Bouts’ painting shows the repentant Magdalene with an emphasis on her humility, grief for her sins evident in her face. Within the composition, she is placed directly under the sign of absolution made by Christ’s fingers, as a sinner would be in receiving the sacrament of penance, as in the effort to evoke the actions of the liturgy made in Caracciolo’s preached description of the scene, and likewise portraying a Magdalene whose integrity is manifested as vivid emotion.60

Mary Magdalene functioned as the model for fifteenth-century artists such as Bouts, as they worked to illustrate the doctrine of the penitential system. The contrast between her abject contrition and her sumptuous clothing as a woman of luxury only sharpened with the turn of the sixteenth century, as the treatment of the Magdalene’s image became harsher on the eve of the Reformation.61 In Hendrik Dowerman’s _Magdalena_ from Kalkar, for example, she is dressed as a wealthy contemporary woman in the latest fashion.62 She is likewise elaborately dressed as an early sixteenth-century lady in the reliquary bust displayed in Albrecht of Brandenberg’s Moritzburgkapelle, also known as the Maria-Magdalenenkapelle, in Halle.63

These dual identities, as ideal penitent and as exemplary sinner, both point to the importance of gender in considering the Magdalene’s role in medieval spirituality. Her penance is burnished by feminine tears and late-born modesty, just as her sinfulness

---

ripens into full-blown voluptuousness in portrayals of her pre-conversion state. Katherine Jansen has outlined the medieval debate that rejected a public preaching or teaching ministry for women while at the same time adopting the Magdalene as a model for male preachers.⁶⁴ While sinfulness disqualified her and other women from leadership roles in the church, it served, paradoxically, to encourage those who could preach, by assuring them that God chooses sinners to spread the Gospel.⁶⁵ Equally hopeful was the message that Mary Magdalene’s works of penance were effective, for herself and others, in achieving a reunion with God for those compromised by sinful acts and inclinations.

Given her role as model penitent, and especially her connection to atonement for sexual sin, combined with the theme of powerful conversion and reform, another role for the Magdalene came naturally: she was made the patron of convents and homes for reformed prostitutes, beginning in the twelfth century. The first prostitution reform campaign was initiated in France ca. 1100, and the movement reached a peak of enthusiasm in the 13th-14th centuries, following Pope Gregory IX’s bull endorsing the foundation of “repenties.”⁶⁶ The Chronicle of Colmar describes the founding of the first such convent after the issuing of the papal bull, the Sorores Poenitentes Beatae Mariae Magdalenae, in the mid-thirteenth century. Another was founded amid a Dominican preaching campaign in Pisa in 1240, the Sorores Repentite Hospitalis S. Marie Magdalene de Spina. In 1257, Santa Maria Maddalena a Penitente was established in Florence; in 1342, Santa Maria Maddalena was founded in Naples, under the patronage

---

of Queen Sancia. Rebecca Lea McCarthy notes the breadth of the phenomenon: “Out of 51 new foundations, 32 were of the order of Penitents of St. Mary Magdalene. However, other convents that housed repentant prostitutes, and not named for Mary Magdalene, also used the Magdalene as their patron saint.”

Just as her penitence was occasioned and shaped by her identity as a woman, the Magdalene’s gender contributed to the character of her role as the ideal contemplative and to how other women identified with that model. Caroline Walker Bynum notes that Catherine of Siena’s biographer, Raymond of Capua, dwells on the Magdalene’s fasting as her most exemplary feature. Thus the self-destruction of her body, of her feminine beauty and fertility, is presented as the pinnacle of women’s spirituality, erasing the marks of the Fall: the temptation and subsequent punishment of Eve with pain in childbearing. Even where no explicit comparison to Mary Magdalene was made, biographers of medieval holy women drew on her legend for their construction of sanctity, establishing her characteristics as paradigmatic for female holiness. St. Colette of Corbie’s Vie, written in approximately 1447 by her confessor, Pierre de Vaux, uses this strategy to give authority to his subject. Colette was a very politically involved abbess, leading a reform in her order, a figure whose public power was noted as dangerous, even as it was identified as apostolic during her lifetime. In creating her hagiography, Pierre writes about her asceticism, her “abundance of tears,” and calls her

---

68 McCarthy, Origins of the Magdalene Laundries, p. 80.
an “apostle.” All of these elements of the Magdalene’s character would have been well-known and meaningful to his Burgundian readers, in the region where one of her major shrines, Vézelay, was located. The royal house of Burgundy claimed its lineage from the king and queen who had been miraculously aided by Mary Magdalene in her legend. Similar identifications with a figure both sinful and redeemed, both meek and powerful, were used to authorize institutions and individuals for reform and innovation in the medieval church.

*The First Christian: Mary Magdalene in Relation to Church and Self*

The Magdalene served, for many exegetes and theologians, as a symbolic figure for the church itself, expressing its need for reform. In times when the church engaged in self-criticism, such as the twelfth century, the Magdalene provided a ready image of a contrite figure, much loved by Christ despite her sinful character, and able to be turned to the divine purpose once she has been converted from error. The equation to a sinful but redeemable human institution had been made by figures from Augustine to Odo of Cluny, who included a reference to the meaning of Magdala (strong tower) as representing the church, and Rupert of Deutz.

The identification of Mary Magdalene with the institution of the church presented interesting challenges, given Mary’s character as a woman, and an especially sinful one

---

75 Gössmann, “Maria Magdalena als Typus der Kirche,” pp. 60-61, 63.
at that. As a woman, the very fact of her public preaching constituted a problem, for it contradicted Paul’s express injunction of female silence in 1 Corinthians 14, a dilemma that did not escape the notice of medieval theologians. Katherine Jansen has argued that the mendicant orders’ conscious appeal to a female model for preaching was particularly useful for their reform efforts. Identifying publicly with the humility of her gender helped set them apart from the established religious authorities, Peter’s church, that they sought to criticize, yet maintained a non-threatening posture of female submission.76 The Magdalene’s role as a symbol of the church was ambiguous; her gender lent both positive and negative associations to the image. She could be embraced as a representation of female meekness, or criticized as a representation of female unruliness and potential for disorder (or even heresy). Luci Halliwell and Beverly Mayne Kienzle have also noted the conflict between the church as represented by Mary Magdalene, passionately devoted but potentially ungovernable, and the church as represented by Peter, figure of ecclesiastical authority and doctrinal orthodoxy.77 This conflict is not merely a modern insight, a wistful musing on the egalitarian church that might have been, but was played out in the set pieces of medieval religious drama, in doubtless crowd-pleasing scenes where the jubilant and garrulous Mary is shouted down by a stern Peter, lest the church be founded on the untrustworthy chatter of women.

76 Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, pp. 84-89.
77 Beverly Mayne Kienzle, “Penitents and Preachers: The Figure of Saint Peter and His Relationship to Saint Mary Magdalene,” La figura di san Pietro nelle fonti del medioevo. Atti del convegno tenutosi in occasione dello Studiorum universitatum docentium congressus (Viterbo e Roma 5-8 settembre 2000), ed. Loredana Lazzari and Anna Maria Valente Bacci. Textes et etudes du moyen age, 17 (Louvain-la-Neuve: F.I.D.E.M., 2001), p. 272. Halliwell, Mary of Magdala, p. 27, traces this conflict to the early church and the era of composition of the Gnostic Gospels, such as Gospels of Thomas and of Phillip, which portray men resenting Mary for speaking and seeking prominence among the disciples.
A necessary transformation was achieved by the ultimate subjection of her character to the leadership of the male disciples. Dramatists actively exploited the potential conflict between Mary Magdalene and male saints, including Peter, to achieve dramatic tension and to present the birth of an authoritative church. The late medieval English Wakefield/Towneley Mystery plays, for example, have St. Paul present at Mary Magdalene’s announcement of the resurrection and rebuking her for speaking publicly, refusing to believe based on women’s unreliable words. The plays describe a narrative of reform from the very beginnings of the Christian tradition, with heretical or unreliable elements in the church, personified by the Magdalene, being conformed to orthodox teaching.

Less problematic than her speech, her sorrow at the tomb was praised and often compared favorably in Passion plays with the desertion of the other followers of Jesus. The contrast between her mourning and then her rejoicing at the resurrection was used to theatric effect, heightening the audience’s sense of cathartic transformation. Jean Michel’s Mystère de la Passion, from the end of the 15th century, establishes a dramatic contrast between Mary Magdalene’s faithfulness, displayed in vivid grief and joy, and the lack of faith displayed by Jewish characters in the play. The anti-Semitism of medieval drama becomes a feature of her interaction with the Jewish characters, especially interesting in relation to her role as symbol of the church. Michel was following a

79 Garth, Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature, p. 66-7.
80 Garth, Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature, p. 36.
81 Garth, Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature, p. 37.
tradition that compared the Magdalene, in her identity as the church, the bride of Christ, to the Jewish community. In Michel’s dramatic narrative there is a movement from this kind of virulent condemnation of the Jews to an opening of hope for conversion, apparent in her scene with the Jewish apothecary who sells Mary Magdalene the ointment she was taking to prepare Jesus’ body for burial. Michel describes her temptations in terms his audience would readily have understood. He equates the seven demons driven out of Mary Magdalene to the seven deadly sins, following a common medieval interpretation.

He describes the saint of late antiquity as a fifteenth-century chatelaine with courtly lovers and Lazarus as her noble brother, a knight hunting with falcons.

Just as Michel adapted his character to French social structures and culture, the English Digby Mysteries, also from the last half of the fifteenth century, tell the story of the Magdalene in ways suited to the local audience. The Digby Passion cycle includes Christ's Burial and Resurrection and Mary Magdalene, both of which feature her character. Jacob Bennett has discussed the influence of the plays’ setting; they were produced in a coastal area, and the text therefore emphasizes the sea voyage of the

---

83 Her faithfulness is a foil for Synagoga, a figure representing the Jews, in the twelfth-century Gospels of Henry the Lion and Matilda. See Elizabeth Monroe, “‘Fair and Friendly, Sweet and Beautiful’: Hopes for Jewish Conversion in Synagoga’s Song of Songs Imagery,” in Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture, Mitchell B. Merback, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 41-42. Also in the late twelfth-early thirteenth century, Pope Innocent and Joachim of Fiore both interpreted the uncomprehending Magdalene of the Johannine resurrection narrative to the Jews, while presenting Peter and John as the faithful Latin and Greek peoples, respectively. See Brett Edward Whalen, Dominion of God: Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 135-36.

84 Pinto-Mathieu, Marie-Madeleine dans la littérature du Moyen Age, p. 241. Jewish narrators are shown to be especially taken with the example of the Magdalene’s conversion, and the mercy offered her by Christ, in the anonymous, early sixteenth-century Play of Lazarus’ Death, in People and Texts: Relationships in Medieval Literature, Thea Summerfield and Keith Busby, eds. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 176-77.

85 Garth, Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature, pp. 31, 93.

86 Garth, Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature, p. 64.
Magdalene, using a mariner’s vocabulary.\textsuperscript{87} The tavern in which the Magdalene is tempted in the beginning of the play resembles a late medieval English tavern.\textsuperscript{88} Not only the setting, but the treatment of character in the play also encourages viewers’ identification with the events and experience of the Passion. In \textit{Mary Magdalene}, the focus is on the Magdalene herself; Christ has moved to the background, as the object of her first-person observation. The play contains a concluding morality section exploring the saint’s temptation, fall, and repentance. Bennett argues that this focus on a single character and her experience marks a shift from medieval morality plays and explores a more naturalistic psychology. “The morality in this instance is not so much one in the orthodox sense showing the plight of Mankind or Everyman but is more a means of depicting the struggle within a troubled individual.”\textsuperscript{89} The identification of the Magdalene can be seen to be in transition here, from a collective symbol of the whole church to a figure with whom audience members are encouraged to identify as individuals. Elisabeth Pinto-Mathieu has also pointed out this shift in the Magdalene’s role in liturgical drama from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the fifteenth, from a symbol of the church who begins and closes the action, to a more realistic human figure who appears throughout.\textsuperscript{90}

Scott Boehnen has examined the power of this revelation of a saint’s nearness to normal human experience.

\textsuperscript{88} Bennett, “The ‘Mary Magdalene’ of Bishop's Lynn,” p. 6.
\textsuperscript{89} Bennett, “The ‘Mary Magdalene’ of Bishop's Lynn,” p. 8.
\textsuperscript{90} Pinto-Mathieu, \textit{Marie-Madeleine dans la littérature du Moyen Âge}, p. 209. See also Maria Norberta Hoffmann, \textit{Die Magdalenenszenen im geistlichen Spiel des deutschen Mittelalters} ... (Wurzburg, K. Triltsch, 1933), p. 64.
The cult of sainthood of the Middle Ages drew its power from the representation of saints as at once ordinary and extraordinary. A saint was an ordinary human in his or her often violent attachment to sin—as with Saint Paul or Saint Augustine. This ordinary, humanized current of hagiographic representation empowers the saintly figure as an effective intercessor, even after he or she achieves extraordinary spiritual power or the extraordinary favor of God: the narrative of a saint’s life must, in a sense, position the saintly exemplum mid-way between the church militant and the heavenly church—neither too close nor too remote from earthly Christian life.91

Mary Magdalene is introduced at the beginning of the Digby play as an anti-hero in whom audience members can see themselves and their own lives as they are, fraught with faults and temptations. For Boehnen, the chief area of life explored by the play is the religious pilgrimage. The main dramatic question of the play is, “what constitutes a spiritually correct pilgrimage?” – addressing the tendency of fifteenth-century pilgrimage to become “secular tourism.”92 The pre-conversion Magdalene thus sets out on a pilgrimage from her home to Jerusalem without confessing first, as one was supposed to, and engages in sinful acts along the way. Indeed, sexual license was a lamented feature of medieval pilgrims’ conduct, critiqued in the ca. 1424 Imitation of Christ as “sensual curiosity.”93 After repenting and enlisting as a disciple, she then performs an exemplary, correct pilgrimage to Marseilles, in which idolatry of miracle-working saints is discouraged and the audience is urged toward a Christ-centered piety.94 Boehnen argues that this constitutes a demonstration of the reform-minded teaching on the eve of the Reformation, possibly influenced by the religious critiques of the anti-authoritarian Lollards.

The reform themes of the play, the transition from idolatrous to metaphorical and spiritual pilgrimage, may have led to its survival, when copies of other saints’ plays were destroyed.\textsuperscript{95} Boehnen suggests that the play’s extant manuscript originally belonged to William Blomfild, a young Catholic priest in the early sixteenth century, who would become a Lutheran-leaning clergyman by 1529 and eventually a Calvinist. This line of argument serves as a microcosm of the larger preoccupation of this study: that the survival of the Magdalene, through the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, depended on the flexibility of interpreters of her tradition, in adapting different elements of her story to advance new theological programs.

A new theology of lay piety was needed to accommodate economic and social developments at the close of the Middle Ages. As Joanne Findon argues, “Mid-fifteenth-century culture was struggling to redefine itself within ‘a work-centered ideology that would allow them [lay people] to be pious without leaving their secular activities.’”\textsuperscript{96} Among the expanded possibilities for women’s lay piety were both devotional and secular roles, described with notable respect in the Digby \textit{Mary Magdalene}. Unlike much other medieval drama, the play refrains from mockery at Mary Magdalene’s expense (though there is comedy in the play), bespeaking a local climate of civility between clergy and holy women.\textsuperscript{97} The play also departs from the hagiographic convention by having Mary Magdalene pay for passage, alone, on a ship bound for Marseilles, after


\textsuperscript{97}Findon, \textit{Lady, Hero, Saint}, p. 155.
being told by Christ to become an “apostylesse.” The uniqueness of this journey to France, made without her traditional companions, makes the Digby Magdalene into a new kind of dramatic hero; the solitary heroic journeys of medieval literature are more usually undertaken by male protagonists. Findon contends that Mary Magdalene’s freedom of movement in the play offered imaginative possibilities to women whose lives were more circumscribed than those of men. Even within the outlines of an ordinary, laywoman’s life, the Digby play offers innovation, with its depiction of companionate marriage between the king and queen of Marseilles, a relationship that is given saintly approval by Mary Magdalene’s support. As Findon notes, “This depiction may reflect the shifts in late medieval ideas about marriage, in particular the rise of ‘sacramental marriage.’” In bringing together previously disparate or conflicted groups, such as the established authorities of the church and idiosyncratic mystics (or husbands and wives!), the Digby Magdalene is able to accomplish a reunion of warring opposites represented by her own character since the days of the early church. “This Mary Magdalene knits together earth and heaven, lay and clerical, rich and poor, male and female, human failure and heavenly grace, in one unifying vision.”

The saint’s unifying role, assisting believers to cross boundaries such as that between clergy and laity, sacred and profane, is attested by the visual record of the medieval church. The Magdalene first appeared in depictions of Gospel events, and those

---

100 Findon, Lady, Hero, Saint, p. 187.
101 Findon, Lady, Hero, Saint, p. 182.
102 Findon, Lady, Hero, Saint, p. 192.
continued to be the most common instances of her appearance in religious art. Her role in late medieval Passion imagery was often that of an intermediary figure, drawing the viewer into a sense of immediate participation in the scene. In Jan Van Eyck’s *The Crucifixion: The Last Judgment* (1430), for example, the Magdalene serves as a focal point, kneeling and praying in the same stance as the viewer would, dressed in expensive finery suggesting her worldly attachments.\textsuperscript{103} One can identify more with her than with the Virgin Mary, whose extreme grief doubles her over and thus hides her face from the viewer. Isabelle Chamska has argued that in late medieval crucifixions the Magdalene is “much more humane, tender, and passionate” than the more otherworldly Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{104} Similarly, in Rogier van der Weyden’s *Deposition* (1435), Mary Magdalene is the figure toward which the composition points. She is not at its center, however, which contains the arms of Christ and the Virgin Mary, but at its periphery, again, at the intersection of the dramatic plane with the viewer’s world. As with her physical location, her affect is accessible: her eyes are open, and she is praying. The artist creates a greater connection with her than with the dead Christ or with his mother, who looks dead herself from grief and is therefore distanced from the viewer, who would approach their supernatural trauma in the Magdalene’s attitude of watchful prayer.\textsuperscript{105}

The imitative piety fostered by such images can be observed in self-identification with the Magdalene in the religious writing of medieval women. The Italian holy woman known as Blessed Battista typified the late medieval focus on compassion for Christ’s

\textsuperscript{103} Lahr, *Searching for Mary Magdalene*, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{105} Lahr, *Searching for Mary Magdalene*, p. 28.
suffering, suggesting an association between herself and Mary Magdalene. Her 1488 treatise, *I Dolori Mentali di Gesù*, tells of how a vision of Christ directed her toward an emotional, unregulated devotion that conformed to the model of the Magdalene. “Christ tells [Battista] that the Magdalen ‘loved me without order and without measure. So too, without order and without measure was her sorrow.’” The pattern of a woman’s conversation with Christ, as Battista experiences in her vision, takes its precedent from Christ’s dialogues with Mary Magdalene and the other women with whom she is linked in scripture, so that both the content of affective piety and the form of spiritual discourse are determined by the image of the Magdalene.

One very prominent example of the internal dialogue, with the author in the role of Mary Magdalene contemplating Christ’s suffering, takes place in the writing of the English mystic, Margery Kempe. This identification is used to authorize Kempe’s own, sometimes publicly suspect mystical experiences. Suzanne Craymer has described how Kempe, a married woman, approaches a level of spiritual self-dedication normally reserved in the medieval period for avowed religious: she “justifies her ‘way to high perfection’ through manipulating the legend of Mary Magdalene.”

---

106 On individual holy women and female communities reading and being influenced by exegetical texts about Mary Magdalene, see Kienzle, “Penitents and Preachers,” p. 270.
be worthy of thy love as Mary Magdalene was.”¹¹⁰ In her vision of the Passion she stands in the place of the Magdalene and Christ addresses her, telling her that he does, indeed, love her in the same way as he loved the original Mary. The comparison is not solely flattering, however. Kempe excuses herself for the apparent presumption of such a parallel, recording her own history of temptation by the same sins as had lured Mary Magdalene to her profligate, early fall. Margery’s love of fine clothes and her pride in her status as a business woman represent the luxury associated with the Magdalene’s wealth and position, and an adulterous relationship in Margery’s past reveals the same capacity for sensuality that formed such a vivid part of medieval legends of the saint.¹¹¹

Despite such sinful histories, both women receive similar graces as rewards for their compassion: Margery hears heavenly music, just as the Magdalene does in the account in the *Golden Legend*.¹¹² Both women are described as regaining virginal purity after their conversions, which they express through the adoption of white clothing.¹¹³ Likewise, both were blamed for the same spiritual faults. Though instructed by the Virgin Mary in a vision that she must weep like Mary Magdalene, Margery was publicly rebuked for over-lacrymose mourning, an ironic repetition of a criticism directed at the saint herself, in liturgical Passion dramas of the period.¹¹⁴

Though not without the problematic associations of sin and female hysteria, the ultimate effect of Kempe’s self-identification is the authorization of her visions and her

¹¹³ Craymer, “Margery Kempe's Imitation of Mary Magdalene and the ‘Digby Plays,’” pp. 177-78.
public testimony. In one vision, Christ himself makes Kempe his “spokeswoman… ‘I am in you and you are in me and those that hear you hear the voice of God.’”\footnote{Craymer, “Margery Kempe’s Imitation of Mary Magdalene and the ‘Digby Plays,’” p. 178.} Like the Magdalene, then, Margery has been commanded by the incarnate God to speak on his behalf before his church; the many ways in which her story echoes that of the biblical figure confirm Kempe in this role, both to herself and as an argument in favor of her authority, for others. It is a carefully negotiated position. Victor Scherb has discussed the painstaking deference observed by both the saint, as presented in the Digby Magdalene play, and by Kempe, before male clerics.\footnote{Victor I. Scherb, “Blasphemy and the Grotesque in the Digby ‘Mary Magdalene,’” \textit{Studies in Philology}, Vol. 96, No. 3 (Summer, 1999):231.} This respect for established religious authorities serves to present both Mary Magdalene and Kempe as figures themselves deserving of due regard and attention from their audiences and helps ward off the threats of persecution or mockery.

Just as the Magdalene and Margery Kempe recognize and defer to the orthodox leadership of the church, so do they expose and confront false teaching. For example, in the Digby play, “the spiritual authority of Mary’s preaching” is shown to overpower pagans and heretics.\footnote{Scherb, “Blasphemy and the Grotesque in the Digby ‘Mary Magdalene,’” p. 237. On the conflict with heresy in the late Middle Ages, and the use of the authority of the saints to counter it, by mendicant preaching orders, see Gyorgy Galamb, “Sainthood in the Propaganda of Mendicant Orders: The Case of the \textit{Dialogus contra fraticellos} of James of the Marches,” in Otto Gecser, ed., \textit{Promoting the Saints: Cults and Their Contexts from Late Antiquity until the Early Modern Period: Essays in Honor of Gábor Klánizcay for His 60th Birthday} (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press: Central European University, Department of Medieval Studies, 2011), p. 255.} The presence of two pagans, a priest and his assistant, in a scene depicting the Magdalene’s preaching in Marseilles, “thus enhance[s] Mary’s status as a powerful speaker, one who brings the news of Christ’s resurrection to the other apostles
and participates in the conversion of pagan Europe.”

Scherb and Teresa Coletti have noted the “precarious” position of female preachers in fourteenth- to fifteenth-century England, as such license was then linked to Lollardism. “The East Anglian saint play portrays its principal subject engaged in the very behaviors that at various moments had attracted such vociferous opposition in fifteenth-century England.”

The late fourteenth-century Lollard Walter Brut had offered Mary Magdalene as an example that authorized women to preach and perform sacraments. In an effort to establish her own orthodoxy in such a perilous climate, Margery Kempe had imitated Mary Magdalene’s achievement in the play, making a favorable comparison between heresy and her own speech as a strategy of authorization.

The First Missionary: The Magdalene as Preacher of the Resurrection

The Magdalene’s scriptural role as first witness of the resurrection was used to support the preaching ministry of those who identified with her, male and female. This function is evident in the hagiographic tradition, especially in the lives produced by monastic orders whose mission included preaching. In the Cistercian life, her divinely authorized preaching receives particular emphasis: she is both “the evangelist of the resurrection” and “the apostle of his ascension to the apostles.”

The Magdalene is included in a group of apostles who gather just before the Ascension for a meal with

---

119 Coletti, Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints, p. 144.
120 Coletti, Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints, p. 142. See also Kienzle, “Penitents and Preachers,” pp. 271. Waldensians had made similar claims; see Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, p. 57.
121 The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, p. 73.
Christ, who commands them all to preach.\textsuperscript{122} The account of the Ascension which follows even gives her priority among the apostles, as her status is equated with that of John the Baptist. “And standing with the apostles at the ascension, as though pointing with her finger to the ascending host, she showed that she was equal to John the Baptist in being more than a prophet.”\textsuperscript{123} When she and her companions reach Gaul, they divide the territory amongst themselves, and each preach to a part.\textsuperscript{124} Despite her great, almost salvific faith expressed in such effective proclamation, the Cistercian account features a more human than supernatural preacher, in comparison with other versions. The saint here fails to believe in the resurrection, even after seeing the empty tomb; she is not convinced until she meets the risen Christ and is addressed by name, following the Johannine Gospel narrative.\textsuperscript{125} The author also dismisses the ravishing–the legendary, daily elevation of the Magdalene by angels, in which she is fed on heavenly food–as false.\textsuperscript{126}

This version does include her ascetic sojourn in the desert, though, so that alongside the presence of a call to preach, the Cistercian Magdalene is deeply committed to contemplative withdrawal and can only consider a public ministry as part of the expression of her interior life. The text discusses her reluctance to leave silent prayer in order to preach and stresses the importance of an attitude of contemplation for true preaching. “So from time to time she left the joys of contemplation and preached to the

\textsuperscript{122} The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{124} The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{125} The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{126} The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, p. 98.
unbelievers or confirmed believers in the faith… For her lips spoke from the fullness of her heart, and because of this all her preaching was a true exercise of divine contemplation.”

A German life of the saint from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, a manuscript now known as the Nürnberger Maria Magdalena-Legende III, similarly emphasizes a specific incarnation of monastic preaching in Magdalene piety, in this case the culture of the Dominican order, which had adopted the saint as its patron in 1297. The legend “describes Mary Magdalene as a Dominican nun, that is to say, as a preacheress; she loves the order and calls the Dominicans her brothers.” Here her relationship to the preaching and teaching vocation is less ambiguous; the Dominican Magdalene does not express the Cistercian saint’s scruples about leaving her contemplative life. “Then I became a preacheress and apostless,” she declares. Madeleine Boxler has described how the saint functioned, in this and other lives in late medieval Germany, as a figure of imitation for the Dominican preaching order to rally round. The theological basis for the association had been developed by Pope Gregory X, who had commended the mendicant orders as exemplifying the virtues of both Mary and Martha, both contemplation and action. A fourteenth-century sermon by the Italian Dominican, Giovanni da San Gemingnano, demonstrates the extent to which his order saw itself practicing an active preaching ministry in harmony with a contemplative vocation, rather

127 The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha, p. 86.
128 Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, p. 76.
than in tension with it. He understands the Magdalene herself as able to represent both ways of life. “The Magdalene selected the best life for herself because sometimes, as it were, she was active and she ministered to him… she was also a contemplative, as it were, when she was meditating, listening to his words. This was an admirable life made best through the exercise of both lives.”

Though individual forms of monasticism and their understandings of preaching are reflected in the vitas that emerged from those orders, the wider tradition of the saint’s life also featured significant emphasis on her preaching and its theological implications. Jacobus de Voragine’s thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* constitutes a synthesis of much of the hagiographic lore that had developed over the preceding thousand years. *The Golden Legend* was likely produced originally as a resource for Dominican preachers, but quickly became a popular and widely accessible devotional work. In Voragine’s narrative, the vividness of Mary Magdalene’s initial proclamation to the disciples on Easter morning is repeated in her preaching at Marseilles, where she demonstrates her rhetorical capability: “She came forward, her manner calm and her face serene, and with well-chosen words called them away from the cult of idols and preached Christ fervidly to them.” Establishing boundaries for this persuasive power, Voragine confirms her subservience to Rome. The relationship between Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, and Peter, the first among the apostles, is explored in terms of a deft negotiation between Magdalene and Petrine authority. When challenged by the infertile Provençal

---

135 *Golden Legend*, p. 376.
136 *Golden Legend*, p. 376.
governor, “Do you think you can defend the faith you preach?” she responds with confidence but is careful to ground her authority in the primacy of Peter whose superiority to her is clearly stated, as is his Roman connection: “‘I am ready indeed to defend it,’ she replied, ‘because my faith is strengthened by the daily miracles and preaching of my teacher Peter, who presides in Rome!’” Later, when he confirms the content of the Magdalene’s promise to the king, Peter praises the “good advice” the king has received, but does not mention Mary Magdalene by name; he is clearly the authoritative figure and does not need to appeal to her identity to secure his own pronouncements.

By contrast, in Nicholas of Bozon’s account of the conversion of the Provençal king when he meets St. Peter the bishop of Rome is explicitly supportive of the Magdalene, encouraging trust in her by name. Based on the *Golden Legend*, Bozon’s presentation of the saint is more positive than its source in several aspects of its treatment of her preaching and her suitability as an evangelist. Bozon makes an unusual addition to the typical presentation of the story, one not included in Voragine’s account, and contradicting the Cistercian life’s assertion of the saint’s ignorance about the resurrection. Bozon claims that even as she approached the tomb on Easter morning, she had faith that Christ would rise again, as he had told her he would. “But from that which she had heard—/That he would rise again—/She took comfort to herself.” After the Ascension she and her family go to Marseilles, where she preaches to a house of pagans. Again, this

---

138 *Golden Legend*, p. 379.
140 *Three Saints’ Lives by Nicholas Bozon*, p. 8.
account features a more laudatory description than its source in the *Golden Legend*, stressing the Magdalene’s eloquence, derived from her intimacy with Christ.

The Magdalene there took her stand,/ And nobly preached to them/ About the truth of our Faith./ And many marveled/ That any woman knew how to speak so/ That her words so pierced their hearts,/ From which many received devotion/ And contrition for their sins./ It was no wonder that spoke so well/ That mouth which formerly touched/ The feet of him who is the font/ All full of grace and wisdom.\(^{141}\)

Indeed, her words mimic the actions and gain the force of Christ’s own life: piercing the hearts of her listeners as the events of the Gospel had pierced the Virgin Mary’s soul, her mouth like a baptismal font, issuing forth the living water of rebirth.

The Magdalene’s power and efficacy are natural themes for Bozon, whose account champions Vézelay as the site of the officially approved relics, encouraging religious pilgrimages to the site. His version was countered by a series of lives emphasizing her career in Marseilles, but her preaching and its potency remain prominent. These narratives were likely used as part of practices associated with pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela; there was a stop on the pilgrimage route at the site sacred to the Magdalene cult in the south of France. In a late fourteenth-early fifteenth-century Spanish manuscript translation of this French material, the saint is described as preaching to many at Marseilles, including fellow evangelists who are labeled, “her disciples.” “They came to the port of Marseilles and went outside of the boat and found the Magdalene and all her disciples who preached to a great multitude of

\(^{141}\) *Three Saints’ Lives by Nicholas Bozon*, pp. 9-10.
people. And they cast themselves at her feet and said to her, ‘O blessed Magdalene, your God whom you loved and whom you preach…’"  

The saint’s special love for Christ also authorizes her preaching in the late medieval Italian account. The author, like Bozon, includes moments of special knowledge for Mary Magdalene. He muses that Mary had become aware, before anyone else, that Christ was the Son of God. The revelation comes in a moment of domestic bliss shared with her siblings and Christ; in reaction, Mary Magdalene says, “as Peter said on the Mount: ‘Master, let us make here three tabernacles.’” In this episode of the ongoing competition between the two saints, Mary comes out the winner. The reference to the Transfiguration reminds the reader that Peter had foolishly misinterpreted a clear manifestation of Christ’s divinity, trying to comprehend revelation by confining it within a human framework. But Mary is able to realize the sacredness of the even most mundane moments in Jesus’ life. In effect she uses Peter’s words to humiliate him and the other obtuse, male disciples, for Christ is already recognized as divine and housed within a tabernacle, in the hospitality she and her family offer him in their own home. Not only do Mary and her family receive a kind of private Transfiguration, but the Virgin Mary and the Magdalene are given permission by Christ to come to the Last Supper and to be among the first to receive the Sacrament from him, which the author defends by arguing for the two women’s position as apostles and as carriers, each in her way, of the Word.

142 “Il vindrent au port de Marseille, et issirent hors de la nef e trouvent la Magdaleine a touz ses disciples que preschoit a grant multitude de gent. E il se lessierent cheoir a ses piez e si distrent, ‘O benoite Magdaleine, ton Dieu que tu as aoree e qui tu presches…’” The Lives of St Mary Magdalene and St Martha (MS Esc. h-I-13), p. 14.
“And why should it not be so, and why not as meet or more for her and the Magdalen as for the disciples? Was she not the apostle and guardian of the Gospel?”

Mary’s insight into Christ’s identity comes from her intimacy with him, from the closeness of the relationship he had with her and her family. This knowledge gives her a license to preach, which she begins to do even before the resurrection and Christ’s explicit command that she proclaim the Gospel. She speaks publicly to the people of her territory, the serfs her family had renounced as part of their embrace of holy poverty; her “sweet speech” converts them. The author effuses about her worldly judgment, in addition to her spiritual graces, and concludes with a literary comparison between the Magdalene and Christ himself, echoing the final words of John’s Gospel.

Oh, most prudent Magdalen!... there was never a realm in this world that thou wast not capable of ruling, both in judgment and discretion;... the good Lord restored thee through His great mercy, and made of thee an example to women in the Church, as He did of Paul to men; and if thou hadst had disciples, and they had written down thy deeds and all thy sayings, and the gentle nature of thy person, and thy sweet talk of Christ and His doctrine, they would have filled more volumes of books than one could count.

Interpretations of the Magdalene in medieval hagiography, intended to shape piety, can thus be seen taking their audiences in different directions according to the goals of their authors and communities. They emphasized her preaching in ways that served specific ecclesiastical programs and theological orientations. More secular discussions of the Magdalene’s life would also adapt her identity as a preacher for the rhetorical culture of Renaissance literature.

---

The Magdalene was an exemplar for women’s speech in the late medieval debate over the worthiness of women, the *querelle des femmes*. Men joined in on both sides of the question and likewise appealed to the Magdalene in praising female virtues. In Baldassare Castiglione’s manual for aristocratic conduct, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), we find that

Women would not be surpassed by men in the slightest as far as this is concerned: for Socrates himself confessed that all the mysteries of love that he knew had been revealed to him by a woman… You should also remember that many sins were forgiven Saint Mary Magdalene because she loved much and that she, perhaps in no less a state of grace than Saint Paul, was many times rapt to the third heaven by angelic love.¹⁴⁸

Castiglione does not neglect the traditional comparison of Mary Magdalene to prominent male saints, here finding her equal to Paul, in this case through their shared experience of the beatific vision. Henricius Cornelius Agrippa’s *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (1529) contains a similar comparison, this time holding her to be above the male disciples in her relative loyalty, and in the marks of favor that she receives from God.

We know also, through the Gospels, the constancy of Mary Magdalene in her faith. For while the priests and the Jews crucify Christ, she cries, carries unguents to the cross, looks for Christ in the tomb, interrogates a gardener, recognizes God. She hastens to tell the apostles and announces to them that Christ is risen. But they doubt what she believes.¹⁴⁹

In advancing the worth of women, Mary Magdalene’s scriptural identity proved irresistible to authors searching for a model of both merit and divine approval.

¹⁴⁹ Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s *Noli me tangere*,” pp. 239-40.
Castiglione and Agrippa echoed the interpretation made by Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*, from the early fifteenth century. By contrast with the devotional and catechetical aims of the Italian life, De Pizan’s hagiography is explicitly polemical; she addressed the misogynist claims of her opponents in the *querelle des femmes* one by one, using female figures from the Christian tradition in service of her argument. Pizan notes the scriptural record of divine favor on women, approving the feminine character and granting them authority to preach. On the criticisms of female weeping, she pointed to Christ’s compassion for the weeping of Mary Magdalene and Martha over their brother, Lazarus, and for the penitent tears of Luke 7’s sinful woman.

“What special favors has God bestowed on women because of their tears! He did not despise the tears of Mary Magdalene, but accepted them and forgave her sins, and through the merits of those tears she is in glory in heaven.”  

150 And on her opponents’ denigration of women’s speech, she countered,

> If women’s language had been so blameworthy and of such small authority, as some men argue, our Lord Jesus Christ would never have deigned to wish that so worthy a mystery as His most gracious resurrection be first announced to a woman, just as He commended the blessed Magdalene, to whom He first appeared on Easter, to report and announce it to His apostles and to Peter. Blessed God, may you be praised, who, among the other infinite boons and favors which you have bestowed upon the feminine sex, desired that women carry such lofty and worthy news.  

151

The particular literary occasion of the *Querelle des femmes* was one expression of a debate over women’s position in society (and therefore in the church) with a long history in western theological discourse. Pizan engages this history by mentioning Peter in

---


151 Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1.10.5, p. 28.
particular among the apostles and noting his debt to the Magdalene for the news of the resurrection. She thus makes reference to the longstanding tensions in the relationship between Saints Peter and Mary Magdalene, as they were treated in the medieval tradition. The interaction between these two figures and their supporters is representative of two sides of the Christian tradition: the one as orthodox authority and the other as divinely-inspired prophet.152

The threat represented by the Magdalene was that she was too close to Christ, and too inspired by fierce emotion, for orthodoxy. Many interpreters found Christ himself addressing this potential problem, when he reveals himself to Mary in the garden on Easter Sunday but warns her not to touch him, as he has not yet ascended to the father.153 This passage was used by medieval exegetes and canon lawyers to argue for the inappropriateness of Mary’s attitude toward Christ after his resurrection as a model for women; the rejection signaled an end to their previous, easy intimacy and a rebuke to her temerity in speaking.154 Illustrations of this scene were among the most popular images featuring the saint, the Noli me tangere genre.155 Another trope of late medieval art suggests a possibility for renewal of the intimate contact between the Magdalene and Christ following his death and resurrection, in a different mode. Late medieval portraits of the dead Christ make pointed reference to his body as the Eucharistic Host.156 Would viewers of these images have seen Mary Magdalene, coming to prepare Christ’s body, to have been figuratively performing the Eucharistic liturgy, establishing a priest’s familiar

154 Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, pp. 54-55.
156 Hofstätter, “Darstellungen der Maria Magdalena in der Bildenden Kunst,” p. 79.
commerce with the elements? A liturgical role was alluded to in the Cistercian life, which features not only the saint preaching, but where she acts as a priest in carrying out Christ’s instruction to communicate the news of the resurrection. “Just as Eve in Paradise had once given her husband a poisoned draught to drink, so now the Magdalen presented to the apostles the chalice of eternal life.” A late fourteenth-century account of the saint, in Pietro de’ Natali’s influential *Catalogus sanctorum*, describes her not only converting the pagans of Marseilles, but baptizing them, as well.

A few images from medieval art explore this clerical identification for the saint, displaying a Magdalene daring in her embrace of male roles, such as public preacher or priest. There is a unique image in a stained glass window from Klagenfurt, Austria, from 1170 showing Mary Magdalene dressed in priest’s vestments (alb, chasuble, stole), holding her customary ointment jar but also a thurible. Where the depiction of the conversion of Marseilles in the windows at Chartres shows only Bishop Maximin preaching, the fresco cycle in the chapel at the church of Saint-Étienne de Tinée, Auron, showing the life of Mary Magdalene, portrays her preaching to the people of Marseilles. In such a position of leadership, however, she is still a relatively accessible character, in whom viewers could see themselves. Contrast her figure, the same size as the others in the Auron frescoes, with the ubiquitous medieval Madonna of Mercy image, a supernatural protectress who towers over miniature men and women, sheltering them

---

160 Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, p. 139.
from God’s wrath beneath the folds of her cloak.\textsuperscript{161} Perhaps the Magdalene’s nearest equivalent among the saints of the church was the professedly un-supernatural John the Baptist, with whom she had been compared in the Cistercian \textit{vita}. Lucas Moser’s ca. 1431 altarpiece for the side altar of the Tiefenbronner Kirche shows the legendary boat journey to France; Mary Magdalene is pointing like the traditional portraits of John the Baptist, another association of her own preaching ministry with his model of inspired prophetic witness.\textsuperscript{162} Both the Magdalene and John the Baptist were figures of repentance, intense asceticism, and profound insight into Christ’s identity and mission, expressed in public testimony that challenged the prevailing religious authorities.

\textit{Controversy}

Mary Magdalene’s story follows the arc of the Gospel narrative, from the first prophetic call to repentance made by a desert ascetic, through a compassionate journeying alongside Christ in his work and suffering, to the triumphant preaching of the resurrection. She represented penitent sinners and new converts, as well as powerful evangelists; in her was seen the life of the church, the bride of Christ, and the struggle of the individual towards God, ultimately surrendering in awed contemplation. She is both self-effacing and bold, the creator of her own cloister and yet somehow still a fallen pleasure-seeker. She had been associated with conflicting impulses within the human character in part because of the multiple identities she had been assigned by the tradition

\textsuperscript{161} Chamska, \textit{Marie-Madeleine en tous ses états}, p. 159.
since Gregory the Great. In the early sixteenth century, humanist scholars would seek to undo that complex tangle of scriptural characters and emerge with three separate women, characterized only as they are in the biblical text.

The French humanist and biblical scholar, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, argued in a treatise published in 1517 that the scriptural record supported no connection between the penitent sinner of Luke 7, Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the woman from whom Christ had expelled seven demons. This last was the only woman truly associated with the name of Magdalene and was the witness of the crucifixion and resurrection. Lefèvre’s motive for distinguishing the different women was, in part, the impropriety of a sinner maintaining so intimate a relation with Christ. “Mary the sister of Martha was not that public sinner, but holy, pure and a virgin, which is what I prefer to believe.”

Several scholars, particularly in England, leapt to the defense of the traditional Magdalene. The Bishop of Rochester, John Fisher, published a tract refuting Lefèvre’s thesis. Fisher’s friend Thomas More advised combining the two figures of Mary and Martha within one’s self, engaging by turns in both study and public life, though definitely asserting Mary’s contemplation as the “better part.” A decade after the initial


controversy More would return to the traditional hagiography to advance the contemplative, penitent Magdalene in a counter-reform dialogue against Luther.\textsuperscript{167}

The most renowned humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, maintained an ambiguous position, attempting to distance himself from the controversy by maintaining that the Magdalene’s value for piety, in her multiple roles, was more important than separating them into an accurate series of figures.\textsuperscript{168} His earlier \textit{In Praise of Folly} (1509), however, had arguably associated Mary Magdalene with Lady Folly, lampooning a sterile contemplation (the inevitable product of women’s education); indeed, many later sixteenth-century editions rendered his \textit{Moriae} as \textit{Mariae}, suggesting less reverence for the saint on the part of Erasmus or his editors than Fisher and More evinced.\textsuperscript{169}

Teresa Coletti argues that the humanists who favored separating the three Marys really did so to guard the purity of Mary of Bethany, representative of the contemplative life, and to keep the sinful woman of Luke 7 from any connection with the first public proclamation of the resurrection. Perhaps it was, in fact, the late medieval fascination with elaborating the details of the Magdalene’s worldly life, with its many temptations, that finally provoked scholars to distinguish this most voluptuous of sinners from the friend and preacher of Christ.\textsuperscript{170}

The humanists’ effort to uncover the ‘authentic’ identities of the biblical women comprising the \textit{unica Magdalena} signaled the fracturing of the overdetermined symbol who was identified… with the continuity of the erotic and the divine… the sacralizing of the material realm, the role of gender in salvation history, and the scriptural foundations of women’s religious and evangelical authority… By asserting Mary Magdalene’s difference from Luke’s penitent sinner, the

\textsuperscript{167} Giraud, ed., \textit{L’image de la Madeleine}, pp. 75-6.
\textsuperscript{169} Giraud, ed., \textit{L’image de la Madeleine}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{170} Pinto-Mathieu, \textit{Marie-Madeleine dans la littérature du Moyen Age}, passim.
contemporary recuperation of the historical Magdalene in its own way reinforces the reformers’ perception that the attachment of female sexuality and eros to holiness can only be unsuitable—with important consequences for the relationships between flesh and spirit, femininity and divinity.\(^{171}\)

The medieval church had attempted to resolve the question of the Magdalene, of why this woman was chosen for so great a role. Her complex hagiography developed over centuries, adding layers of imaginative explanations about character and circumstances, wealth and sex, love and persuasion, holding in tension what is ultimately inexplicable: how a fallen humanity pursues a divine purpose. According to Coletti’s reading, the medieval solution eventually failed: for those desiring the reform of the church, so sinful a saint simply could not fill so crucial a place.

As the era of Reformation dawned, then, students of the Magdalene legend must bear in mind the consequences for popular piety of this attempt to limit the identity of the saint. For those who defended the tradition, how would they argue for the continued importance of each feature of her hagiography? How would her sin affect her status as preacher? For the reformers who maintained her as central to evangelical narratives, how would they adapt her image and deploy it in the service of the new teaching? For those others who minimized her place in the story, on what terms would they reject aspects of her apostolic role?

In addition to the scholarly controversy and the interpretive programs of various reformers, the context of the early sixteenth century included changes in vocation for women both Protestant and Catholic, as they discerned new lay vocations in Evangelical congregations on the one hand, or as they interacted with the official program with the

mid-century Council of Trent on the other. On the Protestant side, the leaders of new church communities had to address a fundamental question raised by the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers: just who is authorized to preach in congregations modeling themselves on an early church, a church undeniably founded by the testimony of a woman? The Catholic Church was asserting the traditional legend of the Magdalene against the claims of reformers beginning with Lefèvre d’Étaples. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the use of the saint as an example of preaching would become problematic for an institution wrestling with the creations of new, public, teaching roles for its religious women. Given the dangers opened up by evangelical uses of Mary Magdalene as a figure of divinely-empowered lay ministry, and attempts to conform convents more closely to official policy, the Catholic Church itself was beginning to find the *apostola apostolorum* an undesirable champion and sought to emphasize instead the other features of her character: the abject contrition of the Lucan penitent, the converted wanton made compassionate lover of Christ, and the visionary ascetic.

*The Spirit of Reform*

Abstracted spirit, rapt in ecstasy,  
Who while you haunt the skies, your origin,  
Have left your servant host as you roam free,  
Your well-matched body—quick to discipline,  
Heeding you, for this pilgrim’s life we’re in—  
Sans sentiment, and to emotion slow;  
Wouldn’t you care for just a while to go  
Out of the heavenly manor where you dwell?  

172 Esprit abstraict, ravy, et ecstatic,  
Qui frequentant les cieux, ton origine,  
As delaissé ton hoste et domestic,  
Ton corps concorde, qui tant se morigine
A reader could be forgiven for thinking this a prayer to Mary Magdalene, the saint who, in her legendary, austere exile in Southern France, was daily ravished by angels who took her up into the clouds for the Eucharistic nourishment that was her only food. It was, however, François Rabelais’s dedication of the third book of his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1546) to Marguerite de Navarre. Known as a patron and protector of Protestants within her sphere of influence in France, Marguerite had been the subject of a similar literary allusion before, though less favorably. A play produced by students at the Collège de Navarre in 1533 mocked Marguerite as abandoning proper female pursuits for the anarchy of the evangelical Gospel. She was, in their eyes,

… a Queen who, in womanly fashion, was taken up with spinning, and wholly occupied with the rock (distaff) and the needle; then the fury Maegera appeared, bringing lighted torches near to her that she might throw away the rock and the needle. For a little while she opposed and struggled; but when she had yielded, she received the Gospel into her hand, and straightway forgets all she had formerly got into the habit of, and almost even herself.173

In both texts, the paean and the lampoon, Marguerite is a woman so involved in her study of theology and Scripture that she has left behind her duties as woman and as queen. The student agitators had found this contemptible, while Rabelais implored her to return and continue her championing of humanism and religious toleration by reading his book!

However divisive her actions may have been, the Christian tradition’s model for such

À tes edictz, en vie peregrine
Sans santonement, et comme en Apathie:
Vouldrois tu poicnte faire quelque sortie
De ton manoir divin, perpetuel?


173 The description comes from a letter by John Calvin; see Ferguson and McKinley, *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, pp. 7-8.
behavior in a woman, as Rabelais observes, was Mary Magdalene. The Magdalene represented a female spirituality that was as alarming as it was admirable. Described in the New Testament as a woman who supported Christ’s ministry, becoming the first to witness his resurrection because she dared to visit his tomb, she had also long been associated with Mary of Bethany, who sat at the feet of Christ while her sister, Martha, tended to the household, and with the penitent prostitute who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears. In each of these guises the intensity of her devotion brings both praise and censure, as her courage and audacity are contrasted with social expectations for women and with the actions of men around her. How had the sister of the King of France come to be linked with such a controversial figure? The comparison reveals a debate over the question of women’s divided loyalties, to their families and to their God, as a particular preoccupation of her age, the era of Reformation. The Magdalene figured in this debate and in the larger, allied project of interpreting the predicament of all believers, who must be in the world and yet not of it, in the teaching of early modern Protestants and Catholics.

Like the Magdalene, Marguerite had, indeed, sat at the feet of her religious and intellectual mentors, having received a humanist education at the direction of her mother, Louise of Savoy.\textsuperscript{174} The saint and her controversial roles played a part in shaping that education; the works of Christine de Pizan, the fifteenth-century author who had argued for the preaching and teaching of women using the example of Mary Magdalene, were

included in Marguerite’s childhood library. In 1515-1516, Marguerite, her mother, and
Queen Claude (wife of Marguerite’s brother, Francis I) went on a pilgrimage to the center
of the Magdalene’s cult, St Maximin and Ste Baume in Marseille, making gifts to support
the shrine. The visit inspired Louise to commission her son’s tutor, François de Moulins,
to write a life of the saint, on which he consulted with the eminent humanist scholar,
Jacques Lefèvre d’Étapes. It was this consultation that led Lefèvre d’Étapes to his
own inquiry about the identity of the Magdalene, which ultimately produced his 1519
tract rejecting her medieval legend as false and unscriptural, a characterization that would
be taken up by Reformation polemicists. Through the war of words that followed,
including the placing of Lefèvre d’Étapes’s works on the Inquisition’s list of forbidden
books and his denunciation by the Theology Faculty of the University of Paris, he found
protection and employment with Marguerite and her family. She secured him the position
of tutor to her brother’s children then housed him at her court in Nérac during his
retirement, until his death.

Lefèvre d’Étapes was not the only reformer to benefit from Marguerite’s interest
and influence. She maintained a correspondence with the reform-minded Bishop of
Meaux, Guillaume Briçonnet, who served as her spiritual adviser, from 1521-24;
Briçonnet was the leader of the circle of humanist scholars that included Lefèvre
d’Étapes. As a result of her relationship with this group and its ideas, Marguerite sent

176 Ferguson and McKinley, *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, p. 3.
177 Jonathan A. Reid, “Marguerite de Navarre and Evangelical Reform,” in Ferguson and McKinley, eds., *A
Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, p. 33.
178 Reid, “Marguerite de Navarre and Evangelical Reform,” p. 7.
evangelical preachers to Berry, the territory she ruled through her appointment as duke-peer in 1517. Her creation as Duchess of Berry in her own right, by her brother Francis I, gave her the political status of an “honorary man,” establishing a parallel to the Magdalene’s public activity, so unusual for a woman in late antiquity.\textsuperscript{180} She sheltered John Calvin on his flight from France in 1534.\textsuperscript{181} Calvin’s fellow evangelical exile in Geneva, Marie Dentière, solicited Marguerite’s patronage for further reform in a 1539 treatise, proclaiming women’s right to preach and teach in public, and appealing to the Magdalene as an exemplar.\textsuperscript{182}

Despite her manifest commitment to many of the ideas of the Reformation, Marguerite herself never converted from Catholicism, determined instead to reform the church from within.\textsuperscript{183} Her reform program included vernacular Biblical translation and charitable works, as well as correcting the abuses of monasticism.\textsuperscript{184} Barbara Stephenson argues that Marguerite could operate outside of institutional restraints with remarkable freedom due to her social and political position. “Informal activities offered much more scope for women to operate in than formalized ones.”\textsuperscript{185} Her efforts did not escape censure, however, as we have seen. In addition to the student protests, she was condemned by the Theology Faculty of the University of Paris in 1533 for the theology espoused in her devotional work, \textit{Mirror of a Sinful Soul}.\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{181} Stephenson, \textit{The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{182} Stephenson, \textit{The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{183} Stephenson, \textit{The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{184} Cholokian and Cholokian, \textit{Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{185} Stephenson, \textit{The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{186} Cholokian and Cholokian, \textit{Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 4.
Marguerite de Navarre’s biography and career suggested the comparison with Mary Magdalene to her contemporaries, to Rabelais and to Marie Dentière, who both invoked the saint in connection to discussions of female religious leadership. And as a public advocate for religious causes, Marguerite followed the Magdalene’s model of testimony to the Gospel in her role as first witness and preacher of the resurrection. Other aspects of the likeness were explored as well. Another derisive theatrical portrayal, this time by Parisian students, had mocked her as possessed by demons, one of the descriptions of the Magdalene’s condition, from which she was said to have been released by Christ.  

As a humanist scholar and author of devotional poetry and prose, Marguerite displayed the intimacy with Christ as the incarnate word of God that had characterized the Magdalene of medieval hagiography. The group of humanist reformers at Meaux with which Marguerite was associated referred to the Gospel as “le seul necessaire,” the one thing necessary, alluding to Christ’s praise in Luke 10:42 for Mary’s devotion to him.

Given these parallels, some of them displaying a self-conscious orientation toward Magdalene piety on the part of Marguerite and her associates, it is interesting to examine the references to the saint that Marguerite makes in her own writing. The Magdalene appears in the moral at the end of story 19 in Marguerite’s Heptameron, a collection of moral fables on the pattern of Boccaccio’s Decameron. Capping the evaluation of a pair of star-crossed lovers who both enter the religious life, Marguerite writes:

---

188 Reid, “Marguerite de Navarre and Evangelical Reform,” p. 34.
Thenceforward Pauline and her lover lived such holy and devout lives, observing all the rules of their order, that we cannot doubt that He whose law is love told them when their lives were ended, as He had told Mary Magdalene, ‘Your sins are forgiven, for ye have loved much;’ and doubtless He removed them in peace to that place where the recompense surpasses all the merits of man.\textsuperscript{189}

The celibate, monastic life is praised as providing the solution to the lovers’ unhappy circumstances and their faithfulness in pursuing it guarantees them a place in heaven as reward for their labors. If Marguerite may be said to have had a foot in both evangelical and Catholic camps, this Magdalene reference displays her loyalty to elements of Catholic tradition, with reform meaning simply a purification of that tradition.

Elsewhere in the \textit{Heptameron}, glimpses of an evangelical adaptation of the Magdalene tradition can be seen. Marguerite gives an account of an unfaithful wife who is made to do penance by being locked in a room with her lover’s skeleton, and forced to drink from his skull. A painting that is made of her likeness then moves viewers with the image of her beauty and penitence. François Rigolot interprets this grotesque story as a critique of the veneration of relics.\textsuperscript{190} An intimate and penitential interaction with human remains is presented to harrowing and perhaps critical effect, though the woman and her penitence still emerge as inspiring and exemplary, so the reading of this feature of the text seems somewhat ambiguous in its relation to medieval piety. Rigolot explores the connection between this figure and Mary Magdalene, the model penitent sinner in theology and art, who was often depicted with a skull and linked in Christian iconography to Adam’s skull, which becomes a chalice to collect Christ’s blood at the

It may be that the allusions to Mary Magdalene in the female protagonist serve as a positive image of penitence, while distancing the saint from cult practice that the author viewed as harmful. The story is told, within the framing narrative of the *Heptameron*, by Oisille, a devout widow commonly thought to represent Louise de Savoy, whose special devotion to the Magdalene had led to the humanist investigation of her identity.

A more overtly evangelical message is found in the discussion of the Magdalene herself that follows the story in the framing narrative. Ennasuite compares the unfaithful wife to Mary Magdalene.

> ‘How could you make up for such loss of honor?’ said Longarine. ‘Don’t you know that nothing a woman can do after such a crime can ever restore her honor?’ To which Ennasuite replied, ‘Tell me, I beg you, whether the Magdalene does or does not have more honor amongst men than her sister, who was a virgin?’ ‘I admit,’ said Longarine, ‘that she is praised for her great love for Jesus Christ and for her great penitence, but even so she is still given the name of Sinner.’ ‘I don’t care,’ said Ennasuite, ‘what names men call me, only that God pardons me.’

The emphasis here is on God’s gracious forgiveness, which overcomes the saint’s dubious reputation. The idea of an insurmountable stain of sexual sin for women is rejected, as is the medieval hierarchy of virtue that valued virginity as the highest ideal of Christian life. Patricia Cholakian has argued that the subject of women’s sexual honor was prominent in Marguerite’s writing. This theme would have made reflection on the fate of the Magdalene a natural focus for her work.

---

193 Rigolot, “Magdalen’s Skull,” p. 63.
The Magdalene’s role in the New Testament resurrection narrative is the sole subject of a poem Marguerite dedicated to her brother the king. Titled, “The Faith of the Magdalene,” the poem responds to Francis’s own, “Do Not Blame Love That Errs Through Ignorance;” expressing a strongly evangelical position, Marguerite disputes the traditional value of the Magdalene’s renowned love. Nicole Cazauran notes that in other works Marguerite connects herself with the grief of the saint coming to the tomb. Here, though, that grief is absolute, at war with faith.

Love without faith makes the Magdalene weep.  
For faith, seeking something in our God  
More sovereign than humanity  
Scarce permits such great sorrow to hold sway  
Because of the loss of a body, when it is certain  
That he has risen for us from death.  
The ignorance of this truth  
Makes her feel an unbelievable pang.  
It is love that drives her to such blindness  
That we see her forgetting the divinity  
To go no farther than the human nature [of Christ].  
O beggar love, and vain hope,  
It is you who treat her with such great miserliness  
Faith gives her the source and the spring,  
And you make [her] go out ceaselessly  
Looking for water, in her faithlessness,  
Amid a torrent.  But this love  
Which blinds faith is neither praiseworthy nor sound.  
For, possessing all things, it still stands in need.

The Magdalene of the poem is a pathetic figure, disabled by human love and grief when she should trust the abundant revelation of God’s nature and purpose. We will see Calvin

---

196 Marguerite de Navarre, *Poésies chrétiennes*, p. 113. I am grateful to Christopher Brown for assistance with the translation.
interpret the saint in very similar terms, rejecting a religion of sentiment in favor of an intellectual assent of faith.

For Marguerite, Mary Magdalene was a figure that allowed her to explore the questions that activated her, from the reform of monasticism to the theological understanding of redemption, with a special focus on female religious experience. The multiple identities of the saint made her a flexible model for several different kinds of investigation, not limited to one particular confession orientation. As Marguerite’s early modern contemporaries took up their own projects of reform, from polemical debates that established confessional boundaries to more irenic reflections on the life and practice of faith, the Magdalene provided a similarly compelling and malleable image. Scholarship on the cult of the Magdalene has not always recognized this history, especially when it has been obscured by assumptions about the Protestant Reformation’s attitude toward the saints.

Conclusion

The medieval Magdalene tradition, with its rich diversity of imagery, provided a fertile ground for Christians interested in reform, such as Marguerite. The Magdalene’s identity had lent theological support to institutions at the heart of the church’s authority: the offices of absolution and of preaching. As a penitent and as a messenger of the Gospel she had been directly addressed by Christ himself; her example showed medieval believers how to perform those tasks, crucial to the salvation of the individual and to the life of the church. As Mary of Bethany, her ardent devotion to Christ, rejecting the call of
worldly duty, made her a model for the monastic life, that life held by medievals to be more sacred, more beloved by God, than the secular activities of marriage and family, business and government. The Magdalene would seem, then, to have been inextricably bound up with everything that ordered and directed medieval life: its social structures and its system of belief, its entire worldview.

And yet, in the two centuries that followed Marguerite of Navarre’s birth, the era of Reformation, theologians did separate Mary Magdalene from the medieval tradition, in some cases consciously, in others as part of a natural evolution, responding to new circumstances and needs in the church. The different images of the saint that had developed since the early church remained, but the multiplicity of her medieval identity would become untenable. Different readings of the story of Luke 7, for example, would divide Protestants from Catholics on the question of justification. Protestants would reinterpret Mary of Bethany’s devotion as the prerogative of all the faithful, rather than as the exclusive charism of cloistered contemplatives. It is not that St. Mary Magdalene disappeared from Protestant piety, but that new Protestant Magdalenes were preached and came forward to preach, in their turn.
Chapter Two
Lutheran Preaching on Mary Magdalene

Just as their medieval forebears had, sixteenth-century Evangelicals identified themselves with Mary Magdalene in their self-descriptions as sinners, as the faithful community of the Word, and as preachers. This chapter will explore the theology and preaching that emerged from the movement initiated by Luther and developed by his colleagues and followers in Germany. The Magdalene was advanced in public discourse on the question of lay and female preaching and vocation within the church from the very beginnings of the Reformation, and continued to be so through the period of Protestant confessionalization. Even where her role was not interpreted so radically, Mary Magdalene remained at the heart of the Gospel accounts of Christ’s passion, and therefore could not be ignored by exegetes and preachers.

The principal exegetical project of Reformation theologians and pastors was the reinterpretation of biblical texts to express the evangelical Gospel: the message of justification by faith alone. In the interpretation of the pericopes in which the Magdalene figures, Martin Luther established the model followed by the church leaders in his community of influence. Luther accepted the Magdalene’s composite identity; though he emphasized her roles as the penitent sinner and as witness of the resurrection, he continued to speak of all three figures traditionally identified with her, recasting each of them in an evangelical mold. He read the story of the sinful woman in Luke 7 as a parable of Christ’s absolution producing gratitude in the sinner. His account of the confrontation between Mary and Martha described Mary’s devotion to the Word above
all things as paradigmatic for the faithful. Most positively, Luther held her up as an example of devotion to Christ, and of faithful, evangelical testimony, in his readings of the passion and resurrection narratives.¹ In contrast to the presentation of Eve in his Lectures on Genesis, whose “substitution of the devil’s word for the word of God” serves as a kind of perverted preaching to Adam, Mary Magdalene speaks the news of the resurrection as she is commanded to by Christ and by angels; that the disciples in the different Gospel accounts fail in various ways to believe her message is no fault of her own.² Luther’s serial preaching on the Johannine passion narrative, from 1528-29, included an extended discussion of Mary’s vigil at the tomb, praising her tears. Luther commended her ardent love for Christ and her eager announcing of the news of the resurrection as patterns for all Christians, and especially preachers, to follow. The use of a woman as a model for faithful preaching inevitably raised questions in the nascent reform movement about the role of women, and of lay persons in general, in the church.

After surveying Luther’s teaching on the different aspects of Mary Magdalene’s identity throughout his career, I will investigate how these Magdalene interpretations were taken up, altered, or set aside, in his colleagues’ and followers’ postils. My research looks at collections published before 1620 that ran to ten editions or more, indicating work of some influence and popular reach. Stopping the survey at this date prevents the findings from being distorted by the disruptions of the Thirty Years’ War and from having to address changes to Lutheran theology in the wake of Pietism.

¹ Martin Luther, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 178-20 (1528-29/1557), LW 69:298-305.
I will argue, drawing on the work of Amy Nelson Burnett, that the teaching role of the pastor and of his sermons in Protestant culture was “to propagate norms among the laity.”3 Thus, in the preached treatments of the resurrection narrative, as well as of the other biblical texts in which she appears, Mary Magdalene was presented as a normative model for ordinary Christians, male and female, lay and ordained, in perceiving the gracious work of Christ forgiving sins and overcoming death on their behalf, and in their testifying to the same with faithful confidence.

Luther’s own record of teaching on Mary Magdalene has not been systematically explored in the scholarly literature. He discussed her frequently in his exegetical lectures and treatises, and his treatments there are often the apparent source for the interpretations to be found in the preaching of his epigones. Further evidence for his reading of the saint can be found in his sermons on texts related to her in the church calendar, falling roughly into three categories: preaching on the Sunday before July 22, when her traditional feast day was observed in the calendar; on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary; and sermons for Easter Week, especially those following the Johannine resurrection narrative.

The text retained for use in the Evangelical liturgical calendar for Mary Magdalene’s feast was Luke 7:36-50, the account of the penitent sinner who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, then dries them with her hair and anoints them with precious oil. Since the seventh century, the Gospel for the observation of the Assumption of Mary had been Luke 10:38-42,4 the comparison between the contemplative Mary and the industrious Martha, stemming from a connection made between the quiet devotion of

---

3 Burnett, *Teaching the Reformation*, p. 222.
Mary of Bethany in this text and the character of the Virgin Mary, said to ponder the events of her son’s life “in her heart.” Both the sinful woman and Mary of Bethany had been identified with Mary Magdalene by Gregory the Great, and Luther chose to retain this association even after its recent, controversial debunking by the French humanist scholar, Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples.

One aspect of the exegetical tradition, the identification of Mary Magdalene as the bride in the wedding at Cana, was rejected by Luther as false. Maintaining this association would have meant undermining the importance of Christ’s first miracle having been performed at a wedding, a fact that Luther wished to interpret as indicating divine approval for the married estate. If Mary Magdalene’s abandonment and subsequent life of sin had been the result of the Cana nuptials, an aborted wedding would not have served Luther’s program of divine support for the institution of marriage. Thus we see Luther carefully crafting an evangelical identity for the Magdalene, retaining those elements of the tradition which could be engaged in service of the reforming Gospel, and leaving aside those which might counter his arguments.

The Johannine resurrection narrative served as the lection for the highest festival of the church year, Easter Sunday, but the feast of the Magdalene and, to a certain extent, the Assumption of Mary, also remained in the Lutheran liturgical calendar, and the different aspects of her identity therefore continued to be celebrated as part of Lutheran

6 Gregory the Great, Sermon XXXIII, PL 76:1239; Martin Luther, Auslegung und Deutung des heiligen Vaterunsers (1518), WA 9:150; Lefèvre, De Maria Magdalena.
7 Sermon on Marriage (1525), WA 17:1:17. In this he followed the Golden Legend.
spiritual formation, as is evident in the postils for both the Gospel lectionary and the calendar of the saints. Mary Magdalene’s three lections are found in postil collections for the summer season (stretching from Easter to the last Sunday before Advent), and in those for festivals, largely saints’ days. Although neither her place in the Easter story nor the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption were taken up by all postil authors, several of the most prominent authors, who produced the most frequently published postils, such as Johann Spangenberg, Anton Corvinus, and Johann Habermann, as well as the hymnodist Nikolaus Herman, spent significant time exploring aspects of her role, and often repeated or extended Luther’s teaching on the saint.9 The festal collections all contain sermons for her feast day and so propagate Luther’s evangelical reading of the pericope of the sinful woman, while many also contain sermons on her experience of the risen Christ at Easter and show her listening at Christ’s feet, in her family home in Bethany. The retention of these Magdalene pericopes in the worship and preaching of the Lutheran church guaranteed that her story would continue to be told; the ubiquity of Mary Magdalene in Lutheran sermons establishes her as a central character in the evangelical project of scripture interpretation and theological reform. Her composite identity gave Luther and his followers the opportunity to provide scriptural foundations

9 Neither Anton Corvinus nor Johannes Habermann, for example, included a sermon for the Assumption of Mary in their collections; Philipp Melanchthon’s postil treatments of the Easter Sunday readings, to take one prominent example, ignore the roles of the women at Christ’s tomb. On the popularity and good reputation of Spangenberg’s and Corvinus’s postil collections among their evangelical contemporaries, see the evidence of their presence in personal libraries: Ronald K. Rittgers, The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 5; Robert Kolb, “‘A Beautiful, Delightful Jewel’: Cyriakus Spangenberg’s Plan for the Sixteenth-Century Noble’s Library,” Journal of Library History, vol. 14, no. 2 (1979):145, 150 (Cyriakus Spangenberg was Johann Spangenberg’s son).
for the core reform doctrines of justification by grace alone and the nature and implications of a priesthood of all believers.

The Sinful Woman of Luke 7

In his exposition of the Lucan account of the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, we can see Luther constructing an evangelical reading of a story traditionally proffered in support of the sacrament of penance. Medieval exegetes had emphasized the grievous nature of the woman’s sexual sin and saw her abject posture as a fitting work of satisfaction for that sin, duly rewarded with Christ’s absolution. For example, the fifteenth-century Rheinauer Predigtsammlung contains a sermon for the feast of the Magdalene, which describes her as “a light for all sinners.”

Just as she is the prototypical sinner, so is she the model of repentance: “God has set up before us a model… that we, who are sinners, take an example from her, as she separated herself from sins, that we too do the same; and as she repented of her sins, that we also allow ourselves to be sorry for our sins.”

The sermon then tells the story of her fall and then her action in washing Christ’s feet. The author emphasizes the statement, “And, in truth, I tell you, many sins have been forgiven her, because she has great love.”

The account of her subsequent life includes a brief recitation of the career of the scriptural Magdalene, with an acknowledgement that she witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection. Though no mention is made of her role in preaching about Christ’s rising, her legendary ascetic

---

11 Exemplary lives, p. 135.
12 “Und da von sag ich dir för war, ir ist vil sünt vergeben, wan si vil minn haut.” Exemplary lives, p. 137.
retreat to the desert is given considerable space. When asked to identify herself on the
point of death, she confesses merely that she was “Mary, the public sinner.”

In considering Luther’s adaptation of this tradition, it is important to be attentive
to the influence of occasion and audience in shaping Luther’s use of the Magdalene, as
well as that of his colleagues. Luther’s theology was famously determined through
adversarial rhetorical exchanges, but more recent scholars have also noted how much of
his thought and approach were formed by pastoral situations in which he found himself
called on for advice and authoritative pronouncements. Luther was attempting both to
reform the medieval church, purging it of spurious accretions in order to return to the
model of early church practice, and also to minister to believers whose very immersion in
the medieval heritage made them vulnerable to attacks of conscience. Throughout his
career, he demonstrated a keen awareness of the need to modulate his tone and even his
doctrine in the achievement of his evangelical goals.

---

13 Exemplary lives, p. 139.
15 Luther was much grieved, for example, by the suicide of Johann Krause, an advisor to the Archbishop of Mainz who had condemned himself for wavering between an evangelical conversion and loyalty to Catholic teaching; see the description in Luther’s letter to Justus Jonas (1527), LW 49:181-82. See also Randall C. Zachman, The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
16 Near the beginning of his career, Luther demonstrated a moderate position on iconoclasm, preferring concern for the needs of parishioners to the more ideologue position of Karlstadt; see Luther, Against the Heavenly Prophets (1525), LW 40: 84-101; Carlos M. N. Eire, War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 71-2. His final series of sermons, from 1546, includes an admonition to tolerate heresy within the church, rather than risk
The penitent Magdalene had been a feature of Luther’s arguments against the system of works of satisfaction and the necessity of priestly absolution since the earliest years of Luther’s protests against indulgences. She featured in the Acta Augustana, his defense against the censures issued by Cardinal Cajetan at the hearing held in 1518 in Augsburg, a work in which Luther developed his theology of justification using scriptural evidence.  

He wrote,

So says St. Augustine on John: join the word to the element, and make the sacrament, not because one does, but because one believes. Behold, Baptism washes, not because one does it, but because one believes in the washing. Thence He absolved Mary, saying: Your faith has saved you, go in peace. Hence that common saying: ‘Not the faith of the sacrament, but the faith in the sacrament justifies.’ Without which it is impossible to have peace in one’s conscience, as Rom. 5 says, ‘We are justified therefore by faith, let us be at peace before God.’

His exposition of the text in the Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness, a theological treatise produced during the same period, 1518-19, reveals the Magdalene’s personification, for Luther, of the radical humility that is the only correct posture of the sinner before God.

And if we do not freely desire to put off that form of God and take on the form of a servant, let us be compelled to do so against our will. In this regard consider the story in Luke 7[:36–50], where Simon the leper, pretending to be in the form of

harming those who might convert, or disrupting the community in ways that might impede the preaching of the Gospel; see Luther’s sermon for February 7, 1546, LW 58:442-59.


God and perching on his own righteousness, was arrogantly judging and despising Mary Magdalene, seeing in her the form of a servant. But see how Christ immediately stripped him of that form of righteousness and then clothed him with the form of sin by saying: “You gave me no kiss…. You did not anoint my head.” How great were the sins that Simon did not see! Nor did he think himself disfigured by such a loathsome form as he had. His good works are not at all remembered.

Christ ignores the form of God in which Simon was superciliously pleasing himself; he does not recount that he was invited, dined, and honored by him. Simon the leper is now nothing but a sinner. He who seemed to himself so righteous sits divested of the glory of the form of God, humiliated in the form of a servant, willy-hilly. On the other hand, Christ honors Mary with the form of God and elevates her above Simon, saying: “She has anointed my feet and kissed them. She has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.” How great were the merits which neither she nor Simon saw. Her faults are remembered no more. Christ ignored the form of servitude in her whom he has exalted with the form of sovereignty. Mary is nothing but righteous, elevated into the glory of the form of God, etc.\textsuperscript{19}

She is Luther’s paradigmatic sinner, at once condemned and saved. Mary Magdalene is elevated to the status of Christ because she seeks no status for herself, making no appeal to her own merits because she knows that she has none. She thus gains the only kind of righteousness truly possible for the Christian: that with which Christ clothes the passive recipient.

In Luther’s postils the Magdalene is likewise reinterpreted as a model for an evangelical kind of contrition, one that had been separated from any consideration of merit based on works of penance.\textsuperscript{20} In the 1527 Festpostille, his notes on the Gospel read, “The hypocrites and works-saints write that such signs or works bring righteousness, but Christ says: your faith has saved you.”\textsuperscript{21} An important distinction in the new theology of absolution made it clear that forgiveness was not earned, but only passively received.

\textsuperscript{19} Luther, Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness (1518/19), LW 31:303.
\textsuperscript{20} See the 1544 Hauspostille sermon for St. James’ Day, WA 52:679.
\textsuperscript{21} WA 17.2:464.
Thus, the evangelical reading of Luke 7 does not portray Mary’s great self-humiliation so impressing Christ that heforgives her, but rather his generosity summons her great love. In the Hauspostille sermon devoted to her feast day, her “great love” is the appropriate fruit of a graciously bestowed forgiveness, a beautiful gesture denoting her humble awareness of both her own unworthiness and Christ’s great mercy.\(^\text{22}\) In a sermon on John 4 from the same collection, Mary Magdalene is still being used, near the end of Luther’s preaching career just as at its beginning, to assert the worthlessness of works and justification by faith. “Then thus speaks Paul: ‘We hold that man through faith and not through the work of the Law is made righteous.’ And the Prophet Habakkuk says: ‘The righteous shall live by his faith.’ And Christ says to Mary that her sins are forgiven: ‘Go, your faith has saved you.’”\(^\text{23}\) Faith in the Gospel, not the love that follows faith, is proposed as Mary’s path to salvation.

\textit{Luke 10:38-42: Mary and Martha}

Continued use of the pericope of Martha and Mary in one of the remaining festivals of the Virgin Mary piety allowed another feature of Mary Magdalene’s identity, that of the pious contemplative, to shape the devotional life of the saint in the preaching of Luther and some of his followers. Although the Feast of the Assumption was not observed by most Lutherans after the first generation of the Reformation, it was a feature


of the piety of confessionally divided cities, such as Augsburg. For Luther, the text becomes another opportunity to reassert the importance of faith over works. The “better part” taken by Mary is listening to the Word incarnate, and this is commended to all Christians as salutary, in comparison to the human activity of Martha. In contrasting Martha with Mary as a Law/Gospel paradigm, Luther was following the exegesis of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Cyril of Alexandria. Augustine had read Mary’s contemplation and Martha’s action as two parts of the same life, rather than as two opposed ways of life, an interpretation that will also undergird Luther’s reading.

Luther’s sermon for the Feast of the Assumption, from 1523, explicitly rejects the medieval (and even the patristic) readings of the two figures as representing the active and the contemplative life. “We can dismiss what has been said until now about the active and the contemplative life… I would cover up their words and let them be unknown.” Luther redresses the traditional inequality between religious and secular vocations and, indeed, the separation of them into two distinct estates. He seeks to embrace Martha’s work as an example of industry in the pursuit of one’s secular vocation, but to remove the anxiety associated with a valuation of works as meritorious. “It is in our nature… not to be satisfied with faith, but to require works as well. We should be active, but we should not worry.” Mary’s contemplation, on the other hand, is praised as part of constructing an evangelical distinction between faith and works. “All

25 Constable, Three Studies, pp. 15-16.
26 Constable, Three Studies, p. 18.
27 WA 12:651.
28 Translated in Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, eds., Luther on Women, p. 78.
29 Luther on Women, p. 79.
people’s works are transitory things; there is nothing except the word of God and faith. The word remains eternally, and is steadfast against the devil, death, and hell.”

Mary’s work is shown to be no work at all, but the passive attitude of trust in God’s spoken promises. In the sermon for the same festival from the previous year, Luther had said, “For I wish to have no work but the work of Mary, which is believing.”

The new definition of contemplation is further refined in a sermon for 12 Trinity, 1531; it is not to be confused with a scholastic speculation on the nature of God, but to remain simply listening to the Word itself.

My doctrine and preaching can not be obtained in all of the books, in Aristotle, among the scholastics, Thomas and Scotus; accordingly it became separated from the crowd and heard only itself. For this would I do, and him only would I hear, and I will sit with Mary at his feet, then I will also learn what was taught by Christ about faith. That is necessary for us, what we Christians have each to believe seriously.”

Mary, in her humble simplicity, provides the example for faithful Christians, with her meek posture and in her direct reception of the bare Word. It is not necessary to be a doctor of theology but only to do as anyone may, even an untutored woman. This praise of Mary’s simple faith stands within Luther’s larger theology that prefers a childlike dependence on God to the idea of faith as an intellectual quest.

---

30 Luther on Women, p. 78.
31 Sermon on the Assumption of Mary (1522), WA 10.3:272.
32 Sermon on Trinity 12 (1531), WA 34.2:148.
33 Cf. Anselm’s fides quaerens intellectum; see Giles E. M. Gasper, Anselm of Canterbury and His Theological Inheritance (Aldershot, U.K.; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 107-09. Luther’s opposition to this conception of faith is demonstrated in his contempt for the “theologians of glory” at the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), LW 31:40. His praise for the faith of children and young women can be found in his frequent celebration of the early Christian virgin martyrs; see Margaret Arnold, “To Sweeten the Bitter Dance: The Virgin Martyrs in the Lutheran Reformation,” Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, vol. 104 (2013):110-33.
The Resurrection Narrative

The Johannine account of the resurrection served as the Gospel text for the Easter Sunday morning service, and Luther thus preached on it almost every year in which he wrote an Easter sermon.\(^{34}\) On occasion he also expanded his treatment of the passage with a particular consideration during Easter week, as in 1530, when his preaching for Easter Thursday featured a sermon dedicated especially to the Magdalene’s role as the first witness of the resurrection. His preaching career contains at least eleven preserved sermons on this text, a substantial record from which to draw some tentative conclusions about the way in which he strove to interpret the episode for his congregation and colleagues.

The main themes of Luther’s homiletical work on John 20:1-18 are twofold. The first is Mary Magdalene’s character as an ordinary sinner, comparable to male prophets and disciples of both the Old and New Testaments, all of whom were chosen, despite their failings, to reveal and serve the Gospel.\(^{35}\) This trope was common throughout Luther’s work: in *Against the Heavenly Prophets* Mary is counted alongside male sinners, Peter and Paul, who became saints by the means of grace alone, and in the *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther wrote, “Just as sin was aroused in Manasseh, but for grace and salvation, and similarly also in the case of Peter, Paul, and the Magdalene.”\(^{36}\) In the Easter preaching, this is explicitly discussed as a spiritual equality of all sinners, as in the

---

\(^{34}\) Fragments from 1514-17, WA 1:53-58; 1525, WA 17.1:182ff.; 1529, WA 29:261; 1530, WA 32:46; 1531, WA 34.1:284; 1535, WA 41:51-55; 1536, WA 41:532-34; 1538, WA 46:318-24; 1540, WA 49:97-8; Dietrich’s Hauspostille, 1544, WA 52:246.

\(^{35}\) Magnificat, WA 7:569; Vorlesung über den 1. Timotheusbrief (1528), WA 26:24; sermon for 11 Trinity, 1537, WA 45:128.

\(^{36}\) The comparison of Peter (and Paul) with Mary Magdalene as penitents was an element of the medieval hagiographic tradition of the two saints; see Kienzle, “Penitents and Preachers,” pp. 258-59. See Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:124ff.; *Lectures on Genesis* (1535), LW 6:371.
sermon for Easter Sunday, 1530, where Luther himself, along with Peter and Mary Magdalene, are all likewise sinful until Christ calls them to new life on Easter Day.  

In the sermon for the following Thursday, everyone, Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene, Luther, and his listeners, “are all brothers alike and there is utterly no difference between persons.” This point was also emphasized in Stephan Roth’s 1526 *Sommerpostille*, where, in a discussion of the relative merit of different scriptural figures, Luther acknowledges that Peter would, of course, have done a greater work than the thief crucified with Jesus, and Mary, the mother of God, a greater work than the sinful Magdalene, yet all are made brothers with Christ, and there is to be no distinction of persons.

It may be that Luther’s frequent comparisons of the Magdalene to Peter, in addition to being a reassurance for all Christians that they are equally recipients of grace and an exhortation to service of God in gratitude, also serve the purpose of undermining the traditional primacy of Peter among the saints and thus providing a subtle attack on papal authority. In the sermon for Septuagesima, 1524, Luther imagines an indignant Peter appealing to God. “Mary had seven demons. If Peter said: Mary cannot be equal to me, God would respond: how much more has actually been given to the Magdalene, than

---

37 WA 44:46
38 WA 32:85; see also p. 90.
to you. Here he works for the whole day with no effect.”41 Peter’s plea and God’s response echo the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, in which those who had worked for a full day are paid as much as those who were hired at dusk. The evangelical emphasis on unmerited grace is made while, at the same time, Peter is portrayed as ungrateful and petty.

God’s championing of the sinful Magdalene or the latecomers in the parable seems, on the face of it, unreasonable and enigmatic. The very ordinariness of Mary Magdalene, a mere sinner, is another demonstration one of Luther’s favorite themes, the foolishness of the Gospel: God’s rejection or inversion of worldly wisdom, power, and status. Luther notes the strangeness of the Lord’s resurrection being announced first to, and by, mere women, and ignorant ones at that. In the 1528 Winterpostille, Christ’s revelations to the heathen woman and to Mary Magdalene confound the usual order of things.42 An Easter week sermon from 1529 also draws attention to the astounding fact of Christ’s first post-resurrection appearance, to a woman.43 In the sermon for Easter Monday from Caspar Cruciger’s Sommerpostille, Luther speaks of the women, led by the Magdalene, who were so unknowing as to go to the empty tomb to minister to a dead body, “Now these madwomen and fools become the first to whom Christ reveals His resurrection, and He makes the same into preacheresses and witnesses.”44 The emphasis on the weakness of Mary and the other women at the tomb is coupled ironically, in the

42 WA 21:82f.
43 24 Predigt am ersten Osterfeiertage (1529), WA 29:261.
1529 Easter Sunday sermon, with an acknowledgment of the “excellent, unconquerable strength” of these women, once they are sustained by grace. The contrast is offered not to establish the nature of women as weak (an undisputed characterization in the sixteenth century), but to point to the weakness of all Christians before the receipt of grace, and to the contrast with their power and freedom in Christ. The paradoxical coexistence of pitiable weakness and magnificent strength within the same person, considered from two different perspectives, is one of Luther’s most common tropes about Christ’s incarnation, in which the Lord of creation is born a helpless infant, and suffers an ignoble death.

That Luther’s emphasis is not on Mary’s special frailty as a woman is also argued by his failure to take up a common trope of medieval exegesis on John 20, the interpretation of the Noli me tangere text as a condemnation of Mary’s carnality. The passage was read by Luther only as an indication that the earliest witnesses of the resurrection did not understand the nature of the risen Christ. He even develops a passage of prosopopoeia in which Jesus rejects the idea that Mary’s touch was itself inappropriate. “I am not concerned by your touch,” Luther has the risen Christ tell Mary, “but what does concern Me is what you think about My resurrection, namely, that you should believe that through it I have entered a different existence.”

The second theme of the Easter preaching is Luther’s praise of the Magdalene as an example of faithful devotion to Christ, by her zeal in going early to the tomb and her

---

45 Contra Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, who offer this text as an example of Luther’s references to the particular weakness of women; Luther on Women, pp. 60-61, 84.
47 See Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, pp. 54-55.
patient mourning there when others had left or stayed away.\textsuperscript{50} In her ardent seeking of the incarnate Word, and in her divinely ordained mission to strengthen the disciples with the message of their newfound brotherhood with Christ, she is held up as a model for all Christians. And particularly for preachers: “Oh, that we also should have such a heart,” Luther laments, in referring to the depth of her love and grief.\textsuperscript{51} In his preaching on John 20 from 1529, Luther gives an extended discussion of her passionate fidelity.

Thus Mary is a fine, beautiful image and an outstanding example of all those who cling to Christ so that their heart is set aflame with pure, genuine love for Christ… And the evangelist has so carefully noted all of this in order to present an example to the whole world, so that we who preach or hear it may also gain such longing, love, and ardor for the Lord Christ in accordance with her example… This example of Mary puts us all to shame.\textsuperscript{52}

As we have already seen, Luther proclaims that John 20 shows Christ appointing Mary Magdalene to be the first preacher of the Gospel. In the 1530 Easter Thursday sermon, Luther writes, “macht ein predigerin aus yhr, das sie mus eine Meisterin und leren der lieben Aposteln sein/Christ makes of her a preacheress, that she must be a mistress and teacher of the dear apostles.”\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, in his Easter Monday sermon for the Duke of Saxony from 1538, Christ tells Mary to “Go forth and become a preacheress and declare this (as I say to you) before my dear brothers.”\textsuperscript{54} In these references Luther uses the female form for the role of Mary and the other women at the resurrection; he is not invoking them allegorically, as symbols of faithfulness meant only for imitation by male

\textsuperscript{50} Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 17-20 (1528-30), LW 69:289-91.
\textsuperscript{51} Alius sermo D Martini super Euangelio Ioannis 20 de Magdalena (1530), WA 32:78.
\textsuperscript{52} Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 17-20 (1528-30), LW 69:299, 303.
\textsuperscript{53} Alius sermo D Martini super Euangelio Ioannis 20 de Magdalena (1530), WA 32:80.
clergy. These are emphatically women, whose very humble reality makes them models for the believers sitting before the Wittenberg pulpit.

Providing a foundation for these discussions of the Magdalene as a preacher, Luther elsewhere insists on her identity, amongst other women and men in the New Testament, as a disciple.\(^{55}\) In the context of a 1529 sermon directed against sacerdotalism, advancing Luther’s theology of the priesthood of all believers, he writes,

Discover that the disciples are not only the apostles, but all those who believe in Christ. Luke in Acts, chapter 9 [says], ‘There were disciples at Lydda,’ etc. In this word all are comprehended, so this teaching makes them blush, because women are mentioned by name, etc. And without doubt the women, Mary Magdalene, Martha, Johanna, were at the supper, and went with Him freely, who went together at Passover and on Easter. He does not speak of apostles, of priests, but of disciples, whereupon you should observe this. The evangelist, with the greatest discrimination speaks of disciples. The disciples are, again, those who cling to Christ, not the Apostles. In Antioch they began to call the disciples Christians. In Jerusalem they did not, but said: they are disciples, students, followers of Jesus Christ, so until this very day. Just as the name of Christians and disciples is common to all, men and women, so remains this text for our community also.\(^{56}\)

This sermon, coming five years after the Peasants’ War and the emergence of radical reformers such as Thomas Münzer, argues against the claim that Luther abandoned his early theology of the priesthood of all believers in favor of a more traditional understanding of the division between clergy and laity, when confronted by

55 *Disputatio inter Ioannem Eccium et Martinum Lutherum* (1519), WA 59:577.
the threat of insurgent, unauthorized preachers. Timothy Wengert has argued that the theology of the priesthood of all believers as it is commonly understood today was, in fact, a seventeenth-century construction by the Pietist theologian, Philipp Jakob Spener. According to Wengert, what Luther really intended by applying the terms for priests and pastors (Luther never actually uses the phrase, “priesthood of all believers”) to all Christians was a largely negative statement. The claim that Luther makes in the early 1520s, that “We are all priests” meant, according to Wengert’s reading, merely that no one person could be elevated by the pope over any other in a spiritual hierarchy. The clergy is an identification only of office among Christians, who are all equally members of the spiritual estate. In *A Treatise on the New Testament* (1520), for example, Luther describes Christian men and women as “priests and priestesses.” Thus, Luther can call scriptural women, such as Mary Magdalene and the others at the tomb, “priestesses,” without meaning that all women thereby gain the authority of a public, ecclesial office. Wengert concedes, though, that Luther’s theology of universal Christian priesthood is not only a negative one; a positive duty attaches to each believer at need, to minister the Gospel one to another, and even publicly, in an emergency. Which returns us to the role played by the Magdalene at the resurrection. Wengert writes, “Those called to the public office of ministry have no more to say or do in our vocations than Mary Magdalene.”

And no less, as Luther’s paeans to Mary’s faithfulness at the tomb and in her

---

proclamation afterward attest. While Luther certainly did not intend to open the office of the pastorate to women, the scriptural ministry of women had become an argument against the medieval theology of the priesthood, and the choice of Mary Magdalene to be the first preacher of the resurrection served Luther’s aim of promoting active evangelism by the laity.

Luther’s discussion of the Magdalene’s preaching is consistent with his more general considerations of female and lay preaching. His early polemical treatise against the sacramental theology of the Catholic church, *The Misuse of the Mass* (1521), deals with the question of the nature of the priesthood as Luther understood it.

This is a spiritual priesthood, held in common by all Christians, through which we are all priests with Christ... And Jer. 31[:34]: ‘No longer shall one man teach or instruct the other, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the youngest of them to the oldest.’... Thus it follows that the priesthood in the New Testament is equally in all Christians, in the spirit alone without any roles or masks, as Paul says in Gal. 5 [3:28]: ‘In Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither master nor servant; for you are all one in Christ.’

These are the kinds of pronouncements that had suggested the possibility of female preaching and lay preaching in general. The dangers associated with that possibility were already evident to Luther in 1521 and led to cautious and careful treatments of the question. He had authored this treatise during his time of hiding in the Wartburg from the death sentence of the Edict of Worms. During this period, his fellow reformers in Wittenberg, led by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt and Philipp Melanchthon, had moved toward abolishing the mass as a misinterpretation of Christ’s institution: if all are

---

alike priests, then one man cannot offer the mass as a sacrifice on behalf of others.62

Luther wanted to encourage his colleagues without inspiring anarchy, and so his treatise contains both revolutionary theology and a deliberately measured tone.63 He therefore follows his claims about the common spiritual priesthood with arguments that seek to place authoritative limits on the filling of the public preaching office: “We readily admit that not many of you are to preach at the same time, although all have the power to do so.”64 He specifically addresses the provocative question of public female speech and the texts marshaled against it, apparently already raised by his opponents.

Now, however, the papists quote to us the saying of Paul (I Cor. 14[:34]): ‘The women should keep silence in the church; it is not becoming for a woman to preach. A woman is not permitted to preach, but she should be subordinate and obedient.’ They argue from this that preaching cannot be common to all Christians because women are excluded... Paul forbids women to preach in the congregation where men are present who are skilled in speaking, so that respect and discipline may be maintained; because it is much more fitting and proper for a man to speak, a man is also more skilled at it. Paul did not forbid this out of his own devices, but appealed to the law, which says that women are to be subject [Gen. 3:16]... How could Paul otherwise have singlehandedly resisted the Holy Spirit, who promised in Joel [2:28]: “And your daughters shall prophesy.” Moreover, we read in Acts 4 [21:8–9]: “Philip had four unmarried daughters, who all prophesied.” “And Miriam the sister of Moses was also a prophetess” [Exod. 15:20]. And Huldah the prophetess gave advice to pious King Josiah [II Kings 22:14–20], and Deborah did the same to Duke Barak [Judg. 4:4–7]; and finally, the song of the Virgin Mary [Luke 1:46–55] is praised throughout the world. Paul himself in I Cor. 11[:5] instructs the women to pray and prophesy with covered heads. Therefore order, discipline, and respect demand that women keep silent

62 Croken, Luther’s First Front, pp. 31-2; there is an excellent survey of the events of 1521, and the theological development that led up to them, in Amy Nelson Burnett, Karlstadt and the Origins of the Eucharistic Controversy: A Study in the Circulation of Ideas, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 10-35.


64 Martin Luther, The Misuse of the Mass (1521), LW 36:149
when men speak; but if no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach.\

Luther is obviously attentive to the scriptural examples of female preaching, such as that of Mary Magdalene. Without denying the value of these figures or the veracity and divine inspiration of their messages, he is at pains to prevent exposing his movement to ridicule and his new pastors to subversion of their authority. The spiritual equality before God that Luther found between the Magdalene, Peter, and Paul is evidence of a common spiritual estate, but the divinely established temporal authority of husband and father, teacher and pastor remains firmly in place, dictating who may hold the public office of preacher.

A more positive discussion came in a treatise from the same year, but this time addressed *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, encouraging lay men, the secular princes and rulers of Germany, to consider themselves as divinely authorized to intervene in ecclesiastical affairs to further the Reformation. Luther writes,

To put it still more clearly: suppose a group of earnest Christian laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he were married or not, and charge him to baptize, say mass, pronounce absolution, and preach the gospel. Such a man would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world. That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution. This would be impossible if we were not all priests.

---

67 Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1521), LW 44:128.
This goes further than asserting only that no one shall be set over another in absolute spiritual authority, such as the pope claims. It is the common potential of priesthood, specifically the power of delivering Christ’s Word to the neighbor that gives anyone the power of assuming the office for a given community. Luther’s argument goes on to classify both men and women as priests and priestesses.

When examining the case of female preaching by itself, however, separated from the question of the laity as a whole, Luther’s position is more conservative. He discusses the injunction to silence among other problems of congregational organization in his Lectures on 1 Timothy (1528), concluding that women may speak only where there is no man in authority over them, that is, in the case of unmarried women in their own homes.68 He mentions the daughters of Philip from Acts 21 as examples of such unmarried women but maintains that the possibility allowed in 1 Corinthians 14, of women teaching publicly, “has now perished,” except in the absence of a male teacher, even though he could “wish it were still in effect, but it causes great strife.”69

Audience and occasion, then, had an influence on the force and direction of Luther’s rhetoric about the openness of the preaching office. Where he is defending his reform movement against accusations and trying to forestall abuses or avoid quagmires, he is assiduous in reinforcing established authorities. Where a revolutionary challenge to traditional authority and a proclamation of evangelical freedom are called for, however, he seizes on examples that are both powerful and perilous in the liberty they suggest.

68 On the Lectures on 1 Timothy and its ecclesiastical goals, see Brecht 2:248-49.
69 Martin Luther, Lectures on 1 Timothy (1527-28), LW 28:277.
Lutheran Postils on the sinful woman of Luke 7

The Magdalene interpretations made by Luther’s followers echoed the theological themes and language that their mentor had used. Especially in preparing postil collections, which were marketed as reliable guides to orthodox, evangelical teaching, authors sought to ensure that they were providing sound exemplars by hewing closely to Luther’s pronouncements. One of the earliest postil collections published by one of Luther’s epigones was Johann Bugenhagen’s 1524 *Postillatio*. Bugenhagen was Luther’s close associate and the pastor of St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg. For several of the Sundays in the *Postillatio*, Bugenhagen simply refers the reader to Luther’s own sermon on the text, indicating his reliance on his friend’s teaching.\(^{70}\) Bugenhagen’s sermon notes for the feast of the Magdalene present the penitent, Lucan Magdalene as an example of true repentance and salvation by faith.\(^{71}\) Another of Luther’s initial supporters was Urbanus Rhegius, who began to write and minister on behalf of the evangelical cause in 1521 in Augsburg, eventually becoming the superintendent of evangelical clergy in Lüneberg, where his supervisory role led him to produce a preaching manual, published in 1535-36.\(^{72}\) As part of the book’s goal of theological education for a recently converted populace, Rhegius addresses many of the areas of religious life that Luther sought to reform, with sections on how to speak “properly,” “carefully,” or “circumspectly” about such sensitive topics as fasting, human traditions, the cult of the saints, and images,

---

\(^{70}\) See, for example, the sermons for the first Sunday after Trinity, ibid., A7v; and for the ninth Sunday after Trinity, B1v.

\(^{71}\) Johann Bugenhagen, *Postillatio in evangelia usui temporum et Sanctoru(m) totius anni servientia, ad preces Georgij Spalatini scripta* (Wittenberg, 1524), C2r. The *Postillatio* is in schematic form, and does not offer a prose exposition of any of its texts.

including a section explaining the new theology of confession. There he refers to Luke 7, offering a close application of the story to the contemporary congregation and its practices of piety. The Magdalene’s absolution is an encouraging example for Christians that every absolution is spoken to us directly, from Christ, when spoken to us by the pastor.

People [under the papacy] were persuaded that sins were remitted by the act of confessing and their own contrition. The merits of Christ were scarcely considered… Christ gave to his church the keys to the kingdom of Heaven and commits them to ministers of the Word… We ought to believe firmly, therefore, in the absolution, no less than if Christ himself would visibly absolve us just as he absolved Mary Magdalene.

Believers were thereby assured that they continued to be absolved of their sins, but directed toward a new understanding of how that freedom was achieved and what it meant.

The emphasis on Christ’s action gives new meaning to the Magdalene’s washing of Christ’s feet: she tends to Christ out of love and gratitude for what he has already done for her, not as a propitiation for her sins. This interpretation is elaborated in Johann Spangenberg’s catechetical Postilla of 1544, where the subsequent conversion of her whole life is a model of the sinner’s response to her redemption. Luther’s close associate and supporter, Spangenberg had served as evangelical pastor of Nordhausen since 1524, going on to become church superintendent in Mansfeld County in 1546. Having been rhetor of the Latin school in Stolberg before his ordination, he applied his talents to

---

73 Lüneburg’s reformation had begun in the mid-1520s and was “still in progress” in the 1530s; see Rhegius, Preaching the Reformation, pp. 8-9 and table of contents.
74 Rhegius, Preaching the Reformation, p. 77.
religious education, founding the Latin school at Nordhausen and publishing a collection of instructional sermons for young people.76

The sermon for the Magdalene’s feast expresses an evangelical theology of confession and absolution, organized around a series of questions in the standard catechetical formula. He gives an introduction to the different kinds of possible sinners: unrepentant sinners, hypocrites, and the penitent, of which the sinful woman of Luke 7, whom “some” connect with the Magdalene, is the model.77 She is not merely a model for particularly sinful sexual miscreants, nor even for women as such, though he acknowledges lust as the character of her sinful past.78 Rather, Spangenberg uses the story to emphasize the universality of the sinful condition, noting in several places that Christ came for “poor sinners, male and female.”79 He urges his students to do as she does, “We should learn from this example, how it must happen that we will attain the forgiveness of sins from God.”80 Once students imitate her faith, they will demonstrate it in acts of love and compassion like hers.81 He very clearly lays out the evangelical order of contrition, then faith that Christ forgives sins, and “lastly,” the works of gratitude.82 The sermon firmly refutes a suggestion that her action might have played some role in securing her forgiveness. “How could a human work achieve the forgiveness of sins, that only comes

76 Leaver, Luther’s Liturgical Music, p. 212.
77 Johann Spangenberg, Postilla Teütsch (Wittenberg, 1544), 128r, 128v. Spangenberg refuses to take a position on whether or not the Magdalene is this sinful woman; he claims that her specific identity is unimportant, but the message that Christ comes for sinners is all that Christian need know; 128v.
78 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 127v.
79 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 128v, “Man vnd weib,” and 129r, “die armen Sünder vnd Sünderinnen.”
80 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 129v.
81 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 129v.
82 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 130v.
from God?" Spangenberg asserts, however, that so great a faith “is not idle or without works, but rather extends itself through love,” warning his young audience against the possibility of an over-emphasis on unmerited forgiveness, an Antinomian interpretation Luther and his colleagues combated as threatening lawlessness. For Spangenberg’s pupils, the Magdalene is thus the paradigmatic believer: one who knows herself sinful, and responds appropriately. As he notes, citing 1 John 1:8, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.” All are therefore sinners like the Magdalene; all must seek her steadfast faith, which is then expressed in service of God and the neighbor.

Such theological instruction, identifying believers with the sinful woman, took place not only in sermons but throughout the worship service, in prayer and in song. The hymn author Nicolaus Herman was the cantor in Joachimsthal, in northwest Bohemia, and another early supporter of Luther’s reform program. His collection of hymns for the church year, published in 1560, includes two hymns for the feast day of the Magdalene. Interestingly, the hymn Herman had written for Easter Sunday, describing the Magdalene’s visit to the tomb, is reprinted just before the hymns for her feast day, indicating that the liturgy for her feast may also have included an observance of her role in the resurrection narrative. The first hymn for the Luke 7 text creates a similar connection between the sinner of the story and the contemporary worshipper, with a first-

---

83 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 133r.
84 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 130r.
85 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 130r. See Luther, Against the Antinomians (1539), LW 47:99-120; Bernhard Lohse, Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 178-84.
86 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 132v.
87 Spangenberg, Postilla Deutsch, 133r.
person speech that places the words of the woman’s desire to care for Jesus in the mouth of the singer. The hymn concludes with an admonition to imitate her piety, “You sinful men and women/ learn from this penitent woman/ how God admits so graciously/ the penance done/ in faith and improves it.” A second hymn for the same occasion, “Das vorige Euangelium von Maria Magdalena/ zum andern mal gemacht,” emphasizes a passage from the pericope in which Jesus offers Simon a story about two debtors, one of whom is forgiven a much greater debt and who therefore feels more gratitude to the creditor. Herman describes Mary’s love as great because she has been forgiven much, inverting the cause and effect relationship from medieval exegesis of this passage in an assertion of the evangelical order of forgiveness followed by the fruit of faith. “For her love toward me is great,/ Because she is being loosed from many sins./ However, one who is not forgiven much,/ That one also loves so much the less.”

Christopher Brown has established the catechetical relationship between hymns, such as Herman’s, and preaching. The symbiosis between the two served both to create a coherent message in worship and to promulgate the lessons taught at church in the home and workplace, creating a powerful vehicle for the evangelical Gospel. A parallel interpretation of the text does, in fact, appear in the sermon for Mary Magdalene’s feast in the postil collection published in 1565 by Herman’s colleague in Joachimsthal, the

91 Brown, Singing the Gospel, pp. 91-92.
pastor Johannes Mathesius.  

92 Mathesius, like Herman, presents a consistent reiteration of Luther’s exegesis of this passage; both preaching and song would have reinforced each other in conveying an evangelical reading of the text that was both memorable and theologically thorough.

Unusually among evangelical interpretations, Mathesius’ introduction of Mary Magdalene describes her as an upper-class woman, a “pious Schlossfrau,” in what he admits is a reference to her medieval legend.  

93 He notes that she was among the women who supported Christ and his disciples from their means, subtly connecting her with the wealthy female patrons of his own congregation, on whose support he depended in a confessionally divided area.  

94 He also pauses to recall the events of Easter morning, when to Mary Magdalene “the Lord first appeared after his resurrection on Easter day, and commanded her to preach and declare his joyous resurrection to his beloved disciples and brothers.”

95 He acknowledges the identification of this Magdalene with the sinful woman of Luke 7 (and with Mary of Bethany) and that the tradition associates this text with the Magdalene’s feast. Claiming that he does not wish to dispute the point, he suggests that these figures were three separate women but proposes to examine the text for its intrinsic value.  

96 Placing some distance between the prostitute and the patroness seems politic, in view of Mathesius’s audience of noblewomen. Serving a similar purpose, and likewise

---


93 Mathesius, Postilla, 54v.

94 Women such as Margarethe von Hassenstein, the Lutheran wife of the Catholic Bohleslau Felix von Hassenstein; Mathesius, De Profundis, Ausgewählte Werke, Georg Loesche, ed. (Prague: J. G. Calve, 1908), 4:463.

95 Mathesius, Postilla, 54v.

96 Mathesius, Postilla, 55r.
innovative among Lutheran preachers, is Mathesius’ focus on the Magdalene’s recognition of Christ’s preaching office as especially praiseworthy, both in the initial description of what she does and in Christ’s comparison of her actions to the inadequate welcome given him by Simon the Pharisee. The emphasis is not only on her self-awareness as a contrite sinner; she is also insightful about Christ’s identity and respectful of him as the Word incarnate. In this she provides an admirable model for women as discerning supporters of the true mission and message of the church. More conventionally, Mathesius goes on to describe how she honors Christ in gratitude for the forgiveness of her sins. As Luther often had, Mathesius lists her among other sinners selected by God for great service: Paul and David. Again like Luther, Mathesius insists that her love is a “fruit of faith,” rather than the cause of her redemption. In concert with the other evangelical interpreters of this passage, Mathesius uses Christ’s statement to the woman, that her faith has saved her, to establish that justification is based on faith alone, not works.

That assertion was still being made two generations after the beginning of Luther’s reform, in the era of confessionalization. Johann Habermann’s very popular 1575 Postilla contains a long exposition of the story. Even at sixty years remove from Luther’s attack on indulgences, Habermann was dealing with the legacy of medieval piety. He was superintendent of Naumburg-Zeitz, a diocese that had been forcibly

---

97 Mathesius, Postilla, 55v, 56r.
98 Mathesius, Postilla, 55v.
99 Mathesius, Postilla, 56r.
100 Mathesius, Postilla, 56v.
reformed when Saxon Elector Johann Friedrich installed the evangelical Nicholas von Amsdorf as bishop in 1541. The area had passed back into Catholic control during the Schmalkaldic War in 1546-47. The diocese reverted to the control of the Saxon princes in 1564, with the death of the last Catholic bishop. When Habermann began his tenure in the region in 1576, it had thus experienced religious upheaval for more than thirty years, and firm teaching on evangelical identity must have been among his chief tasks.

Habermann begins his treatment of the Magdalene by parsing the hagiographic tradition, distinguishing between those parts that he will continue to observe and those elements that are to be rejected. He notes that he is following Gregory’s identification of the three scriptural Marys, as Luther had. He briefly addresses the apocryphal legends that have accrued around her cult, her travels to Marseille and other “idolatry,” dismissing them in favor of a consideration of the biblical record. The sinful woman hears the preaching of Christ and becomes convinced of her sin, fearful of death and hellfire. She brings the ointment and bathes Christ’s feet with it and dries them with her hair, “which is a sign of great love” and of faith … “for the love is a fruit of faith.”

The preaching of the Gospel, Habermann urges, should affect us in the same way, causing repentance, love, and a new obedience as the fruit of faith. He insists that shame, regret, and penitence are not enough; one must have faith in the grace of Christ who

---

103 Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings*, p. 72.
105 Johannes Habermann, *Postilla/ Das ist: Auslegung der Sontags Euangelien/ wie sie durchs Jar vber in der Kirchen gelesen vnd gepredigt werden/ Mit sonder fleis vnd treuen beschreiben* (Jena: Donat Richtzenhan, 1575), 154r.
106 Habermann, *Postilla*, 149v, 150r.
107 Habermann, *Postilla*, 150r.
mercifully forgives sins, as the Magdalene’s story also shows. We should learn from this that we are all sinners, in need of grace, and should repent, confessing our sins. We are saved by grace, not works, to contradict the false teaching of the pope, as we see from Christ’s words: “Your faith has saved you.” Habermann points out that Christ does not say “Your love has saved you.” The love is gratitude for the forgiveness and, again, its “fruit;” it does not produce the forgiveness. The importance for evangelical theology of Jesus’ story about the two debtors here becomes evident. Jesus asks the Pharisee who loves the merciful creditor more; the question and answer establish, for Habermann, that love is created in response to mercy. This is true for the sinful woman and in his own congregation. Lastly, Habermann claims that right faith never comes without bringing love, expressed in deeds and obedience to God’s commands. Like Spangenberg with his impetuous young pupils, Habermann is concerned to prevent Antinomian abuses of evangelical freedom. The Luke 7 text both extends the promise and sets the limits on the theology of justification by faith alone.

**Lutheran Preaching on the Mary-Martha Pericope**

Luther’s followers also adopted his exegesis of the comparison between Mary and Martha as they taught evangelical congregations about the new theology of vocation: how to incorporate contemplation into the life of the laity and how to understand the sacredness of being active in the world. Because the Mary-Martha text was attached to a
feast no longer celebrated in most Lutheran communities, but mostly in those with a divided confessional affiliation, there are fewer examples of preaching on this pericope in Lutheran postil collections. Johann Spangenberg’s 1544 Postilla Teütsch does contain a sermon for the Feast of the Assumption. In answering Martha’s plea for some help with the housework, Christ responds, “Mary has chosen a good part, and it shall not be taken from her.” In Spangenberg’s reading, she has a “good” part, but not the “better” one of the Lucan text. Here we can see a preacher taking license with the scriptures, as Luther had counseled, in order to deliver the message of the Gospel clearly and emphatically. Like Luther, Spangenberg does not wish to diminish the work of Martha as a worldly good, important in the secular kingdom, but only to indicate its irrelevance in God’s kingdom. He asks what men have made of the two lives represented by Mary and Martha and describes how, under monasticism, Mary’s contemplative life was held up as the holy one, and the physical labor of Martha was seen as lesser. What kind of predicament does this impose on the majority, who must endure in their lot in life? “So must all worldly businessmen, craftsmen, townspeople and farmers be lost?” He contends, following Luther’s 1523 sermon, that it is not Martha’s work that is being rebuked or rejected, but the false meaning attached to it. The emphasis is on Christ’s statement that Mary’s work is the one thing needful, that God’s Word is what is necessary to bring us to eternal life; physical works are good, but not necessary in

---

113 Johann Spangenberg, Postilla Teütsch, 77r.
115 On Luther’s two kingdoms theology, see Lohse, Martin Luther’s Theology, pp. 314-24.
116 Spangenberg, Postilla Teütsch, 78v.
relation to salvation. “Your work is certainly useful and good, but Mary’s work alone is necessary. Your work is fleeting, Mary’s work (namely, to hear God’s Word) is eternal and brings the hearer at last to that place where the Word sits in its essence, at the right [hand] of God in eternal life.”¹¹⁷ In his concluding summary of this text, Spangenberg writes “That works do not make us righteous before God, but rather sitting at the feet of Christ and hearing His Word—that makes us righteous and blessed.”¹¹⁸

This pericope was thus used by Luther and subsequent preachers of reform to argue for a rejection of the medieval hierarchy of ways of life, which had elevated the celibate, cloistered life over the domestic and mercantile existence of the laity. Mary Magdalene was brought back in the early Lutheran sermon from her retreat into an eremitic contemplation and relocated in the hurly-burly of the mundane. Sitting at the feet of Jesus—as she and all other Christians are commanded to do—does not represent a turning away from the duties of this life but a devotion to the Word as it pierces through the cacophony of market place and nursery, workshop and battlefield. Rather than counseling the faithful to imitate her example by preferring religious vows to marriage and children, Lutheran pastors could hold the Magdalene up as a figure for ordinary believers, in listening to the Gospel even as they attended to their daily tasks.

Lutheran preaching on the resurrection narrative

Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner have argued that Luther viewed the active ministry of biblical women, and in particular the preaching of Mary Magdalene, as

¹¹⁷ Spangenberg, *Postilla Teütsch*, 78v. The clarification that Mary’s work is hearing God’s word is Spangenberg’s own.
“extraordinary” exceptions to the general rule of silent obedience for women in church.\textsuperscript{119} Though Luther did praise the Magdalene herself as a “preacheress,” as he weighed the biblical examples against the potential turmoil to be caused in the nascent reform movement by such a challenge to pastoral authority, he advised against allowing women to preach publicly. Some of his followers, in writing postil sermons on the resurrection narrative, went farther than the Reformer in exploring the possibility of public religious speech for women. The particular contexts and aims of their work, emphasizing the education and perseverance in the faith of second– and third–generation Protestants, may have allowed for a different acknowledgement of women’s roles in the process of confessionalization.

Spangenberg’s \textit{Postilla Teütsch} offers a clear exposition of the potential controversy suggested by the prominent activity of women in the resurrection story. After recounting the events of Easter morning, he pauses to ask whether the female witnesses were, indeed, being given the work of priests in being instructed to spread the news that Christ was risen. He states of Mary Magdalene’s role, repeating Luther’s language, “Here He makes her into a preacheress/She must be the mistress and teacher of the Apostles.”\textsuperscript{120} And of the group of women as a whole: “Does Christ make these women into preachers?


\textsuperscript{120} Spangenberg, \textit{Postilla Teutsch}, “Da macht er sy zur Predigerinnen/Sy müs der Apostel Maisterin und Lererin sein.” 6v.
Freely Christ the high priest himself makes these women into priests and preachers.”\textsuperscript{121}

In answering that they were being given a priestly office, he notes that one can find other examples of women fulfilling prophetic vocations in Scripture: Hannah in Luke 2 and the daughters of Philip in Acts 21. He then addresses the apparent conflict with Paul’s injunction of silence for women in church, from 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

Saint Paul’s meaning is not that the female Christians should not teach and confess, but rather he wants that in Christian community it should be done in an orderly manner. Where men can fulfill the teaching office, there women should keep silence. Where, however, no man is able to preach, why should a woman not be unforbidden to preach? Women must, as Christians, baptize in need, thus they also must preach at need, not through their own worthiness, but rather through the death and resurrection of Christ.\textsuperscript{122}

Given that male preaching also derived its authority from Christ’s death and resurrection, and that the Reformation was an era in which communities were encouraged to find preachers of the evangelical Gospel if that Gospel was not being preached by the established church, this represents a significant encouragement to women’s teaching and preaching, in theory even if seldom in practice.

Spangenberg may have been drawing on the work of his contemporary, Anton Corvinus, who had taken up the same contradictory texts at the end of his sermon for Easter Sunday, in the 1539 postil collection, \textit{Kurze und einfeltige Auslegung der Episteln und Euangelien}.\textsuperscript{123} Corvinus had been influential in the progress of the Reformation in

\textsuperscript{121} “Macht Christus dise weibet zü Predigern? Freylich/Christus der Hohe priester weihet dise weibet selbst zü Priestern und Predigern.” Spangenberg, \textit{Postilla Teutsch}, 8v-9r.
\textsuperscript{122} Spangenberg, \textit{Postilla Teutsch}, 10r.
\textsuperscript{123} Corvinus and Spangenberg apparently met in 1544, when Corvinus, in his role as confessor to Elisabeth Braunschweig-Lüneburg, accompanied her and her son on a trip to Saxony, which included a visit to Pastor Spangenberg in Nordhausen. See Carl Lorenz Collmann, \textit{Anton Corvinus Leben}, in \textit{Das Leben der Altväter der lutherischen Kirche}, ed. M. Meurer (Leipzig; Dresden: Naumann, 1864), p. 43; Paul Tschackert, \textit{Antonius Corvinus Leben und Schriften} (Hanover; Leipzig: Hahn’sche, 1900), p. 151.
northern Germany, through his published sermon collections and in writing church
orders.\footnote{Rittgers, \textit{The Reformation of Suffering}, p. 180.}

Part of his work in developing the church orders was the excision of hagiographic
material from the liturgy, as in the case of the Marian antiphons he removed from the
worship practice in Calenberg-Göttingen.\footnote{See Mary E. Frandsen, “‘Salve Regina/Salve rex Christi’: Lutheran Engagement with the Marian Antiphons in the Age of Orthodoxy and Piety,” \textit{Musica Disciplina}, vol. 55 (2010):153.} Corvinus desired that the saints, such as the
Virgin Mary, be honored and studied as models of faith but not venerated as supernatural,
intercessory figures. He had written, “‘It is just that Mary is praised, extolled, and
commended as a blessed child of God, and put forward as an example of justifying faith
for all Christians, but let her remain a creature,’ and do not place her over Christ.”\footnote{Frandsen, “‘Salve Regina/Salve rex Christi,’” p. 153.}

Consistent with this approach, his treatment of the Magdalene in his postil for Easter
Sunday focuses on the application of her example to ordinary men and women. In
describing the preaching of the angel who gives the good news to Mary Magdalene, Mary
the mother of James, and Salome, he writes,

Note that the women here should do a priestly office. [A marginal note printed
with the text reads, “We are all priests.”] Who had sanctified them as priests?
John the Baptist? No, but rather God through His Son and our high priest, Christ.
Whoever believes in Christ, and receives the Holy Spirit through His Word, that
one is among those of whom Peter had spoken (1 Peter 2). God grants it to man or
woman.\footnote{Anton Corvinus, \textit{Kurtze und einfaltige Auslegung der Episteln vnd Euangelien so auffff die Sontage vnd furzemisten Feste durchs gantzee jar jnn der Kirchen gelesen werden} (Wittenberg, 1539), iiiir.}

As in Luther’s discussion in the 1529 sermon for Palm Sunday, Corvinus uses the active
ministry of the women to affirm the evangelical doctrine of the priesthood of all
believers, though his emphasis seems to go farther toward the legitimation of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Rittgers, \textit{The Reformation of Suffering}, p. 180.}
\item \footnote{See Mary E. Frandsen, “‘Salve Regina/Salve rex Christi’: Lutheran Engagement with the Marian Antiphons in the Age of Orthodoxy and Piety,” \textit{Musica Disciplina}, vol. 55 (2010):153.}
\item \footnote{Frandsen, “‘Salve Regina/Salve rex Christi,’” p. 153.}
\item \footnote{Anton Corvinus, \textit{Kurtze und einfaltige Auslegung der Episteln vnd Euangelien so auffff die Sontage vnd furzemisten Feste durchs gantzee jar jnn der Kirchen gelesen werden} (Wittenberg, 1539), iiiir.}
\end{itemize}
women’s preaching than did Luther. Corvinus goes on to offer the same examples
Spangenberg would use, Hannah and the daughters of Philip, and to make the same
evaluation of 1 Corinthians 14, that women ought to keep silent if a man is correctly
fulfilling the preaching office, but the ban is again lifted if there is no male preacher
performing the duty. He concludes, “We all together, women and men, must confess that
we are born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.”

The confession of faith was at the heart of Corvinus’ own vocation. Irene Dingel has
noted his stalwart resistance to the compromises and restrictions of the Augsburg Interim,
for which he was imprisoned for three years, dying from ill-treatment shortly after his
release. Corvinus had supported the public confessional work of Elisabeth von
Braunschweig-Lüneburg, providing an introduction to her pamphlet, *Ein Christlicher
Sendbrief*, which she wrote as regent to encourage her subjects during the religious strife
of 1546. As the Reformation came under increasing threat from religious and secular
opponents in the 1530s and 40s, the necessity of fostering brave and faithful testimony
from all of its adherents, male and female, was surely apparent.

**Conclusion**

---

129 Irene Dingel, “The Culture of Conflict in the Controversies Leading to the Formula of Concord, 1548-
1580,” in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture, 1550-1675*, ed. Robert Kolb, Brill’s Companions to the
130 Elisabeth von Braunschweig-Lüneburg, *Ein Christlicher Sendbrief* (Hanover, 1545). See Ulrike
Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,”
131 On the situation for the Reformation in the 1530s and 40s, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The
We can see, then, Luther’s followers drawing on his own preaching and writing in other genres about Mary Magdalene as she was used to teach evangelical theologies of justification and the priesthood of all believers, and developing interpretations they considered faithful to his teaching and appropriate to their own circumstances, recasting medieval exegesis and theology but preserving the centrality of the Magdalene and her associated texts. The activity of Christ, as opposed to the passive reception of the sinner, was presented as the orthodox understanding of the story of the woman in Luke 7. The penitent’s good works follow upon the faith in Christ’s forgiveness—indeed they must follow, to prevent an Antinomian reading of the passage—but they have no part in effecting salvation. In the comparison between Mary and Martha, the medieval elevation of the contemplative life is replaced with an assertion of devotion to the Word as the duty and delight of every believer, even as Martha’s worldly work is given new appreciation. In preaching on these passages, Luther’s followers tended to follow the interpretations of their mentor almost to the letter.

It is in the interpretation of the Magdalene’s role in the resurrection narrative that Luther’s colleagues depart most from the reformer’s writing, demonstrating a greater license in considering women as potential preachers in the contemporary church. The shift between Luther’s assertion that women may now speak only within the home and his followers’ greater readiness to justify some female preaching may be accounted for, in part, by noting the later authors’ location as preachers to already Protestant congregations. In this context they do not face the challenge of defending a brand-new movement against the ridicule of opponents, but are attempting to instruct the laity in its
evangelical responsibility of confessing the Gospel promises to one another and to equip
the faithful against apostasy, as they encountered persecution. Neither Corvinus nor
Spangenberg follows Luther in appending a similar qualification that would restrict the
teaching and confession of women not only to the situation of a void in male leadership
but to the private, domestic circle. The young boys and girls listening to Spangenberg’s
catechetical sermons, for example, or the parents using them for instruction in the home,
would have heard the urgency of the need for the true Gospel to be preached and taught
despite all obstacles, by whoever could speak the Word.

I would conclude by advancing the suggestion that the Lutheran theology of the
priesthood of all believers, clearly preached by Luther and his followers using the
examples of Mary Magdalene and other scriptural women, laid the foundation within
Protestantism for the public ministry of women. The discussions of women’s preaching
in the case of need in Corvinus and Spangenberg’s postils argues against an interpretation
that an evangelical liberty for women and the laity lasted only for the first few years of
the movement. These popular preaching guides, grounded in Luther’s teaching and
expanding upon it with his approval, place the assurance of the forgiveness of sins above
the restrictions of gender or social position. Indeed, while the younger Luther was
concerned to prevent chaos in his new churches by warning against women’s preaching,
the next generation gives evidence of lessening anxiety on this question and greater
appreciation for the role of women in defending reform as it came under increasing
attack. This early recognition acknowledged female preaching as lying at the heart of the
Gospel and the birth of the church, alongside that of men, though women were certainly
not being encouraged or permitted to serve as pastors in the sixteenth-century church.

The equality of opportunity may have needed centuries more, but the equality of the message, in the authority it grants to any faithful speaker, made that full equality, if not inevitable, at the very least a tantalizing promise.
Chapter Three
Evangelical Magdalenes: The Lady Doth Protest

This chapter will look at Protestant women of the magisterial Reformation laying claim to the title and legacy of the Magdalene. We have seen how common a practice was the identification of holy women with the saint in medieval piety. The assumption of modern scholars has often been that this model would have been rejected by Protestants eager to do away with Catholic veneration of saints. An examination of the work of women authors, however, reveals the Magdalene as an essential tool in the construction of a Protestant, female, religious subjectivity. The roles she was given place her at the center of the reform movement’s theological preoccupations: the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the transformation of medieval spirituality into new forms of lay piety.

Luther’s teaching on the priesthood of all believers raised immediate questions about the liberties and duties of an evangelical laity. If not just Peter and his fellow clergy, but all Christians were endowed with the office of the keys in Matthew 16, instructed to testify the promise of salvation to their neighbors, what did that mean for each person’s ability to teach and preach in church, home, and community? Some claimed that women were empowered by this doctrine to preach as men did. The Magdalene was one of several scriptural women to whom authors referred in asserting the legitimacy of female preaching. Marie Dentière, in her 1539 treatise addressed to Marguerite of Navarre, offers Christ’s appearance to Mary after the resurrection, with his

---

2 As Luther argued; see *The Keys* (1530), LW 40:321, 323, 364-73.
instruction that she bring the news to the disciples, as justification for the women of Dentière’s own era to bear the Gospel to the contemporary church. I will explore the reception of Dentière’s treatise by the men in her immediate context, Protestant and Catholic alike. Dentière argued broadly for women’s equal right to preach the Gospel; Katharina Zell, wife of the Strasbourg Lutheran pastor Mathäus Zell, appealed to the example of the Magdalene on a much more personal and particular occasion. She compared herself to the first preacher of the Gospel in order to defend and excuse her temerity in offering own public speech as she gave her husband’s funeral oration in 1548.³ Dentière’s boldness contrasts with Zell’s posture of humility to demonstrate the versatility of the Magdalene as a model for different kinds of self-understanding and argument.

The application of Mary Magdalene as example was not confined to female authors. Men used her image to describe and praise women around them, holding them up as paradigmatic of the evangelical in society. John Bale, in his Elucidation printed with Anne Askew’s description of her interrogation and torture, compares the Evangelical martyr to Mary Magdalene and the other women who followed Christ, for her resistance to clerical tyranny and for her material support of the church.⁴ This characterization, though not a self-identification, is perhaps all the more important as it comes in one of the most published works of early Protestant martyrology, and attaches

to a woman who continued, throughout the first centuries of the Church of England, to have considerable spiritual authority.\textsuperscript{5} In Ireland, an early provost of Trinity College, Dublin, credited no less a person than Elizabeth I, that institution’s founder, with imitation of the anointing at Bethany through the act of promoting Protestant religious instruction.\textsuperscript{6} In all of these examples, authority to preach and teach is granted by comparing the female subject to the Magdalene, as one with an intimate connection to Christ, the incarnate word of God. That authority was strengthened by the special exigency of need: when the word is not being properly taught and defended, in situations of persecution or confessional strife, it is the duty of female believers to bear public witness to the Gospel. The trope in which Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb are contrasted with the fearful male disciples becomes particularly important as a justification for women’s ministry in situations of inadequate clerical leadership. Such situations were identified with increasing frequency in the early years of the Reformation, as communities agitated for evangelical preachers and religious freedom.

Thus we see an ongoing life of the Magdalene in Protestant spiritual circles, though it was not limited to her role as evangelist. The themes we traced through the Middle Ages, of compassionate witness to Christ’s suffering, and representative of contemplation over activity (especially, domestic activity), can also be found in the work of Protestant women. Women working within and at the margins of emerging Protestant traditions shaped a new model of the contemplative life, one that would be led outside the context of a cloister. This model was not merely a devotion to husbands and fathers as the

\textsuperscript{5} Coles, \textit{Religion, Reform and Women’s Writing in Early Modern England}, pp. 18-45.
\textsuperscript{6} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 197.
instruments of divine authority. Just as the history of avowed religious women is infinitely more complex than the ostensible model of absolute obedience and silent devotion, so the records of Protestant wives and mothers tell of a piety worked out amid the competing claims of loves and burdens. Women celebrated the vocation of marriage and family, as Katharina Zell eulogizes her beloved husband, but they also observed their own ambivalence about the demands of practical responsibilities that took time away from prayer.

Grappling with the Magdalene’s multiple identities—of sister, sinner, saint—gave women a language with which to chronicle their own experiences of formation in faith, as new Protestant communities took shape in the sixteenth century. Nor was the phenomenon a briefly lingering relic of a traditional culture, whose manifestation could be seen to wane as the influence of confessionalization made itself felt over the generations. Exploration of these Magdalene themes continued to inform Protestant spiritual writing through the close of the seventeenth century. In England, M. Marsin published a defense of women in the church that made very similar arguments to those of Dentière. Marsin used the examples of scriptural women, including those at the tomb in the resurrection narrative, as part of a theological argument for public female preaching within the Reformed tradition. The Lutheran spiritual writer Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg wrote about the anointing at Bethany, identifying with Mary’s gesture and equating it to present day speech and writing in Christ’s honour. In the Netherlands, the renowned biblical scholar Anna Maria van Schurman adopted the “better part” of Mary

to describe and legitimize her intellectual work. This brief survey indicates that the Magdalene was advanced in public discourse in support of female preaching, devotion, and leadership within the church from the very beginnings of the Protestant Reformation and continued to be so through early modern Protestant history.

Argula von Grumbach

The first woman to publish in support of Luther’s reform was the German noblewoman, Argula von Grumbach. Her eight pamphlets, authored in 1523-24, were part of an initial spate of lay religious writing that was largely silenced following the 1525 Peasants’ War, as the Reformation became more focused on the direction of a new, evangelical clergy.9 Ulrike Zitzlsperger has described the possibilities and challenges posed to the few women who contributed to this brief movement.

Women participating in the debate therefore had to justify not only their lay status and the reasons for their involvement but also their readiness to engage in public debate. In response they went beyond acknowledging that they were aware of Paul’s writings or that they only wrote in times of danger because men failed to do so: they developed ‘explanatory’ self-images and references that became increasingly complex the longer and the more they wrote.10

One of those explanatory self-images was that of Mary Magdalene, to whom Christ had spoken. In Argula’s open letter to the theologians of the University of Ingolstadt (1523), she writes,

I beseech and request a reply from you if you consider that I am in error, though I am not aware of it. For Jerome was not ashamed of writing a great deal to women,

---

9 Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,” pp. 379-392.
10 Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,” p. 381.
to Blesilla, for example, to Paula, to Eustochium and so on. Yes, and Christ himself, he who is the only teacher of us all, was not ashamed to preach to Mary Magdalene, and to the young woman at the well. I do not flinch from appearing before you, from listening to you, from discussing with you. For by the grace of God I, too, can ask questions, hear answers and read in German.\textsuperscript{11}

Here, both Scripture and the early church are invoked, reflecting the reformers’ desire to reorder the present day church according to the pattern established in the first decades and centuries of the church, aiming at a more authentic Christianity. The texts that she appeals to provide examples of spiritual intercourse between men and women. The Reformation’s emphasis on vernacular Bible translation and theological writing made such conversations possible for lay women, not ordinarily educated in Latin, in a way they had not been since late antiquity. Another feature of evangelical theology, that of the believer’s direct relationship to Christ alone in salvation, provides Argula with an equalizing argument. If Christ is “the only teacher of us all,” then all are alike taught and prepared to understand and confess the Gospel. With this justification, she proposes in this treatise that she will write to the local nobility and correct them, acting in the place of the university faculty, whose teaching role this would otherwise be, as they are not offering correct (that is, evangelical) teaching on the Gospel. In doing so, she makes a more subtle allusion to the Magdalene, in this case in her guise as Mary of Bethany, who had preferred listening at Jesus’ feet to any other occupation.

I am prepared to write to them in this vein, since, because of other business, they have no leisure to sit down and read for themselves. Although there is nothing more needful than the word of God, as the Lord says in Luke 10: ‘That is the best part—to listen to the word of God.’\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Matheson, ed., Argula von Grumbach, p. 83.
The inadequacy of male leadership, Argula’s occasion to write, is attested by a comparison between contemporary nobility, busying themselves like Martha with worldly concerns, and the devoutly studious Mary. By putting herself, a lay woman, in the traditional place of Mary of Bethany, the patroness of cloistered contemplatives, Argula paradoxically negotiates an active, public role for herself, as teacher of men in secular authority. It is interesting to note, then, that for her temerity Argula was labeled a whore by her pamphleteer-opponent; the term was, admittedly, a common epithet for women in rhetorical diatribes, but nevertheless introduces into the debate another element of the Magdalene character.\(^{13}\) Interesting also is the frontispiece to the first edition of her open letter, which features an image of Argula standing with an open book before a group of men, a visual echo of another trope in the portrayal of Mary Magdalene, as doctor of the church.\(^{14}\) In her own self-awareness, and in the perception of her by her contemporaries, Argula was positioned in reference to her multiple identities of the Magdalene: sinful penitent, devout contemplative, and preacher.

\textit{Katharina Schütz Zell}

Both detractors and supporters made such comparisons between contemporary women and Scriptural figures, as connections to the early church were common among the


\(^{14}\) Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,” p. 382; Jansen, \textit{The Making of the Magdalen}, p. 64.
Reformation’s self-reflections. The sixteenth-century Lutheran historian, Johannes Kessler, claimed that prominent female evangelicals, such as Argula and Katharina Schütz Zell, wife of the Strasbourg pastor Matthäus Zell, should be compared to prophetic women of the Old and New Testaments, including Deborah and Hulda, Anna, and the daughters of Phillip. Unlike Argula, whose public career lasted only for a short span, Katharina Zell published work throughout her life. Defending herself in this unusual role, Zell appealed to what would become a standard justification for lay, and female, public testimony in the Reformation, one we have already seen from Argula: the absence of correct teaching from the appointed authorities.

I have no doubts whatsoever about what I am doing or about my beliefs, and I am not frightened to speak up. Why did his [Lutheran theologian Ludwig Rabus] brothers and other preachers not speak up? In that case I would not have been allowed to do so. I watched them for a long time to see whether they would do something—had they done so I would have remained quiet, as is appropriate for a poor woman, and would have left the talking to others.

Ulrike Wiethaus notes that, despite her remarkably public profile (or, perhaps, because of it), Zell maintained a humble, self-effacing posture, excusing her speech and writing on various grounds. Wiethaus examines Zell’s correspondence with Ludwig Rabus, arguing that in these letters Zell sees herself as anomalous; unlike other, frivolous women, she is devoted to the Reformation but is also careful to state that all her activity was authorized

---

15 For example, Luther and his colleagues were depicted as the disciples in Lucas Cranach’s Wittenberg Altarpiece of 1547; see John Dillenberger, Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-Century Europe, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 102-05.
17 Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,” p. 384; see Katharina Schütz Zell, Church Mother, p. 219.
and even suggested by her husband. Despite that claim of reticence, however, what is evident from Zell’s argument is that she considered herself entitled to evaluate the actions of the religious leaders around her, assessing them in relation to a standard she had internalized, and then to speak out when she found them falling short of that standard. This is the work of the priesthood of all believers, the freedom and duty of conscience advocated by Luther.

One of the ways in which Zell excused herself in this work was through a self-identification with Mary Magdalene, one that seems to deny her own agency in the act of evangelizing. In the funeral oration she delivered for her husband in 1548, Zell compares herself to the Magdalene as one who preaches publicly and announces the good news.

I ask you not to take it wrongly and not to be irritated with me for what I am doing, as if I now wanted to place myself in the office of preachers and apostles: not at all! But it is only as the dear Mary Magdalene without any prior thought became an apostle and was charged by the Lord Himself to tell His disciples that the Christ was risen.

She is not guilty of aspiring to an inappropriate office or position nor of having planned to speak out at all, but her mandate to testify comes from Christ himself. By deflecting attention from herself as the actor, and proclaiming Christ as the true messenger as well as the content of the message, Zell’s words gain the authority of the Magdalene’s transparent act of witness: not a calculated speech or prepared sermon, but simply a faithful account of what God has done.

19 On the duty of the congregation to monitor the character of preaching, see Martin Luther, Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers (1532), LW 40:384-85.
20 And to the Virgin Mary, Martha, Anna, Hannah, Sarah, and Rebecca; see Stjerna, Women and the Reformation, p. 127.
21 Zell, Church Mother, p. 104.
In addition to the expression of her own connection to the saint, Zell also holds up Mary Magdalene as an exemplar for believers in their devotional lives. As Zitzlsperger writes, of Zell’s ability to deploy the saint both in self-justification and in exegesis and spiritual direction, “she is able to tailor the role of the apostles to her own position and … she transforms Mary Magdalene, who as a former prostitute remained a controversial figure for Protestants and Catholics alike, into a perfect model as a sinner turned believer and follower.”

In her 1532 (pub. 1558) exposition of the Lord’s Prayer, Zell identifies the cry of Peter and of the Magdalene as representing the ideal posture towards God. She prays that she and her readers will not be like Judas, “but weep over our sin with Peter and Mary Magdalene, to repent and gain great love.”

In a letter of comfort (written on St. Mary Magdalene’s day, 1524) to the persecuted evangelical community of Kentzingen, Zell compares the town’s mourning women, whose husbands had been killed in conflicts with local authorities, to the bride in the Song of Songs, another figure often connected to the saint. Zitzlsperger notes that identification with Mary Magdalene, a figure at once reviled for infamous behavior and yet favored with a particular intimacy with Christ, held a special power for women facing difficult circumstances, including for Zell herself. “The more difficult her role as a cleric’s widow became, the more strikingly she relates to Mary Magdalene.”

22 Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,” p. 390.
25 Zitzlsperger, “Mother, Martyr and Mary Magdalene: German Female Pamphleteers and their Self-images,” p. 390.
still beloved and useful to God can be found at the core of Zell’s self-understanding, and helped guide her private contemplation as well as her public activity as a builder of the body of Christ. Elsie McKee connects Zell’s identification with Mary Magdalene and with Anna as central to her understanding of herself as a “church mother.” Like Argula von Grumbach, Zell understood herself and her place in religious reform partly in terms of a return to the model of the early church, called to follow the Magdalene as a founding apostle of the new church.

Marie Dentière

Zell was not the only wife of an evangelical pastor to use Christ’s choice of Mary Magdalene to spread the news of the resurrection as justification for her own work and for female preaching in general. Pastors’ wives in the emerging traditions of the Reformation had to forge new roles for themselves. They held responsibilities as models of marriage, motherhood, and faith within their communities; especially in the early years of the movement, they had to define the scope and limits of their leadership. At the inception of the Reformed tradition, Marie Dentière (1495-1561) sought to establish herself as an activist and theological innovator. Dentière had been an Augustinian nun converted by the evangelical movement in France, who later fled to Strasbourg where she married a former priest. After his death, she married the evangelical pastor Antoine Froment, and they worked in Geneva’s reform community alongside Guillaume Farel and

---

John Calvin. From that base, she engaged in a project similar to that of Argula von Grumbach, when she wrote to the local nobility, advocating for religious reform.

Writing to the evangelically-minded Marguerite of Navarre, Dentière composed what is, essentially, a hortatory sermon presented in letter form, using rhetorical techniques to persuade about the need for church reform, according to Mary McKinley’s analysis.28 Dentière uses the epistolary genre to excuse her boldness, addressing the scriptural injunction to silence from 1 Tim. 2 in her prefatory remarks to Marguerite. She defines her activity as the private, personal communication of one woman to another, rather than as public preaching. “Even though we are not permitted to preach in congregations and churches, we are not forbidden to write and admonish one another in all charity.”29 Her claim raises interesting questions about the interpretation of “silence,” arguing for a strictly literal reading that liberated women’s words in the age of printing: while they might remain silent within the context of worship services, women could make themselves “heard” through letter-writing and even published texts that would, in effect, “speak” to the church.

Dentière’s letter was, in fact, published in 1539 as a treatise, the Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre; it contains a defense of female preaching, in which the author cites the Magdalene as an example of women being called to preach by Christ.

What woman was a greater preacher than the Samaritan woman, who was not ashamed to preach Jesus and his word, confessing him openly before everyone, as soon as she heard Jesus say that we must adore God in spirit and truth? Who can boast of having had the first manifestation of the great mystery of the resurrection

of Jesus, if not Mary Magdalene, from whom he had thrown out seven devils, and
the other women, to whom, rather than to men, he had earlier declared himself
through his angel and commanded them to tell, preach, and declare it to others?\textsuperscript{30}

Here the reader may note that Dentière, whose circle in France included Lefèvre
D’Étaples, limits the identity of the saint to the roles specifically associated with Mary
Magdalene by name in the Gospels. Like Katharina Zell, Dentière invoked other
scriptural women as well: in addition to the Samaritan woman, Sarah and Rebecca,
Moses’ mother, Deborah, Ruth, the Queen of Sheba, the Virgin Mary, and her cousin,
Elizabeth, are all mentioned in the “Defense of Women” section of the \textit{Epistle}.\textsuperscript{31} The
treatise engages in the ongoing \textit{querelle des femmes} tradition, in which a catalogue of
virtuous women was offered as proof against misogynistic arguments.\textsuperscript{32} Dentière also
draws on the trope of competition between male and female disciples in the Gospel
accounts, which we saw in depicted in the medieval Passion plays. She asks, “Why has it
been necessary to criticize women so much, seeing that no woman ever sold or betrayed
Jesus, but a man named Judas?”\textsuperscript{33} Addressing a more recent question of women in the
church, the text features a sympathetic reading of the Waldensians, a heretical movement
which had included prophetic female preachers.\textsuperscript{34}

Dentière’s arguments in the \textit{Epistle} provoked strong reactions from her male
contemporaries. The Catholic preacher François Le Picart (active 1530-1556) interpreted

\textsuperscript{30} Dentière, \textit{Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{31} Dentière, \textit{Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre}, pp. 54-55.
\textsuperscript{33} Dentière, \textit{Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre}, pp. 55-56.
\textsuperscript{34} McKinley, “The Early Modern Teacher,” p. 410.
Mary Magdalene as a weak woman, used by God to show up the arrogance of men.\textsuperscript{35} In a sermon published in 1541, possibly responding to Dentière’s treatise published only two years before, LePicart explicitly denounces “Lutherans” (a term of abuse for early Protestants in France at that time, and so not necessarily a reference to German authors) who use scriptural figures to claim that women have the right to speak in public. His sermon offers the Samaritan woman, who had been named in parallel with the Magdalene by Dentière, as an example of one such figure who had, in his interpretation, been wrongly used.\textsuperscript{36} An equally confrontational encounter occurred on the evangelical side, between Calvin and Dentière. In 1546 she challenged him about the wearing of long robes, and the conflict is found in one of his letters to Farel from that year. His account indicates the attitude toward women’s participation in public religious discourse held by the reformer.

Froment’s wife came here recently; in all the taverns, at almost all the street corners, she began to harangue against long garments. When she knew that it had gotten back to me, she excused herself, laughing, and said that either we were dressed indecently, with great offense to the church, or that you [Farel] taught in error when you said that false prophets could be recognized by their long garments… Feeling pressured, she complained about our tyranny, that it was no longer permitted for just anyone to chatter on about anything at all. I treated the woman as I should have.\textsuperscript{37}

Dentière’s response, as recorded by Calvin, indicates a shift we had also observed in Germany, between the relative freedom of the early reform movement, in which women

\textsuperscript{35} An interpretation influential on John Calvin and his followers, see below, ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{36} Taylor, \textit{Soldiers of Christ}, pp. 174f.
and other lay authors, “just anyone,” contributed to reform debates, and the more strictly clerical leadership of the era of confessionalization.

Anne Askew

Following this pattern, in the early days of the English Reformation we can find an example of a woman’s speech being viewed with respect, indeed, with reverence for a martyr of the church. Anne Askew was tortured and executed in 1544 for holding a memorial theology of the Lord’s Supper and an evangelical interpretation of scripture, during the reign of the Catholic Mary I. The literate daughter of a landowner, Anne Askew wrote an autobiography, the *Examinations*, including her martyrdom narrative, which was first published by the reformer John Bale during his exile in Cleves.\(^{38}\) Bale’s *Elucidation* adds introductory material and commentary to Anne’s text; he compares Askew and other gentlewomen involved in the Reformation to Mary Magdalene, for material support of the church, defiance of ecclesiastical tyranny, and proclamation of the Gospel.\(^{39}\) In the first edition of Askew’s *Examinations* (1546), Bale’s introduction also draws a parallel between Askew and the scriptural figure of Lydia (Acts 16:14), as well as between Askew and other martyrs of the early church, including Cecilia and Blandina.\(^{40}\) In Askew’s narrative, where she is asked why she disobeys the injunction to silence in 1 Timothy, she assumes a very humble posture, only replying that the inquisitor

---


\(^{39}\) Hannay, *Silent But for the Word*, p. 85. See *The first examinacyon of Anne Askewe, lately martyred at Smythfelde, by the Romysh popes upholders, with the Elucydacyon of John Bale* (Wesel, 1546).

\(^{40}\) Askew, *The Examinations of Anne Askew*, p. 9.
should “find no fault in poor women.” Bale provides more theological grounding, however, listing examples from the Bible and from the early church of women whose scriptural learning and testimony were approved by God, among them arguing that “the women which gave knowledge to his disciples that he was risen from death to life, discomfited not he, but solaced them with his most glorious appearance.” In Bale’s reading, not only was Christ not ashamed to talk to women including the Magdalene (as Argula von Grumbach had noted), but he was not “discomfited” by their speech. By implication, then, Askew’s own speech is defended as pleasing to Christ.

Bale’s celebration of a female martyr of the new church influenced the emerging English tradition of martyrology through the work of Bale’s friend, John Foxe. Interestingly, though Askew does not herself mention Mary Magdalene, the details of her life as provided by Bale and Foxe might well have suggested an association with the saint for readers. Askew had been forced to marry the fiancé of her dead sister, Martha, plunging the spiritually-minded Anne into the life of domesticity represented in the Christian tradition by Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary of Bethany. It was a domestic situation from which Askew fled in order to pursue her spiritual life, a desertion of duty that finds no condemnation in either Bale’s or Foxe’s accounts. Edith Wilks Dolnikowski has analyzed the legacy of religious women as they appeared in Foxe’s Acts

---

42 Aughterson, ed., Renaissance Woman, p. 20.
44 Askew, The Examinations of Anne Askew, p. xix.
and Monuments, in which Askew’s text (with Bale’s commentary) found a prominent place. She notes Foxe’s praise for Askew’s decision.

Foxe defined the parameters of women as role models for the reformed church. Though clearly lacking clerical authority, Foxe suggested that women… could contribute to the mission of the church as teachers, theologians, and evangelists in addition to performing their traditional duties… His open commendation of women who stepped out of the private sphere of home and family to proclaim their faith, even at the risk of ridicule or martyrdom, underscores his conviction that public testimony is a vital component of Christian life, regardless of gender.45

Foxe mentions the Magdalene herself, the original model for the preference of faith over domestic duty, a handful of times in his Acts and Monuments. She is presented alongside David and Peter as an example of a great sinner redeemed by God.46 Her insight is maintained: the claim that Mary Magdalene “did not know Christ to be God, before his resurrection” is listed among the false claims of the Catholic church.47 In a letter of spiritual comfort written by M. Philpot to John Careless, presented in Foxe’s 1563 edition, Mary Magdalene’s washing of Christ’s feet is associated with the remission of her “sevenfold sins,” drawing on the medieval tradition that equated her seven demons with the seven deadly sins.48 The tradition is re-imagined for Protestant readers, who are

---

47 Foxe, Acts and Monuments, Book 5, p. 1383, 1563 ed. On the question of whether Mary Magdalene had understood Jesus to be the Son of God before the resurrection, as it was explored in the medieval hagiography, see Three Saints’ Lives by Nicholas of Bozon, p. 8; The Life of St. Mary Magdalen, trans. Valentina Hawtrey, pp. 51, 71.
to know that such sorrow for sin, as experienced also by the Virgin Mary and by Peter, is an assurance from God of our election: “it is the earnest penny of eternal consolation.”

Elizabeth I

Although more often identified as a virginal figure of female power, Foxe’s sovereign, Elizabeth I, was herself occasionally linked with the Magdalene. As a princess, during the brief reign of her Protestant brother, Edward VI, Elizabeth had made a translation of Marguerite of Navarre’s *A Godly Meditation of the Christian Soul*. It was published by John Bale in 1548, during the reign of Elizabeth’s Protestant brother, Edward VI, with an illustration of Elizabeth as Mary Magdalene. The woodcut image shows the young princess at the empty tomb, kneeling at the feet of the risen Christ, who points upward, indicating that she must go and broadcast the news of the resurrection. Elizabeth’s mission is underscored by the fact that she is shown holding a book, rather than the Magdalene’s usual ointment jar. Whether the book represents the evangelical Gospel or the princess’s translation, the message is clear: Christ directs her to offer the words she carries to God and others.

The identification between Elizabeth and the Magdalene was not confined to the earliest years of the English Reformation, but persisted long into the era of Reformed English piety. A seventeenth-century sermon preached by the provost of Trinity College, Dublin, made a comparison with a similarly evangelical message. Once Elizabeth herself became queen, she held the role of Defender of the Faith, and was responsible for

shepherding the ongoing reformation of the Church of England. In 1693/4, George Ashe
reflected on Elizabeth’s founding of the college a hundred years before by comparing her
work with the anointing at Bethany. The provost celebrates the queen as nurturing the
living body of Christ, the church, through the establishment of a university for educating
Protestant clergy and defending against the threat of Catholicism.

A Princess the most eminent for Piety, Learning, Chastity, and Happy
Government that ever blessed these Kingdoms, having enlightened our
neighbouring Nation with the brightness of the Reformation,… She pour’d this
Box of Precious Ointment upon the Head or Capital of our Kingdom, whence it
might stream or descend to the most distant parts, and refresh the whole with its
most excellent savour; She laid in here such lasting supplies of Piety and
Literature… We and all who benefited by this Auspicious Foundation, must ever
gratefully join with our Blessed Saviour in my Text, Verily we say unto you,
wheresoever the Gospel (whose Holy Doctrine we have here suck’d in, and to the
understanding and declaring of which we have been here train’d up and educated)
shall be preach’d by any of us in the whole world, there also this, that this
Woman has done for us, shall be told as a memorial of her.51

Elizabeth’s legacy is assured, her contribution properly remembered, because of the
worthiness of her actions, as worthy as those of the Magdalene before her.

These examples, though few, involve a public association between the saint and a
woman at the center of a fragile religious settlement, and thus argue for the perceived
legitimacy—and safety—of such a comparison. If Elizabeth, at first the exemplar of a
Protestant-educated princess and, later, the Defender of the Faith, could be likened to
Mary Magdalene, it must have been an equation suggesting only praise and appropriate
behavior, carrying so little residue of the saint’s sinful origins as to be inoffensive, and
offering no provocation to those wishing to distance themselves from the taint of popery.

51 Badir, The Maudlin Impression, p. 197.
Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg

Protestant women continued to identify themselves with Mary Magdalene into the seventeenth century, as can be seen in the work of the Lutheran mystic, Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg (1633-1694). Born to a Protestant noble family in Catholic Austria, von Greiffenberg wrote as part of a dwindling religious minority, in part with the forlorn hope of converting her peers, including the Habsburg emperor. Her major work, *Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ*, celebrated women’s active roles in the religious tradition, featuring scriptural examples such as the Virgin Mary, Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Clopas, and the anonymous female followers at Golgotha, from Galilee, and at the tomb. She also entered into the traditional comparison between the faith of women and men, proposing the greater faith of women by using as example the women at the tomb who remained faithful, while the male disciples stayed away out of fear.

The meditation on the anointing at Bethany shows Jesus defending the actions of the woman who had ministered to him with costly oil. Von Greiffenberg claims that he was thereby championing all women, arguing that his attitude was attested by the fact of the incarnation itself, by Christ’s being born of a woman, as well as by the choice to live and die in their company.

The panacean seed of women did not reject women, refusing to be served by them. Since He dignified them by His own being, made flesh of a woman, He therefore also found them worthy to witness His death. He wanted to begin His

---

life emerging from this sex and to end it in their company. He knew that He had caressed and pressed the ardor of love into them and granted fidelity to them in particular. Thus He meant to enjoy the noble fruit of this tree that His right hand had planted and to receive the sweet perfume of the love of this true-hearted refresher before His suffering, bitter as gall. Thus He testified that He respected not strength but gentleness and that He cared more for the inward ardor of love than the outward pretense of holiness from good works.\textsuperscript{56}

Von Greiffenberg’s language echoes that of Christine de Pizan, seeking to advance the status of women by noting that women were manifestly acceptable to the incarnate Christ.\textsuperscript{57} That argument is then neatly reversed to serve the author’s devotional aim: because particular women were beloved of Jesus, then all women are so loved, therefore all women will, in their turn, wish to participate in the actions that formed the sacred intimacy between Christ and his female followers, by identification and imitation. She yearns “that this blissful anointing had been granted to me! … let the jar of my life be broken for Thy sake at whatever moment it may please Thee.”\textsuperscript{58} The Magdalene’s original sacrifice of her means, to purchase expensive perfume and put it to such prodigal use, is subtly compared to Christ’s death on the cross, by making it an existential spending of the whole self. In meditating on the anointing, then, von Greiffenberg can both describe care for Christ and pattern her life on his self-sacrifice. This immediately becomes a radical asceticism, as she turns to a rejection of the world, vividly recalling Christ’s words to Peter when that disciple sought to prevent Jesus from travelling toward suffering and death: “Get you behind me, you bitter worldly pleasure… for you are the

\textsuperscript{56} von Greiffenberg, \textit{Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ}, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{57} See Pizan, \textit{The Book of the City of Ladies}, 1.10.5, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{58} von Greiffenberg, \textit{Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ}, p. 69. On von Greiffenberg’s desired imitation of the anointing in her speech and writing, see Karant-Nunn, \textit{The Reformation of Feeling}, p. 229.
materials from which the jar of vanity was blown!" She prays instead to be attached only to Christ, to become “enflamed” with passion for God alone.

The image of the Magdalene was not purely positive, as was that of the Virgin Mary, and von Greiffenberg addresses this feature of any identification with the prostitute-saint. She asks the logical question of Mary Magdalene and herself: “But, righteous God, how shall praise from the mouth of a sinner please Thee?” Mary is credited by the tradition with two anointings, after all, coming at two different points in her relationship with Christ: both the gesture of intimacy made by a devoted disciple to signal the movement toward the Passion in the final days of Jesus’ life (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:2-9), and the dramatic act of conversion made by the repentant sinner (Luke 7). Von Greiffenberg’s meditation ponders the unity of motivation behind those two events. She finds the impulse to penitence perpetually within herself, so that the loving follower of Christ remains always the sinful woman, freshly aware of her need for forgiveness. This sense of the believer’s predicament, at once both sinning and justified, is an expression of von Greiffenberg’s inheritance of the Lutheran theological legacy of simul iustus et peccator. “Oh, let me shed the angelic balm of tears of repentance before Thee, like Mary, and cast off the adamantine jar of my heart so that I am not eternally cast out.” Confession and repentance are acts that the faithful Christian

---

60 von Greiffenberg, *Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ*, p. 70. On Luther’s discussion of Mary Magdalene being enflamed by love of Christ, see his *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 17-20* (1528-30), LW 69:299, 303.
must take up anew, each day, experiencing both the peril of one’s soul and the relief of Christ’s assurance of pardon.

The appropriate affect of penitence, as demonstrated by the Magdalene, is sorrowful tears. Von Greiffenberg dwells on this expression of gratitude for divine forgiveness, and grief over her own guilt in the suffering that achieved it. She discusses the weeping of women, with reference to the sisters of Lazarus (Mary Magdalene and Martha), as a laudable sign of love for Christ. “Should not the agony of Him who helped to relieve the agony of many be lamented? Oh, yes! It is most right to sorrow over Him who relieved the sorrow of so many… Thus these women very rightly and ardently bewailed Him, crying the most passionate tears.”

She describes the compassion of Mary Magdalene and the other women gathered at the foot of the cross, a sympathy so complete that they are wounded in the same way as the nails wound Christ, their eyes bleeding tears, cut by his crown of thorns, embracing the cross as Christ’s arms are stretched upon it, feeling every blow. As Susan Karant-Nunn has argued, not all strands of the magisterial Reformation had embraced the affective piety von Greiffenberg praises here. The exploration of the value of female tears in Lutheran writing of the seventeenth century constitutes not only a survival of the earlier tradition of hymning the Magdalene’s compassion, but also a rebuttal of more recent criticism of religious emotion as unnecessary and effeminate.

---

64 von Greiffenberg, Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ, p. 85.
65 von Greiffenberg, Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ, p. 99.
67 See the discussion of religious emotion in the Reformed tradition, below, ch. 6.
In addition to defending the scriptural women’s weeping as a stereotypically female attribute to be commended to all Christians, von Greiffenberg notes that Jesus’ female followers also acted in ways that were considered inappropriate for women but argues that they were, in fact, praiseworthy in this as well. She writes of the female disciples’ great loyalty in following Christ, even to the point of neglecting their domestic and family duties, as Mary of Bethany had, and encourages her contemporaries to do the same at need.

No land should be too far away and no home too dear to follow our dearest Jesus… To follow Jesus, many [of these women] must have abandoned their husbands, children, friends and relatives, and also their household and housekeeping for a few days and perhaps did not leave them all that well provided for and instead in danger of unpleasant occurrences… We choose that good portion: Christ. It shall not be taken from us.68

Silke Falkner describes the strategies the author used to excuse her public writing as a Protestant woman supposedly confined to domestic duties, postures of humility such as we have seen from Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Schütz Zell.69 Falkner omits discussion, however, of this passage in the Meditation, in which the question of women’s duty is explicitly addressed. Far from employing tactics of equivocation here, the author proclaims that women reading the Bible should feel confident their devotion will find the same divine approval that Mary’s did. Likewise, in discussing the women witnessing the Passion, von Greiffenberg echoes the bold language of the late medieval preachers of penitence, who had pointed to the hope provided to the ordinary believer by the example of the Magdalene, a notorious sinner pardoned and uplifted by grace.

68 von Greiffenberg, Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ, p. 111.
The Holy Spirit suffered these women, especially the sinner and penitent Mary Magdalene, to be named by the Evangelist here as well as later in describing the Resurrection so that no sinner, man or woman, would despair of the grace of God and true repentance. If she is deemed worthy of the true love of Jesus and of touching His sacrosanct body living and dead with her mouth, hands and hair, she who had once given her body over to the most unclean sins, then no one who truly repents should lose heart in the midst of sin.\textsuperscript{70}

She goes on to a similar parallelism using the identification of Mary Magdalene as the woman cured of seven demons, continuing in the Lutheran tradition that engages all of the different Magdalene roles, in order to offer the comfort of the Gospel to despairing sinners.\textsuperscript{71}

On the question of Mary Magdalene’s particular sinfulness as a woman and as an individual, von Greiffenberg ultimately concludes that it is irrelevant when measured against the overwhelming grace of Christ, who calls her from her former life into one of proclaiming the promise of forgiveness to all.

The trusty recorder, the Holy Spirit,… cannot extol and praise these enough, even those of the greatest sinners, men and women alike. He certainly mentioned the discipleship and constancy of Mary Magdalene and of the other women who loved Jesus. How He lauds their presence and persistence, not only in living and suffering, but also in death and at the sepulcher of Christ… This happens because poor womenfolk, on account of being completely despised and defamed by most men, seek and find their honor in the apologia of the Holy Spirit. And why ask in the end about the disgrace of people who have God himself eulogizing them? If it is God who takes care of our honor, we are thus free from care.\textsuperscript{72}

Here is an instance of the Lutheran theology of salvation by grace alone making possible the claims of women’s equal worth before God, and Luther’s language of Christian liberty speaking to the needs of women in the church. God makes every believer


\textsuperscript{71} von Greiffenberg, \textit{Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ}, p. 113.

\textsuperscript{72} von Greiffenberg, \textit{Meditation on the Incarnation, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ}, pp. 129-30.
honorable by exchanging his righteousness for human sin, freeing Christians from slavery to the Law, in Luther’s classic formulation. God offers this promise universally, for all of creation and humanity afflicted by original sin, but also particularly, for the besetting sins of each individual, and for the different sins plaguing societies, such as the unequal treatment of women. According to the terms of sola gratia, neither the specific sins nor the individual works of believers can effect condemnation or salvation. The focus of Mary Magdalene’s story becomes Christ’s election of her, with her personal unworthiness merely taken as a given, as it would be for anyone, rather than being celebrated as a pathetic spectacle of the redemption of the almost irredeemable.

**Protestant Vocations**

Protestant women thus adapted the Magdalene tradition to express their commitments to an evangelical theology of justification and to describe their own vocations, including public proclamation of the Gospel—whether called preaching or denied that title, and different forms of contemplation. Like Dentière, Zell, and von Greiffenberg, the seventeenth-century English author known as M. Marsin used the example of Christ’s first revelation of the resurrection to women as proof of a divine endorsement of women’s public ministry. Marsin is believed to be the pseudonym of a female author active at the close of the seventeenth century (1694-1701), a woman evidently of independent means who produced fifteen theological tracts on women’s

---

religious role, from the margins of the Reformed tradition in England. Her work advocates for women’s ministry and education, and appears aimed at a common, rather than an aristocratic, audience. She describes the women at the tomb as disciples given an evangelical mandate. “The Lord made women the Publishers of the Messiah’s first coming.” She does accede to the posture of humility that we have seen adopted by Zell and Argula von Grumbach, in which Christ’s use of women as messengers serves to shame men neglectful of their own duty, or simply underscores divine power by comparison. In *The Near Approach of Christ’s Kingdom*, she writes, “God has made choice of so weak an instrument [so that] his power might the more eminently appear therein.” In *Two Remarkable Females of Womankind*, she again echoes the language of the other writers we have surveyed, in particular von Greiffenberg, in noting Christ’s associations with women from his birth until his death. “As the Lord came by a Woman, so after he arose, he appeared first to the Women.” From this, she goes on to encourage other women to imitate the testimony of those first witnesses of the resurrection. Indeed, such imitation is not an exceptional virtue reserved for a few; because of this ordinance, it has become the duty of women. “O ye women! Be sound in your Duty; now the word is

---

74 On Marsin, see William Burns, “‘By Him the Women will be delivered from that Bondage, which some has found Intolerable’: M. Marsin, English Millenarian Feminist,” in *Eighteenth Century Women: Studies in Their Lives, Work and Culture*, vol. 1, Linda V. Troost, ed. (New York: AMS Press, 2001), pp. 19-38.
76 Apetrei, “A ‘Remarkable Female of Womankind,’” p. 150.
77 Apetrei, “A ‘Remarkable Female of Womankind,’” p. 145. For the adoption of this trope by Calvin and his followers, see below, ch. 6.
78 Apetrei, “A ‘Remarkable Female of Womankind,’” p. 149.
given according to promise, that at the time of the end, Knowledge should be increased.
That you may prepare for, and Publish the coming of the Lord.” 79

Debate over how to define the duty of women drew on another facet of the Magdalene tradition. The German-Dutch scholar, poet, and artist Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) offered an apologia for the unusual project of serious female scholarship. As the theological foundation for her audacity, she compared herself to Mary of Bethany, sitting at the Lord’s feet and taking the “better part.” 80 Van Schurman was a distinguished linguist, taught by her father, who favored education for girls; she wrote a treatise advocating women’s education, Dissertation, de Ingenio Muliebris ad Doctrinam, et meliores Litteras aptitudine/ A Treatise Regarding the Fitness of the Female Mind for the Study of the Arts and Sciences (1641). 81 Raised in Cologne; she lived for most of her adult life in Utrecht. Though a member of the Reformed tradition, her theological context was broad: she corresponded with Marie de Gournay, who used the Magdalene to argue for women’s right to preach in Catholic France, and she was associated with the Labadist movement, a forerunner of German Pietism. 82

In her autobiography, the Eukleria, she proclaims that by engaging in intellectual contemplation of the wonders of the created world and the revealed Word, she is doing “the one thing necessary.” 83 Karen Lee has observed that van Schurman combined a

81 Lee, “‘I Wish to Be Nothing’, ” p. 192.
83 Lee, “‘I Wish to Be Nothing’, ” p. 189.
Pietist concern for love of God with a zeal for intellectual theological endeavor, determining that the one thing necessary is a total submission of the self to God, a complete conversion and “overthrow of … mind and heart.” She emphasized self-denial as the heart of Christianity, the sine qua non of intimacy with Christ. For van Schurman, that intimacy can be achieved by the individual, whether at home or at work, without the cloistered seclusion it had once implied. She writes of having experienced “being taught by the master directly.” Where the medieval church had associated the fruits of Mary’s devotion with the rewards of the contemplative life, the same text now serves van Schurman’s secular scholarship, reinvented as a Protestant defense of a worldly vocation offered to the glory of God.

The issues at stake in Protestant women’s reinterpretations of the Magdalene, for both public ministry and private contemplation, can be seen in the adoption of language from the Song of Songs, a common device for women writing in sixteenth-century England. Erica Longfellow has explored the popularity, among these authors, of the image of mystical marriage as a metaphor for the believer’s relationship to God. Many of the women in Longfellow’s study used marriage imagery, in which they identified themselves as the bride in the Song of Songs, to describe an equality before God not available to them in their own society and church. Longfellow addresses the contradictions women confronted within scripture, between an evangelical imperative and an injunction to female silence.

---

84 Lee, “‘I Wish to Be Nothing’,” pp. 201-02.
85 Lee, “‘I Wish to Be Nothing’,” p. 189.
86 Lee, “‘I Wish to Be Nothing’,” p. 197.
For many pious women, this model [equality of believers, as in Galatians 3:28] was difficult to reconcile with a command to be silent: was it possible to be a light to the world, as Christ had commanded, if one was not allowed to speak or write? As one early modern woman put it, ‘she could not walk where she had not liberty to speak.’ For such women, living a godly life and conforming to Pauline restrictions on women were fundamentally incompatible.\textsuperscript{88}

The Magdalene tradition, which included identifications with the bride in the \textit{Song of Songs}, as well as with the contemplative, Mary of Bethany, and with the woman who was the first to greet and proclaim the resurrected Christ, provided a supple model for circumventing this predicament. Longfellow offers the example of the seventeenth-century Reformed mystic, Anna Trapnel, whose defense of her prophetic visions, published in 1654, includes the following description. “I, not relishing the discourse [an argument with friends], had a mind to walk in the Garden by myself, and so I did a while; wherein the Lord gave me much of his loving-welcome, and kinde salutations.”\textsuperscript{89} It is unclear whether Trapnel here describes a real escape outdoors to shrug off a brief unhappiness, or whether she intends a more figurative flight of fancy, but the use of garden imagery suggests a rich group of associations. Longfellow links the reference to both Eden and the \textit{hortus conclusus} of the \textit{Song of Songs}, but does not point to another obvious connection, the mutual discovery of Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden before the empty tomb, where he famously gave her so transformative a “salutation,” calling her by name, that she recognized him to be the risen Lord. Longfellow does attribute the license that women such as Trapnel gained for their public speech and


\textsuperscript{89} Longfellow, \textit{Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England}, p. 168. Cf. the garden vision of Teresa of Avila, below, ch. 5.
writing to their special intimacy with Christ, expressed by the marriage metaphor and displayed here in Trapnel’s _Report and Plea_. Longfellow describes what she terms, the crux of the relationship between public, private, and religious devotion for women in the early modern period. As a metaphor, mystical marriage effectively illustrates this crux: the ceremony of marriage is a public act that authorizes private intimacy, just as women’s ‘private’ intimacy with Christ allowed them to speak publicly of him.90

Marking a continuity from the medieval Magdalene tradition, Protestant women’s experience of an intimate connection to Christ informed their private devotion and pushed them to express its fruit in public ministry.

_Conclusion_

At the very beginning of the era of Reformation, Ursula of Munsterberg left the Freiberg Convent of the Order of Mary Magdalene the Penitent after hearing of the new teaching of Luther.91 Her spirituality would have been formed, at least in some measure, by consideration of the saint portrayed in scripture and the medieval legend, as practiced by the sisters of the order. Hagiography had provided the foundations of medieval spirituality, the rock upon which the church was built. No deed or function of the male disciples had been dismissed as anomalous by the church tradition as it developed from the Patristic era onward, but every word and command of Christ to the apostles was counted over and sifted for implications and instructions they might carry for believers and, especially, for the clergy. And, as we saw in the medieval period, the life of Mary

Magdalene had also formed a paradigm for both male and female, religious and lay alike, though the question of her femininity had posed challenges for consideration of her identity as a model for imitation. From the early sixteenth century through the end of the seventeenth, we have seen Protestant women emerging from the medieval tradition. As they responded to the new, evangelical theology, they brought the legacy of Magdalene piety with them, and adapted it in ways both similar and different, according to the goals of their respective reform programs. Some strands of the tradition can be seen to have survived almost universally, while others were set aside by those ascribing to certain confessions.

Some features of the medieval Magdalene vanish altogether in Protestant circles, such as the legendary description of her preaching career in southern France. Nor does the abject recitation of her sexual sins find expression among Protestant female authors. Where her sinful nature is mentioned, it is spoken of alongside the universally sinful character of humanity as the burden Christ overcomes for all, not as a particularly grievous stain on which one should dwell. Katherine Jansen has noted that the pre-conversion Magdalene was not a popular focus for late medieval women who identified themselves with the saint, and this trend continued among Protestants in the magisterial Reformation. The sensuous harlot would find early modern incarnations, but not here.

The feature of the Magdalene most appealed to by early Protestant women was her role as witness of the resurrection, called upon, though a woman, to preach the gospel message to the other disciples. From Argula von Grumbach in the heady days of the pamphlet wars, through Katharina Schütz Zell and Marie Dentière, to Catharina von

---

Greiffenberg, the sheer fact of a woman’s having been chosen for so prominent a place in the Christian story begs a response from those who would set that story as the pattern for their lives.

The Magdalene had been the first witness of the resurrection, according to the reading of Luther and his colleagues, because of her intimate relationship to Christ, attested by her coming to the tomb in the darkness of the early morning, when the male disciples remained away out of fear. This intimacy, claimed as a particular province of women, defines the character of contemplation in the work of the early modern Protestant women we have surveyed. Von Greiffenberg described the compassion for Christ that was engendered by her overwhelming sense of his loving work on her behalf. Van Schurman writes of her intellectual contemplation as a complete submission before God, arising from and leading toward the love of God. Elizabeth I was compared to the contemplative Magdalene, becoming a paragon of Protestant education, both as student and patron. Katharina Zell’s prayer is formed in parallel with the exemplary penitence of Christ’s beloved friends, Peter and Mary Magdalene.

Such self-identifications with the Magdalene served to permit (or even demand) outward expressions of the interior transformations they describe. Authors experienced an intimacy with Christ, in meditation on his suffering and in study of his revealed word, and understood themselves to be thereby authorized, just as Mary Magdalene was authorized by her relationship with Christ, to speak and write publicly. Here we can observe the long tradition of Magdalene interpretation being adapted for evangelical use. But these early Protestant women were not influenced solely by the legacy of late
medieval popular piety, nor were they operating in a vacuum. They were formed by the preaching and teaching of the evangelical congregations to which they belonged, and by their interactions with Protestant and humanist intellectual circles. The women who lived and worked at the beginning of the era of Reformation, Argula von Grumbach and Katharina Schütz Zell, Anne Askew and Marie Dentière, were hardly isolated from the events around them, but can only be understood as participants in the larger movement, as parishioners, as readers, and as correspondents with Luther and other leaders (and opponents) of theological reform.
Chapter Four

The Lady Vanishes? Preaching and Teaching the Magdalene in the Catholic Reformation

We have seen that Mary Magdalene was taken up by authors both male and female in the Protestant Reformation as a symbol of the new theology of justification by grace alone, as an ideal of an evangelical kind of contemplation, and as a model for preachers, with an emphasis on the universal responsibility of the confession of faith for a priesthood of all believers. As members of the Catholic Church responded to the Protestant Reformation, interpretation of the Magdalene’s identity became an important marker of theological orientation. Scholars of early modern Catholicism have observed a shift in the Catholic cult of the Magdalene, away from the saint’s evangelical role and toward an increased focus on her penitence, a turn that served the post-Tridentine church’s dogmatic program, reinforcing the need for participation in the sacramental system in order to obtain salvation. As Sara Matthews-Grieco has argued,

The preaching Magdalene was to have a relatively short career. Initially nourished by the importance accorded to female ascetic spirituality in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, … this representation disappeared under the influence of the

---

1 In this chapter, I use the terms Counter Reformation, post-Tridentine, and early modern Catholicism to discuss the Catholic tradition in the century after Luther’s Reformation. Each of these names captures a facet of what was a very diverse and complex era in the church. The designation, “Counter Reformation,” emphasizes those aspects of early modern Catholicism that were self-consciously set in opposition to the movements begun by Luther, Calvin, and their colleagues. “Post-Tridentine” characterizes elements of Catholic reform from within, as shaped by the pronouncements of the Council of Trent. Early modern Catholicism attempts a more neutral identification of figures and events within a given period and confession affiliation. By intentionally applying different names as part of particular discussions, I aim to be mindful of John O’Malley’s cautions about historical nomenclature in this period; see John W. O’Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 5 and passim.

Counter Reformation, which clamped down on female prophecy and shifted the emphasis to other episodes of the Magdalene’s life.\textsuperscript{3}

With the emphasis on penitence came even greater interest in the sin that caused it: the saint’s sexual licentiousness was the frequent subject of sermons and of visual art, where her condemned sensuality was in full view, offered up for the delectation of patrons in the voluptuous eroticism of Baroque portraiture. One of the questions of this study is: to what extent did this turning toward a Magdalene as penitent sexual sinner mean a turning away from the Magdalene as preacher? Did the Counter-Reformation redaction of the Magdalene tradition focus so exclusively on her conversion from sexual sin to penitential piety that her preaching ministry was obscured? And if such a shift took place, was it made in reaction to Protestant adaptation of the saint, or did it simply arise in answer to internal pastoral and theological concerns?

As part of attempting to answer these questions, this chapter will explore the character of the Magdalene that emerged from the teaching and testimony of Catholic men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In some cases, those men held significant positions of religious and secular authority, as high-ranking clergy, renowned preachers and widely-published authors, or powerful rulers and patrons. In other cases, the voices and images represented here are those of poet-priests or barely-respectable painters, whose works nonetheless contributed to the portrait of the Magdalene that was available for public consumption and personal devotion. Half, or more than half, of the audience

for that portrait was female. Examining the hagiography as it was shaped by male authors, artists, and patrons allows us to understand the Magdalene that early modern women received when they heard sermons, read books, and viewed (or posed for) paintings, all of which necessarily conveyed an interpretation of women’s spiritual identity and experience. It will then be the task of the following chapter to see how women responded to that image and transformed it.

By her very nature, Mary Magdalene was an image of womanhood. Having given in to sensuality in her youth, she represented the sex that was thought to be more prone to physical temptation in general. In addition to the contrition and repentance encouraged for all women, Mary Magdalene was also interpreted in this era as a particular example for religious women, continuing the traditional association of Mary of Bethany with the contemplative life. Religious life for women in the post-Tridentine church featured a new effort to enforce strict enclosure, aimed at ending the experiments with lay monastic communities, such as the Beguines, that had developed in the late Middle Ages. Alongside the changes advocated for nuns came a renewed attempt to achieve a celibate clergy and a morally pure laity, both responses to Protestant attacks on immorality in the church and the society it fostered. The Magdalene’s sorrow over her sinful past was, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, explicitly an agonized revulsion at sexual crimes, and it was to become, in the words of Catholic preachers, a special pattern for the reform of prostitutes.


With attention focused on these parts of the medieval heritage, what became of the Magdalene as the first preacher of the resurrection? While the penitent and the contemplative Magdalenes were undeniably emphasized in programmatic efforts on a large scale, such as campaigns against prostitution or in favor of participation in the Sacrament of Penance, other aspects of the Magdalene’s history were employed in specific contexts to sustain female religious activity and institutions. Federigo Borromeo, Cardinal of Milan, for example, encouraged the cult of the Magdalene, including her testimony on Easter morning, as part of his support of nuns’ musical composition and performance. And in England, Robert Southwell developed an extensive, gender-neutral trope in which the Magdalene helped interpret and guide the experience of Catholics under Protestant rule. Catholic leaders sought to represent their tradition as authoritative and coherent yet approached different situations in various ways. Although the rhetorical posture of orthodoxy is a significant theme in the discourse of the Counter Reformation, it should not be mistaken for a homogenous religious climate. Even in studying the aspirations that the Tridentine Church sketched for itself, we must recognize the pluralism of imagery that was created for believers’ consideration and devotion.

*The Council of Trent*

The historiography of the Counter Reformation, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, has often characterized the early modern Catholic Church as a self-

---

conscious instrument of confessionalization and social discipline. John Bossy pointed to the institution of uniform norms of practice at the parochial level, looking particularly at early modern France and Italy. In a study of preaching in sixteenth-century Rome, Frederick Guinness observed that “‘Right thinking’ is the leitmotiv of the Counter-Reformation.” The program established by the Council of Trent thus represented an effort to conform what had been a disparate and diverse congeries of local practices and movements to the centralized teachings of the Catholic curia.

One consequence of this interpretive framework was to see the post-Tridentine church as an inherently hostile environment for women, who were among the chief objects for reform and increased control. One of the goals set by the Counter Reformation, in its answer to Protestant reformers’ claims about the moral laxity of the church, was that of eliminating nuns’ worldliness and especially its expression in damaging sexual scandals. The decrees of the Council of Trent, subsequently affirmed by the 1566 papal bull, *Circa pastoralis*, formally established enclosure for all women’s religious communities, essentially attempting to force all professed women to take the

---

formal vows of nuns.\textsuperscript{11} R. Po-chia Hsia describes the effect of this fiat for women in terms of a cultural shift.

A Mediterranean model of female religiosity, with greater male supervision and impulse toward enclosure, displaced the late medieval model so well embodied by the beguinages—the autonomous and open communities of pious women of northern Europe—in an indeterminate zone between enclosed religiosity and secular family life. Unlike late medieval piety, the religious energies inspired by the Catholic reform flowed in gendered channels.\textsuperscript{12}

In part, Hsia claims, the increased attention to the order prevailing in convents was determined by an economic concern. The aristocracy and merchant classes in the sixteenth century faced the prospect of dowry inflation, which they combated by placing up to 20\% of upper-class women in religious orders, to protect their honor while keeping them unmarried and thus reserving a smaller pool of marriageable women for whom wealthy suitors would have to compete.\textsuperscript{13} Keeping a priority on sexual purity became an important element of social and economic order. Hsia argues that sexuality mattered even more than gender for determining a woman’s place in society; women were divided among the categories of virgins, wives, unhappy wives, prostitutes, former prostitutes, and widows, all distinctions of sexual status.\textsuperscript{14} He asserts that this emphasis was decisive for the shape of women’s spirituality in Counter Reformation culture: “the Counter-

\textsuperscript{12} Hsia, \textit{The World of Catholic Renewal}, pp. 34-35.
\textsuperscript{14} Hsia, \textit{The World of Catholic Renewal}, p. 40.
Reformation Church placed chastity above all other attributes for female religiosity.”¹⁵ I would append a caution that Hsia’s characterization of the Counter-Reformation Church holds true more for its rhetoric than its reality.

A school of scholarship on early modern religious women likewise characterized the Counter Reformation church as sexually repressive; again, this analysis reveals more about the polemics of the era (and of the late twentieth century) than about the real possibilities experienced and created by women in the early modern Catholic world. Elizabeth Rapley’s study of female devotion in Counter Reformation France, for example, assessed the portrayal of women in sixteenth-century sermons as fundamentally, and even confrontationally, misogynist.

Reform in the Catholic church tended to be accompanied by a hardening of its attitude towards sexuality. In the years after Trent, in the heat of the drive for clerical celibacy, a war of words was declared against the female sex. With increasing frequency, preachers and confessors treated women as agents of the Devil, and warned male audiences against their wiles.¹⁶

If celibacy was to be the mark and measure of a morally purified church, then the natural enemy of that purity was women, with the temptation they provided. According to Ruth Liebowitz’s interpretation of post-Tridentine conditions in women’s religious life, there was a strong agonistic motivation behind the focus on religious women’s chastity; “cloister thus became a tool in combating Protestant influence.”¹⁷ Liebowitz’s evaluation of the result for Catholic women of the policies of the Counter Reformation concluded

---

that while Catholicism did still allow women the option of religious life, as Natalie Zemon Davis argued, subordination was still the rule, and women’s orders were altered or suppressed when they seemed threatening.\(^{18}\)

Scholarship of the past twenty-five years resists the image of a “monolithic” or centralized Catholicism, looking more closely at how the process of confessionalization was served by different tools adopted in different local situations.\(^{19}\) The ideal established at Trent for religious women was cloistered seclusion; the realities that were negotiated in contexts across Europe and the Americas included versions of that option, as well as a range of vocations that integrated activity into the contemplative life.\(^{20}\) Many of the new orders that had arisen during a vigorous period of experimentation at the beginning of the sixteenth century were suppressed or forced to become cloistered societies, such as the Visitandines. The Milanese Ursulines, however, were allowed to leave their convents to teach in the catechetical program Archbishop Carlo Borromeo had set up in that region. As Liebowitz herself noted, “without their assistance, he could not have run this catechism program, which was his response to Protestant charges of ignorance in Papist lands.”\(^{21}\) The Daughters of Charity had similar freedom to do important nursing work in France under Vincent de Paul, though in order to maintain this they had to adopt a strategy of taking simple, temporary vows rather than formal ones, and to accept a lower

legal status than that of full nuns. Recent scholarship has permitted a more nuanced view of the diversity of approaches to women’s religious orders that were worked out in response to local needs and social pressures. The treatment of nuns was affected by the church’s program for countering or preventing Protestant gains both in Europe and beyond, both in the public assertion of stricter enclosure, and in the pragmatic reliance on women for important tasks such as teaching and charitable work.

Barbara Diefendorf has offered an approach to reading early modern women’s religious history that would integrate considerations of gender with attention to the particularities of local and historical contexts. The ability to assess women on their own terms, according to their own stated goals, is more possible than ever before, with the production of many new translations of early modern women’s texts as well recent studies of women’s artistic patronage. In complicating the picture of Catholic women in the Counter Reformation, Diefendorf points to both the “porous” nature of convents, even in the wake of Tridentine decrees on clausura, and the reality of an active apostolate for women, one acknowledged by contemporary clergy as necessary, despite the rhetoric opposing female public ministry. Enforcement of the Tridentine enclosure decrees varied widely, with the process often resisted by nuns and their powerful families. Family, economic, and political connections were maintained by cloistered nuns, with power and patronage exercised within and without the walls, and this arrangement was

---

integral to the social and economic order. Outside the cloister, informal associations of women dedicated to charitable and teaching work remained, escaping external control because of low public profiles or humble spiritual claims, and because their charitable work proved vital to communities’ survival in difficult economic conditions.\(^{25}\) Those communities that did move toward enclosure often desired it as a more prestigious vocation that would attract wealthier patrons and committed members.\(^{26}\) Women’s commitment to organized religious life is demonstrated by their participation in, and agitation for, the convent system;\(^{27}\) women founded the overwhelming majority of new convents in the seventeenth century.\(^{28}\) Diefendorf argues that studies of Counter Reformation culture must take this diverse reality into account. “This broad spectrum of institutional and non-institutional structures offers a better representation of the ways in which pious women adapted their vocations to accommodate the church’s requirements as well as their own desires after Trent than a simple active/contemplative divide.”\(^{29}\)

The opposition between active and contemplative vocations was exposed and critiqued by early modern women themselves, as they struggled to shape their own vocations and those of the women and men around them. Examinations of their writing and practice reveal the importance of mystical, contemplative spirituality for those with active vocations, and the vivid sense of a call to action among contemplatives.\(^{30}\) In


\(^{26}\) Diefendorf, “Rethinking the Catholic Reformation,” p. 38.


\(^{28}\) See Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*, p. 26; Diefendorf, “Rethinking the Catholic Reformation,” pp. 50-51.

\(^{29}\) Diefendorf, “Rethinking the Catholic Reformation,” p. 39.

\(^{30}\) Diefendorf, “Rethinking the Catholic Reformation,” p. 40.
addition, it must be remembered that the Counter Reformation emphasis on the sacredness of celibacy offered an appealing model to both men and women seeking a holy life.\(^{31}\) The hagiographic models that women used to defend and sustain their vocations embraced the celibate ideal and, in turn, influenced the spirituality of their male colleagues.\(^{32}\) While those models emerged from the culture of the Counter Reformation, and to some extent aimed at the refutation of Protestant theology, I will argue that women’s writing was generally more concerned with, and shaped by, internal goals and debates, where the polemics of opposing Luther and his cohort were more often the work of male clergy.\(^{33}\)

One of the projects undertaken in response to the Protestant threat was the reform of education, in which the education of women was necessarily, if problematically, included. Understanding the Counter Reformation’s attitude toward education as part of its response to the challenge of Protestantism highlights the importance of educating women for the survival of Catholicism, so that they would be able to educate their children as good Catholics, a crucial project in areas where Protestants had made a lot of headway.\(^{34}\) The church clearly understood the need to involve women and the laity in the project of religious education, both in their natural roles parents and in their vocations as nuns or members of confraternities who ministered to vulnerable members of society:

\(^{31}\) Indeed, the appeal was so successful that it spread to secular philosophers; see, for example, the work of Gabrielle Suchon, esp. *On the Celibate Life*, in *A Woman Who Defends All the Persons of Her Sex: Selected Philosophical and Moral Writings*, ed. and trans. Donna C. Stanton and Rebecca M. Wilton, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 229-94.
\(^{32}\) See the relationship between holy women and their confessors and biographers, Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*.
\(^{33}\) Following Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, p. 231.
\(^{34}\) Rapley, *The Dévotes*, pp. 42-43.
children, but also the sick, the dying, and the poor. The Parisian Ladies of Charity, for example, were expected to provide basic catechetical instruction to the sick persons they visited. The directions for how they were to do this even give the Ladies some latitude in conveying correct doctrine. After establishing Trinitarian theology according to a given question and answer formula, the visiting sister “could say something of the grandeur and majesty of God, of the care that he has for all his creatures, etc.”

And yet the very need that called women towards teaching the faith involved a danger, for this came perilously close to the Reformation’s justification for its encouragement of women’s education: the evangelical goal of confessing the faith, especially by teaching the Gospel to one’s children. The Pauline prohibition on women’s speech and teaching, which was being so closely parsed in the Protestant communities, was thus a focus of debate on the Catholic side, as Elizabeth Rapley noted:

The Church of the Reformation years held this proscription to be all the more complete because Protestants, on the contrary, were permitting women to study scriptures, dispute, and even teach. Heretic women were dabbling in theology when they would have been better employed at their distaffs: that was reason enough why Catholic women should not do the same. In any case, all catechizing by the laity was contrary to the spirit of Catholic pastoral reform.

The reference to distaffs was made by the Catholic polemicist S. Hosias, in his 1561 De expresso dei verbo, and illustrates the tactic of directing women to their domestic duties

---


37 John Bossy formulates this dilemma elegantly, “[the Counter Reformation] was obliged to promote education, and in promoting education tended to abolish itself.” Bossy, “Counter Reformation and the People,” p. 102.

38 Rapley, *The Dévotes*, p. 117.
instead of to theological thought or instruction, a move we will witness in the correspondence of Anabaptist martyrs who warned each other against exactly this attack from their Catholic jailers. Rapley’s analysis, perhaps unintentionally, highlights the contradiction between such pronouncements about Catholic reform and the realities of practice. What she proposes as an institutional hostility to lay leadership in education and mission was less of a ruling premise than it was a political and ideological posture, exercised when it was advantageous to do so but, at other times, downplayed as the need arose. It is important to keep in mind the disjuncture between rhetoric and reality particularly on this question of women and education, where investigations of Catholic practice reveal female and lay teaching as tolerated or even encouraged, even as the principle of their role in catechesis was dismissed or derided. It must also be observed that “the spirit of Catholic reform” was not a single, unified, and coherent program, but rather a diverse collection of vigorous movements and visionary experiments, sharing some common characteristics but also containing, as a whole, many conflicting ideals and strategies.

Women’s Education

40 Michael Mullett points to the situation in the Netherlands, where there was a shortage of priests; “the result… was to hand the everyday direction of the Church to the laity and especially to women.” Mullett, The Catholic Reformation (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 171. See also Virginia Cox, The Prodigious Muse: Women’s Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 21.
Catholic texts on the degree and direction of women’s education are then of special interest for an investigation of the role women themselves were expected to take in teaching. Such documents were a popular genre during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on both sides of the confessional divide, and authors both Protestant and Catholic drew on the tradition of female hagiography, and on the life of Mary Magdalene in her various incarnations, for an exemplar of different facets of female education and teaching. The lives of the saints were an important part of religious education in the Counter Reformation. According to the decree of the Council of Trent on art, “Through the saints, the miracles of God and salutary examples are set before the eyes of the faithful, so that they may fashion their own life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God and to cultivate piety.”

Putting the instruction into practice, Archbishop Carlo Borromeo, of Milan, for example, instructed fathers to read aloud in the evening to their families from saints’ lives, thus encouraging their examples to form part of the education of girls, no matter what other possibilities for learning they may have had.

Two treatises, published in the period immediately after Luther’s initial agitation for reform, were influential in forming later attitudes to women’s education in Counter

---

41 See the study of Germany’s educational literary production for girls in Cornelia Niekus Moore, The Maiden’s Mirror: Reading Material for German Girls in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Wiesbaden: Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, 1987).
Reformation Catholicism; Mary Magdalene plays a paradigmatic role in both. Their authors’ status in relation to Luther’s movement would have given their opinions credibility: Desiderius Erasmus had been Luther’s polemical opponent on the question of good works in salvation, and Erasmus’s protégé, Juan Luis de Vives, had been the tutor of Mary I, who restored England to Catholicism during her eight-year reign. In Erasmus’s, “The Abbot and the Learned Woman,” written in 1520, the question of education for women is explored in connection with the figure of Mary Magdalene. Women’s education is praised in the form of the witty and lettered Magdalia, who handily defeats the corrupt and foolish monk, Antonius, in debate. Erasmus approved of a humanist education for upper-class women, such as the daughters of his friend Thomas More. As Christine Christ-von Wedel notes, however, Erasmus did not challenge the subjection of women to their husbands’ authority in marriage, and the possibility of an education did not permit a woman to go beyond a desirable excellence in fulfilling her traditional role of wife and mother. The chief aim of women’s education for the Catholic tradition is supported by Erasmus’s statements that women should be educated in order to raise children. As her fundamental claim to higher education, Magdalia asserts women’s domestic responsibilities in countering her opponent.

Antonius: Distaff and spindle are the proper equipment for women.

---

45 Rummel, ed., Erasmus on Women, p. 10.
Magdalia: Isn’t it a wife’s business to manage the household and raise the children?
Antonius: It is.
Magdalia: Do you think she can manage so big a job without wisdom?\textsuperscript{48}

Erasmus cites the role of educating children again as woman’s paramount duty in his treatise on “The Christian Widow” (1529).\textsuperscript{49}

Juan Luis de Vives’s 1523, \textit{De institutione de feminae christianae} expands on the question of women’s proper education, and offers advice to the parents of young girls, as well as to women on how to conduct themselves in marriage and widowhood. In Vives’s account the different identities of Mary Magdalene are incorporated in the models presented for women, in ways fundamental to Vives’s program, but also in more trivial applications. Mary of Bethany is the ideal of young womanhood, while the penitent woman anointing Jesus with fragrant oil sets the standard for appropriate perfumes!\textsuperscript{50} In a chapter otherwise condemning the use of cosmetics, Vives does recommend “mild perfumes” using the example of Mary Magdalene: “for Mary Magdalen poured upon our Lord’s head ointment made of precious nard, whose fragrance filled the whole house and was not displeasing to Christ.”\textsuperscript{51}

More critically, Vives affirms the prohibitions of 1 Cor. 14 and 2 Tim., on women’s public speech.\textsuperscript{52} Women’s education is not to promote public speaking, but rather to foster the moral life:

\textsuperscript{48} Rummel, ed., \textit{Erasmus on Women}, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{50} Erhardt and Morris, eds., \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. xxxiv.
\textsuperscript{52} Vives, \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}, p. 72.
Her whole motivation for learning should be to live a more upright life, and she should be careful in her judgment… She will always remember and bear in mind that it was not without reason that Saint Paul forbade women the faculty of teaching or speaking in church and that they should be subject to men and silently learn what it behooves her to learn.\textsuperscript{53}

A woman’s judgment is good, for Vives, if it leads her to complete submission to a man who will guide her correctly, after the pattern of Mary’s sitting at the feet of Christ. The chapter, “On the Solitude of the Virgin,” discusses the ideal pursuits of young women.

Mary Magdalen, sitting at the feet of the Lord listening to his words, did not enjoy the contemplation of heavenly things only at that moment but while she was reading, listening, or praying. Not only should I wish my ideal young woman to do this, but any other woman, for in many passages in this book we give instructions to women in general.\textsuperscript{54}

The instruction she receives from her male guide, whether Christ or her father or her eventual husband, will shape her conduct even after she gets up again and goes about her other duties. The male reader of Vives’s text is thereby assured that his daughter will be so thoroughly conformed to the desired model that he need not worry about her, even when he is not present.

Setting another restraint on women’s behavior as a further curb on any potentially improper activity, Vives counsels his female readers to prefer silence to speech of almost any kind. He praises the Virgin Mary’s taciturnity in the chapter, “How She Will Behave in Public”: “Tell me, how many words of Mary do you find in the whole story of the four Gospels?”\textsuperscript{55} The passage goes on to list all of the important events in the life of the mother of Christ–the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation at the Temple–at which she says little or nothing. Even at the crucifixion,

\textsuperscript{53} Vives, \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{54} Vives, \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{55} Vives, \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}, p. 132.
when one might have expected some audible display of extreme emotion, she utters no protest, indeed, she manifests no need whatsoever. “At the cross, she was entirely speechless; she asked nothing of her Son–to whom he would leave her, or what his dying wishes were–because she had learned not to speak in public. Imitate her, virgins and all women, imitate this woman of few words, but of remarkable wisdom.”56 The long discussion of Mary’s passive silence is especially interesting given the complete absence, in Vives’s work, of any praise of Mary Magdalene’s active, scriptural role in testifying to the resurrection.

Also absent is any consideration of the legendary aspects of the Magdalene *apostola apostolorum* tradition, such as her preaching in southern France. The reform of the cult of the saints was one of the concerns shared by Luther and humanist scholars who remained within the Catholic Church.57 Vives was a humanist colleague and sometime collaborator of Erasmus’s; as such, he would have known about Lefèvre d’Étапles’s recent work in asserting the separate identities of the three Marys and the repudiation of the non-scriptural elements of her cult.58 Yet in *De institutione*, published in 1523–only four years after Lefèvre’s treatise–Vives uses the name Mary Magdalene to refer to Mary of Bethany. Indeed, aside from the discussion of the Magdalene’s judicious

choice of perfume (associating her with the penitent woman of Luke 7, as well), Vives writes exclusively about the Magdalene in the character of Mary of Bethany. He explores the Mary-Martha pericope to distinguish married women from single women, in their relationship to God.

The wife is pleasing to the Lord but through the intermediacy of her husband, because she is anxious to please her husband, whom God placed over her. The unmarried woman and the widow are pleasing to God without a man and without an intermediary, as it were. Their thoughts are as different as the activities of Martha and Mary were different, not through opposition but in degree, as the thoughts of an unmarried woman are more elevated than those of a married woman.\(^59\)

Vives affirms the medieval assessment of the celibate life as more valuable than the secular life of marriage and family. After married life has ended, in the case of widowhood, however, women are again offered the possibility of a retreat from worldly responsibilities toward an unmediated contemplation of the divine. He advocates a serene attitude for widows: “Peace of mind is what elevates us to colloquies with the divine, as it did with Mary Magdalen, who put aside worldly things and sat at the Lord’s feet, intent on his words. For that reason, she received Christ’s praise, that she had chosen the best part, and it would not be taken away from her.”\(^60\) Even in the humanist context in which Vives worked, he, like Luther, found the different faces of the Magdalene too useful to his pedagogical program to be cast aside. Yet Vives’s choice of the traditional interpretation of the Mary-Martha comparison, as establishing a hierarchy in which chaste contemplation trumps the prosaic duties of husband and children, clearly marks


him out as theologically distinct from the evangelical readings of Mary Magdalene.\textsuperscript{61}

Despite his humanism, Vives’s text rejects all learning for women that would overstep the bounds of their traditional roles as either submissive wives or cloistered religious. Any application of what reading they are permitted (and this is limited to texts that will not provide confusion or temptation) in speech that might contradict a husband or father at home, much less emerge in a public confession of faith, is out of the question.\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{The Reform of Prostitutes}

One form of women’s education with more public repercussions became a particular focus of Counter Reformation efforts. The reform of prostitutes was a part of the church’s response to Protestant attacks on Catholic moral failures, as well as an attempt to address a social issue perceived to threaten society with disease and undermining of the family. Frederick McGinness has noted the urgency of the preaching

\footnotesize{
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} See the section on appropriate reading material, “Which Writers Are to Be Read and Which Not to Be Read,” Vives, \textit{The Education of a Christian Woman}, pp. 73-79.
\end{itemize}
}
ministry undertaken to convert prostitutes in Rome, the city that had been a special target of Luther’s criticism.63

Rachel Geschwind describes the growing concern with the problem of prostitution in cities across Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.64 She examines the popular literature aimed at this effort in her essay, “The Printed Penitent: Magdalene Imagery and Prostitution Reform in Early Modern Italian Chapbooks and Broadsheets,” chronicling a widely-circulated, inexpensive literature that, working in tandem with sermons and the foundation of new Magdalene houses, formed part of a propaganda campaign for converting and reforming prostitutes.65 Geschwind compares prostitutes to Jews in the same period, as a minority population under threat but tolerated for the possibility of their conversion, which was encouraged with specific preaching.66 Underscoring and spreading the message of the preaching was popular printed matter, a method for disseminating cultural values in the early modern period.67 The pamphlets were likely read aloud, broadening their audience beyond the literate, while the genre of secular, moralizing broadsheets was displayed in taverns, workshops, and homes.68 Along with

63 McGinness, Right Thinking and Sacred Oratory in Counter-Reformation Rome, p. 83. For Luther’s scathing judgment of Roman morals, following his visit there in 1510/1511, see Table Talk no. 3478 (1536-37), LW 54:207-08; no. 3582a (1537), LW 54:237.
64 Erhardt and Morris, eds., Mary Magdalene, pp. 108-09.
65 Erhardt and Morris, eds., Mary Magdalene, pp. 107-08.
66 Erhardt and Morris, eds., Mary Magdalene, p. 113.
67 Erhardt and Morris, eds., Mary Magdalene, p. 123.
with sermons, then, texts and images produced for a popular audience are important tools for evaluating the extent to which the Magdalene’s character was adapted and transformed to advance the goals of the era of Reformation.

Mary Magdalene was the most popular saint-subject in Italian chapbooks of the period 1570-1670, with their topic universally being her conversion. Cover illustrations, such as that for Rossiglio’s *Conversion of the Magdalene* (1611), typically portray her nude, with allusions to classical imagery of Venus, thus referring to her sexual history, though Rossiglio’s Platonic characterization of the saint as a personification of Celestial Love makes the Magdalene into both a heavenly and an earthly Venus. The visual reference demonstrates the continued utility of the Magdalene as a bridging figure between secular and sacred, serving in this case, it was hoped, to lead sinners directly from the one to the other. Taken together, the chapbooks and broadsheets offered positive and negative reinforcement of the desired moral lesson, the first showing a role model to which prostitutes could aspire in Mary Magdalene, the second giving examples of what happened–disease and a lonely death–to those who persisted in sin.

These popular media reproduced the theological instruction of sermons such as that delivered by the Capuchin preacher, Bernardino Ochino, in Venice in 1539, on the penitent Magdalene and the reformed prostitutes of Padua. The visual messages of the printed matter also found confirmation in more permanent iconographic programs in prominent locations within Italian cities. The Scuola di San Rocco in Venice, for

---

70 Erhardt and Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 120-21.
71 Erhardt and Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene*, p. 125.
example, had a particular mission to syphilis patients and former prostitutes. A portrait of Mary Magdalene on the first floor of the confraternity depicts otherworldly relief of suffering as the fruit of conversion, promising the only escape possible for those so afflicted by the consequences of prostitution that they were beyond any recovery in this world.\footnote{Erhardt and Morris, eds., \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 160.}

\textit{Baroque Art}

Many scholars of the Magdalene tradition have noted the fluidity of the Magdalene’s image in early modern visual art, adaptable to the several uses made of her in Catholic and Protestant communities, from reformed prostitute to contemplative saint.\footnote{On the “flexibility” and “reinvention of her iconography from one generation to the next,” see Erhardt and Morris, eds., \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 3.} As Patricia Badir argues,\footnote{Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 218.}

> Whether she is found writhing in fits of demonic possession, somber in modest penitential attire, or half naked, bathed in the light of holy rapture, her image is never fixed, sacred, or impervious to all manners of manipulation. Part of her enduring appeal is that she can always be reinvented. She is, in every instance, a pliable, malleable medium of feeling and enchantment that accommodates those who make her a surface upon which to trace the phantom lines of something else more remote and much more inaccessible. She is also, however, a creature of history. Sometimes she recalls a Protestant penitent, sometimes a Catholic mystic.\footnote{Michael Mullett uses her portrait as the representation of the Sacrament of Penance as his example of the importance of the visual arts for conveying theological instruction to the illiterate; see his \textit{The Catholic Reformation} (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 163. See also Anne Hollander, \textit{Feeding the Eye: Essays} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 249.}

The principal theme of Mary Magdalene’s representation in Counter Reformation visual art, however, is that of the penitent sinner.\footnote{Gary Kuchar had described this as a narrowing of the multiform medieval cult of the saint, using terms similar to the analysis}
of Sara Matthews-Grieco, from the beginning of this chapter. “Although her legendary role as the *apostolorum apostola* developed through medieval hagiography and sermonizing largely disappeared in post-Tridentine Catholicism, the efficacy of her penitence remained an important part of Counter-Reformation culture—particularly its religious art.”\(^77\) To an extent, this represents a continuity of part of the tradition. As we have seen, Mary Magdalene’s popularity as a saint can be traced to her accessibility for ordinary people who could relate to her as a fellow sinner beloved by God.\(^78\) Ingrid Maisch has claimed, though, that this penitential emphasis marks a decisive shift from the medieval character of her visual identity, with a new concentration of focus on her sinful nature for its titillating, almost mawkish provocation, rather than as a means to the end of her salvation. The increased consideration of the Magdalene’s sexuality in visual art may be explained partly by developments in anatomical and psychological realism that had emerged in the Italian Renaissance. The figure itself had become a subject for consideration, and its depiction a means of conveying emotion and character. A schematic icon can make a powerful intercessor symbolically present, but it takes a portrait to captivate viewers with a human narrative of conflicted love. As Maisch argues,

> In the Baroque era the image of Mary Magdalene underwent a fundamental change. The medieval Magdalene was a (former) sinner, but that aspect of her legend was important only insofar as through it sinful people were brought to salvation… Now, however, she was interesting precisely as an exciting, seductively beautiful sinner. What people wanted was no longer the patron and advocate, but the loving and penitent sinner. This was true in all the Counter-


\(^78\) Erhardt and Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene*, p. 1.
Reformation lands, especially France and the Catholic principalities of southern Germany.\textsuperscript{79} Maisch contends that the Magdalene functioned as a symbol of the chief intellectual and spiritual preoccupations of the age: she became a symbol of human frailty and the transience of worldly pleasure, and the flight from such temptation into the fevered, ecstatic spirituality that characterized the Baroque.\textsuperscript{80} Where other saints from the medieval canon might have continued to offer more static models of supernatural purity, the Magdalene’s story contained an inherent tension between this world and the next. More than most holy figures, she had experienced temptation and vice intensely. Just as intense were the manifestations of her conversion: tortured weeping, a bride’s desire for the person of Christ, and punishing asceticism. Hers was a dynamic narrative suited to the era of Ignatian spirituality, of a culture of piety which encouraged elaborate visualizations of scriptural scenes and rigorous self-examination, all focused on the work of turning one’s life in the right direction.\textsuperscript{81}

The fascination with the Magdalene’s role as sinner and penitent was not merely a fluctuation in the religious currency of the intellectual and cultural elites. The message was delivered by preachers across the Catholic world, from Europe to the Americas, and applied to real women as well as painted figures.\textsuperscript{82} In colonial Mexico, Franco y Ortega wrote of a Fr. Pedro y Urrutia, whose vivid preaching on confession caused an Indian woman to come forward and “like another Mary Magdalene, [she] recognized her

\textsuperscript{79} Maisch, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{80} Maisch, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 66.
\textsuperscript{82} See, for example, the study of the reform of prostitutes in the Spanish context, in Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., \textit{Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 132-41.
ugliness and sins.”\textsuperscript{83} The ugliness to be recognized was an inward quality, however. The beauty and sensuality of the Magdalene as she was portrayed in visual art also functioned as a real proof of the sinfulness of the prostitute, and therefore as a testament to the worthy motives behind her conversion. If she were truly unattractive, or already the ravaged ascetic she would later become, turning from the commerce of her body would not have been as meaningful. This distinction was also applied to ordinary women, as Matthews-Grieco has found, “In Rome, for example, the Charity of Saint Jerome had precise standards for admission to the convents it directed: ‘We will give admission neither to the infirm nor to those encumbered with old age, since the art of sinning has abandoned them, and not they the art.’”\textsuperscript{84} The salutary fruits of penitence, commended to potential converts and believers alike, are therefore directly tied to the penitent’s intention and measure of self-sacrifice.

The potential benefits to be derived from penitence must then be advertised as still more desirable than a life of indulgence. The results of the Magdalene’s conversion are already on view in an early sixteenth-century Flemish painting that shows the saint later in life.\textsuperscript{85} In the painting, she reads a prayerbook, a secular lute put away but remaining in sight; a popular amorous song, set by contemporaries to a basse dance, is


tucked away, remaining half-visible in the lute’s case. This song was altered and used in the composition of a poem, *Tous nobles coeurs venez voir Magdalene*, written for Madeleine de la Tour d’Auvergne, on the occasion of her marriage to Lorenzo II de’ Medici in 1518. The noble Madeleine is compared to the saintly namesake, as a wealthy and worldly woman at the height of her powers.

All noble hearts come to see Magdalene
In her chateau, full of happiness;
Her noble heart has, through love, proclaimed
‘I would spread worldly glory everywhere.’

The text makes a connection between a secular woman and the pre-conversion Magdalene, but not critically, celebrating her beauty, position, and generosity, rather than condemning her. The Magdalene’s personality is defined by an exuberant love; the same characteristic leads her to the over-indulgence of her sensual desires, but her great love is ultimately that which will save her, when it finds its true object in Christ.

This love, once directed rightly, will guide and shape a life that becomes the model for women’s religious vocations. The Flemish painting contains an inscription above the doorway in the upper left: *Lavra Vestalis*, making a humanist reference to the ascetic hermit communities of the early church, and to Vestal Virgins, with which the Eastern Church, as well as the western tradition, albeit less frequently, connected Mary Magdalene. As Colin Slim has observed, “The visual arts help clarify an often close relationship between nun and Magdalene…” Slim gives several early modern examples

---

of family portraits featuring women in habits placing themselves under the protection of Mary Magdalene. He suggests that the Flemish painting, in which the doorway with the inscription implies a religious house, perhaps represents one of the Magdalene orders for repentant prostitutes, with the woman in the foreground being its abbess.91

The positive effects of repentance can also be seen in a pair of paintings from the same region and approximate date as the Lavra Vestalis portrait. Now assumed by scholars to be two panels of the same original composition, Christ Speaking with a Woman and Lady with a Lute show Mary Magdalene before and just after her conversion, as a wealthy Flemish woman.92 In the panel that shows her inside a house, she is surrounded by worldly attributes, gambling games, a lute, rich clothes, and a bed, though an ointment jar prefigures her future. The other panel has the same figure sitting outside, humbled, at Christ’s feet; this scene would have been the view from the open door in the interior where the pre-conversion Magdalene was still among her secular temptations, thus suggesting the moment at which she contemplated her repentance and conversion.93

Although clearly the penitence of early modern Magdalenes expressed the interests of artists and clergy of the period, it was also the product of patrons’ urging, as can be seen by the documentation of the history of one of the most influential of Magdalene images, Titian’s Mary Magdalene. “In a letter to Titian in 1531, Federico

---

91 Slim, Painting Music in the Sixteenth Century, p. 470.
92 Attributed to either Jan van Hemessen or Jan van Amstel. Slim, Painting Music in the Sixteenth Century, p. 818.
93 The dating is approx. 1524-46, making it unclear whether this painting would have belonged to a Catholic or Protestant context, though the inclusion of ‘before’ and ‘after’ states of a soul in a single visual space is similar to Lucas Cranach’s Law and Gospel compositions, in which a sinner is shown in a single garden divided by the tree of life, mired in sin and condemned by the Law on the left, and simultaneously saved by the death and resurrection of Christ on the right. See Carl Christensen, Art and the Reformation in Germany (Athens, OH; Detroit, MI: Ohio State University Press and Wayne State University Press, 1979), pp. 112-14.
Gonzaga specified that he wanted his Mary Magdalene to be as lachrymose as possible.\textsuperscript{94} Coming at the beginning of a long line of Baroque imitations, Titian’s image duly focuses on the contrite affect of the tearful saint, while still permitting viewers an enticing glimpse of her naked body through its miraculous clothing of hair.\textsuperscript{95}

This tension between the convert and the coquette remained a feature of her visual identity over the course of the following century. The Baroque era witnessed a Magdalene who oscillated back and forth between a truly abject penitent, and a sinner still tantalizingly caught up in the enjoyment of her own destruction. Patrick Hunt confirms Susan Haskins’s assessment of the saint’s importance for Counter Reformation spirituality and its visual language. “The Magdalene was perhaps the \textit{sine qua non} of the Baroque Era (roughly 1600-1750) as putative carnal sinner turned ascetic saint.”\textsuperscript{96} The saint’s association with the sinful woman of Luke 7 together with her legendary background of sensual abandonment made her the perfect choice, from the possible options among the hagiographic tradition, for a central role in the visual culture of penitence and in the church’s efforts to curb Rome’s prostitution problem. “The Magdalene was an important symbol of penance in Counter-Reformation Rome where ‘particular emphasis was paid to the redemption of prostitutes.’”\textsuperscript{97}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{94} Erhardt and Morris, eds., \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 152.
\textsuperscript{97} Hunt, “Irony and Realism in the Iconography of Caravaggio’s \textit{Penitent Magdalene}, ” p. 166, quoting Sergio Benedetti.
\end{flushleft}
That effort is evident in Caravaggio’s the *Penitent Magdalene* (1596-97), which portrays an obstinately un-sexualized saint, literally and figuratively moving the prostitute away from sensual indulgence. He depicts a very young Magdalene at the moment when she turns from a worldly life really only just begun; the emphasis here is not on beauty or worldliness but on a realistic, puffy-eyed contrition. Her jewelry is cast aside and broken on the floor beside her, her expensive perfume ready to be taken up to anoint Christ’s feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The emotional focus of the painting is a sensitive exposition of her inward state, not an enjoyment of the voluptuousness of her sin. According to Hunt, the lack of eroticism in the painting is explained by the time of its commissioning, during the reign of Pope Clement VIII. “This denial of clear-cut eroticism in the painting would be consonant with the period of Clementine values, ecclesiastical patronage and post-Tridentine preferences for modesty and sanctity.” There is some scholarly debate over whether Caravaggio used a courtesan as his model, deliberately contravening the 1582 ban issued by Archbishop Gabriele Paleotti, on painting courtesans or prostitutes as saints—an ironic prohibition, given the subject matter of this particular painting, and the history of the saint it represents.

If the Baroque era may be said to have been riven between an intense spirituality and a frantically playful eroticism, Caravaggio’s work takes its position emphatically on the former side. Indeed, so purely penitent is this Magdalene, scholars have claimed it as

---

98 Hunt, “Irony and Realism in the Iconography of Caravaggio’s *Penitent Magdalene,*” pp. 162-64.
100 Hunt, “Irony and Realism in the Iconography of Caravaggio’s *Penitent Magdalene,*” p. 173.
the source for a seventeenth-century Lenten sermon by Francesco Panigarola. Following an Ignatian model of visual reenactment of the scriptural story, Panigarola preached about the very moment of Mary Magdalene’s conversion, as shown in the painting:

… [S]acred fear overwhelms… a fear that is the basis of all that is good… let us take as our example the Magdalene… casting down her necklaces and jewels, shaking out her tresses, violently wringing her hands, she trembled and declared, ‘O Floor why don’t you open up, why don’t you swallow me? O Bed, you have witnessed so many of my evil deeds, why don’t you smother me?’ Now she could not even bear to look at the walls of her house which concealed and surrounded her lascivious acts.102

Interestingly, the sermon takes more license in envisioning this Magdalene as promiscuous and experienced than does the painting itself.

Though acknowledging this strain of un-sexualized Magdalene imagery, focused on her contemplative life after her conversion, portrayals of the dissolute path of the woman who would only later become the saint were far more common in visual art. A more ambivalent Magdalene, still poised between dissolution and conversion, can be observed in Caravaggio’s portrait of Mary and her sister, Martha. The painter’s hagiographic source is the anonymous trecento legend of Mary Magdalene, in which she is converted by the preaching of Martha.103 Visually, the composition is based on Bernardino Luini’s several Martha and Mary Magdalene compositions (1510-20), which sought to show the saints in an “everyday context,” and on a painting of a woman at her toilette, by Titian.104 Caravaggio’s work thus draws on the secular Renaissance genre of images of women engaged in self-contemplation, paintings that condemn vanity and the

102 Hunt, “Irony and Realism in the Iconography of Caravaggio’s Penitent Magdalene,” p. 175.
transience of beauty, reminding the viewer of human mortality.\textsuperscript{105} Instead of the usual mirror, however, Caravaggio shows the Magdalene looking at her sister, Martha, and so contemplating her identity as a woman.\textsuperscript{106} Lorenzo Pericolo argues that the characters of both sisters are presented as legitimate and necessary paths for human pursuit, following the Augustinian interpretation of the pair as the two parts of any person’s spiritual life.\textsuperscript{107} Martha here represents an “active, somewhat rational spirituality as opposed to the future contemplative perfection of the Magdalene… Caravaggio insinuated the siblings’ complementarity: the one reflects the other in their two-fold approach to God.”\textsuperscript{108} The ordinary associations between activity and passivity, male desire and female availability are disrupted, however. Though Martha is the preacher, her face is averted from the viewer and turned toward her sister; one sees mostly her gesturing hands. Though Mary Magdalene is fully exposed to the viewer’s gaze, as in the paintings which glorify her sensual beauty, here her eyes seem focused inward, on her own self-realization, rather than boldly confronting the viewer, or turning ecstatically upwards. The viewer is stymied, whether in desiring a simple connection with an accessible, aroused woman, or in expecting a debased penitent. This Magdalene is musing, not contrite, still in the act of adorning herself even as she no longer takes pleasure in her physical form, abstracted but not yet incorporeal. “The figure of the Magdalene remains in pictorial suspension: she is neither a courtesan nor a saint.”\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{105} Pericolo, “Love in the Mirror,” pp. 152-54.
\textsuperscript{106} Pericolo, “Love in the Mirror,” pp. 167-68.
\textsuperscript{107} See Constable, \textit{Three Studies}, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{109} Pericolo, “Love in the Mirror,” p. 177.
The sinful saint’s appeal as a symbol was so dynamic that it crossed cultural lines, appearing even in Protestant England, in secular paintings that capitalized on the power of her religious identity. Though Protestant regions did develop their own confessionally appropriate art, the dominance of Italy through the Renaissance and Baroque periods as the origin and arbiter of cultivated style meant that a certain amount of Catholic iconography continued to circulate in the Protestant imaginary. Even in contexts where artists consciously developed a regional aesthetic to express local conditions—such as in confessionally-divided, seventeenth-century Amsterdam, for example—the formal influence of Italy on artists’ education and patrons’ taste was inescapable. Post-Restoration English images of the Magdalene dwelt voluptuously on a sinful, sensual past that was, in the judgment of Patricia Badir, “superimposed on a more or less artificial penance.”

Badir has documented the popularity of French and Italian engravings, including images of Mary Magdalene, among the English nobility. One such image was Titian’s *Magdalen* (1531-35), well-known in England through prints. Though we noted the Magdalene’s tearful affect in that work as its original emphasis, the eroticism of her nude form, just revealed beneath its covering of hair, arguably came to be the more famous—or infamous—aspect of the image. What Titian had suggested, others would strip bare. In Peter Paul Rubens’s *Christ and the Repentant Sinners* (ca. 1620) the Magdalene is most emphatically a sinner: naked (even though the painting depicts her after her

conversion, in the Easter morning scene), prostrate, abased, an unvarnished natural in a Baroque world which valued artifice and discipline yet yearned to transcend them.114 Based on these Continental models, Mary Magdalene became the fashionable ideal, implicitly or explicitly, for English court portraiture, especially that of royal mistresses. Peter Lely’s *The Penitent Magdalene* (Countess of Castlemaine, Lady Jenkinson) (1660), *Louise de Kéröualle, Duchess of Portsmouth as Mary Magdalene* (1670), and Sir Godfrey Kneller’s *Elizabeth Villiers, Countess of Orkney*, (1698) all depict their subjects as not-quite penitent sensualists, with the cascading hair and loose draperies of the saint’s iconographic convention.115

**The Magdalene in Music and Poetry**

Part of that convention included a tradition that associated music and dancing with the Magdalene, both before and after her conversion. Before her conversion they formed part of the temptations of the world; afterwards they would be taken up again in a new way, purified and sanctified as angelic song. In the legendary retreat of Mary Magdalene to the mountain grotto near Ste. Baume at the end of her life, she was lifted to heaven by angels every day on the seven canonical hours, hearing chants from the heavenly host.116 These angels also play instruments in an altarpiece by the Master of the Magdalene Legend, ca. 1520.117 Still more frequently, music and dancing were shown

---

114 Maisch, *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 64-5.
among the activities of the sinful life Mary Magdalene enjoyed before her conversion. A group of paintings of the saint by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths depicts the Magdalene as a lutenist.\textsuperscript{118} An engraving by Lucas van Leyden from 1519 portrays the Magdalene engaged in worldly pleasures, including playing music and dancing, as a contrast to her later activity of preaching, shown in another section of the composition.\textsuperscript{119}

As source material for these images, Passion plays such as the Donaueschingen Passion Play (ca. 1480), Jean Michel’s \textit{Mystère de la Passion} (1486), and the Frankfurt Passion Play (1493), all incorporated scenes of Mary Magdalene dancing during her sinful period.\textsuperscript{120} Two surviving secular dance pieces titled \textit{La Magdalena}, from the early modern period, by Pierre Attaingnant (1530) and Marc’ Antonio del Pifaro (1546), are the kind of dance, a basse dance, that she performs in the plays and in Leyden’s engraving.\textsuperscript{121}

As in the dance compositions, the Magdalene herself appears as a character in the very kinds of songs she was supposed to have enjoyed. Her pre-conversion character had been explored in a song published in 1515, \textit{Maugré dangier}, in which the sinful Magdalene mourns a lost lover in terms that foreshadow her mourning for Christ:

\begin{quote}
Despite her hesitation, Magdalene will display herself gloriously, 
Whether these accursed spiteful men like it or not. 
The Castle of Magdalon is a real paradise, 
Such good comfort does not belong to a low-born woman.

‘I am in pain and sorrow for my lover; 
I cannot endure my sorrowful heart. 
Away all care, sadness and all its supports! 
In love I am very passionate and quick.’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{118} Slim, \textit{Painting Music in the Sixteenth Century}, p. 463.
\textsuperscript{119} Slim, \textit{Painting Music in the Sixteenth Century}, p. 462. This composition may have influenced Lucas Cranach’s later Law/Gospel works; see Christensen, \textit{Art and the Reformation in Germany}, pp. 112-14.
\textsuperscript{120} Slim, \textit{Painting Music in the Sixteenth Century}, p. 462.
\textsuperscript{121} Slim, \textit{Painting Music in the Sixteenth Century}, p. 462.
A noble heart, which feels pain in love
And which, in spite of these enemies, takes pleasure
Should be placed beyond sorrow and affliction.
There is no danger, for comfort drives them out.

‘I am sure and certain of my own pleasure;
I have goods enough in a charming lodging;
And my beautiful body is much in demand by many people;
So I call myself sovereign over all other women.’

‘I shall make a fountain of my two eyes.
And of my head, whence all my pleasure springs,
I shall have it cut off, if I do not see my lover;
Wherefore I die of a sovereign love.’ ¹²²

The song alludes to an opposition between sinful and saved humanity, between old and new creation, a traditional trope of the Christian salvation narrative, in which the Magdalene figures as a new Eve, reversing, in the arc of her own life, the story of the Fall. The “paradise” of the first verse, the home where she begins on a sinful path, is a false paradise, suggesting, by contrast, the garden where Mary Magdalene will later discover the risen Christ. Her pain in losing a lover is “unendurable” here, and yet she admits that it is, in fact, easily chased away by worldly comforts, in ironic parallel to the truly unendurable pain she will suffer as she witnesses the crucifixion of her spiritual spouse. She weeps excessively, as always, but here her tears are frivolous, finding no worthy object. An audience familiar with her late medieval cult would have compared this early manifestation of a sympathetic, emotional nature to its mature flowering after her meeting with Christ, when it becomes an expression of the deepest compassion, when her tears anoint the body of God incarnate. The earthly love and human soul she had

mistakenly thought “sovereign” will be laid at the feet of her true sovereign, whom she will lose, only to gain an eternal communion with him after death.

The loss of, and promised reunion with, Christ is the subject of much of the Counter Reformation verse that features Mary Magdalene. A late sixteenth-century poem by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine expressed this in neo-Platonic terms, as the divine approach to humanity, creating longing to renew the damaged imago Dei within: “Father of the supreme light,/ When you look at the Magdalene,/ You generate flames of love,/ Melting the ice within her heart.”123 Gary Kuchar characterizes the Magdalene explored in early modern poetry using this image of absence and longing, incorporating the tradition of romantic language connected with the Magdalene, inherited from the Song of Songs.

The Renaissance Magdalene becomes aware of herself as a subject insofar as she lacks her object of desire. This process of coming into religious self-awareness vis-à-vis an eroticized experience of spiritual absence constitutes one of the most vital ways in which religious desire is predicated in late medieval and Renaissance devotional literature.124

The Jesuit Robert Southwell’s popular and influential poem, Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares (1591), based on the 12th-century homily, De beata maria magdalena, exemplifies this tendency.125 Another Southwell poem, “Mary Magdalene’s Blush,” had chronicled her sensual temptation.126 The emphasis of Funeral Teares, however, is on her grief, a mourning so complete that she prefers death to the absence of her beloved.127 The self-

---

124 Kuchar, “Gender and Recusant Melancholia in Robert Southwell’s Mary Magdalene’s Funeral Tears,” p. 135, summarizing the work of Deborah Shuger.
125 Subsequent editions of Southwell’s work were published in 1594, 1594, 1602, 1608; see Badir, The Maudlin Impression, pp. 65, 83.
126 Badir, The Maudlin Impression, p. 68.
awareness described by Kuchar thus comes almost at the cost of the annihilation of the self, or at least of the diminishing of her senses. She is so bereft that she cannot see nor understand properly, hence her failure to recognize Christ in the garden.\textsuperscript{128}

The absence and loss explored in the poem is certainly that of all Christians in confronting the death of Christ, but Southwell engages them here as the character of a particular context, interpreting the experience of English recusant Catholics and “fashioning the ideal Elizabethan Catholic.”\textsuperscript{129} Though organized around a female character who represents the religious life of an entire community, Southwell’s poem displays ambivalence about female power in religious circles; women were particularly prominent in the recusant community in England, where men were often imprisoned, executed, or forced into silence or exile.\textsuperscript{130}

Southwell’s introduction to \textit{Funeral Tears} has a conceit in which Mary Magdalene herself is a shrine desecrated by Protestants, part of the whole environment of faith which he and the rest of the Catholic community have been denied.

Though I have been robbed of the Saint… I will at the least have care of the shrine, which though it be spoiled of the most sovereign Host, yet shall it be the altar where I will daily sacrifice my heart and offer up my tears… Likeness love had limned in her heart, and treasured up in her sweetest memories.\textsuperscript{131}

In the body of the poem, the author is like Mary Magdalene, going to the empty tomb to mourn the lord of whom he has been robbed, in the form of the Host that had been permanently on display in churches in the Catholic tradition. For Catholics such as Southwell, churches of the Elizabethan Settlement were barren sepulchers, emptied of the

\textsuperscript{128} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{129} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{130} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, pp. 137-38.
\textsuperscript{131} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 71.
sacred body they had housed.\textsuperscript{132} For the author, the manner of this emptying was as illegitimate, as shocking a theft as that which Mary Magdalene first suspected on discovering that there was no body in the tomb on Easter Sunday. As Kuchar argues, Southwell’s self-comparison with the saint “serves as a commentary on the recusant experience of social isolation and religious abandonment while providing a model example of how one should cope with such marginalization.”\textsuperscript{133}

Given the post-Reformation Catholic’s sense of disruption and loss, Mary Magdalene’s direct encounters with Christ, her personal memories of him, are enviable.\textsuperscript{134} Yet even a fulfilling experience of connection with the divine is complicated by the altered conditions under which she now exists. After she tells the disciples of her meeting with Christ, she admits that she is unchanged, or even more miserable, having had this brief taste of what she cannot possess. “I am nothing different from that I was… in having taken a taste of the highest delight, that the knowledge and want of it might drown me in the deepest misery.”\textsuperscript{135} The emphasis is on the misery of her mourning, an emotion understandable before she finds that Christ has risen, but here she experiences it even afterwards, where the tradition had held her to be transported by joy and a zeal to communicate the good news. This new reading means that the Magdalene is not a transformed evangelist, not the inspired preacher who would go on to convert Marseille, but rather remains a devastated widow, like the matrons of Catholic households missing

\textsuperscript{132} Patricia Badir has noted the popularity of Southwell’s poetry among both Catholics and Protestants; see \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 83. The contemplation of Christ’s absence and the inadequacy of the sacraments as a means of retaining his presence held similar poignancy for Calvinists, who had a memorial theology of the Lord’s Supper (that is, that Christ is not physically present in the elements of bread and wine). For English Protestant treatments of the same theme, see below, ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{133} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 71, quoting Gary Kuchar.
\textsuperscript{134} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{135} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 76.
husbands and fathers. Instead of moving onward to speak the news of the resurrection across the Mediterranean world, she returns obsessively to the tomb, where she dreams only of embracing Christ once more.\textsuperscript{136} An ideal Catholic, she devotedly refuses any substitute, even the word of the Gospel, for the Host she continues to seek.

The contrast between the activity of the Magdalene here and the preaching she took up in Protestant interpretations suggests that the character of “witness” to the resurrection diverged for the two communities. The Protestant form of witness became an active testimony, associated with the confession of faith central to evangelical theology. The Magdalene’s witness in the Counter Reformation tradition, on the other hand, was a more passive observation and a sense of the presence of Christ, defined by an internal feeling of awe and a need to overcome Christ’s absence using the sacraments. In the resurrection narratives, Protestants focused on the saint’s message for the apostles and the \textit{Quid vidisti} dialogue in the road, while the Catholic interest, especially in the visual arts, remained on the \textit{noli me tangere} scene, with its explanation of the necessity of approaching Christ in a new way. The resurrection appearance to the Magdalene is one of the recommended subjects for meditation in Ignatius of Loyola’s \textit{Spiritual Exercises}. In the third apparition, Ignatius does include the commandment to her and the other women at the tomb, to “announce the resurrection of the Lord to the other disciples.”\textsuperscript{137} This is not connected to any action the exertant might perform other than in contemplation, but the fifth apparition describes Christ giving the disciples Communion when he appears to them at Emmaus, making a sacramental interpretation of the scripture’s account of a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{136} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ignatius of Loyola}, ed. Ganss, et al., p. 197.
\end{flushleft}
shared meal. The disciples then told the others “how they had recognized him in the
Communion.” The illustrations of the resurrection appearances commissioned at
Ignatius’s request by the Jesuit Jerome Nadal confirm this hermeneutic. Nadal’s 1594/5
companion to the lectionary, Adnotationes et Meditationes in Evangelia, was an
influential resource for Catholic worship and meditation. The image of the apparition
to the Magdalene shows Christ gesturing to Mary, refusing her touch. The depiction of
the meal at Emmaus has Christ distributing bread directly into the mouth of a disciple, as
a priest would distribute the Host. Catholic readings of the resurrection narratives, in
visual art and in devotional texts, instructed the faithful to seek Christ in penitence,
confession, and the Eucharist, rather than in personal proclamation of the Gospel. The
Catholic poets who followed Southwell provide an example of individuals taking up this
counsel and exploring experiences of spiritual grief and sacramental sustenance within
their confessional context, using the figure of the Magdalene.

Wrestling with the problem of Christ’s absence was a significant theme in the
poetic readings of Mary Magdalene in the work of Southwell’s recusant contemporaries.
Richard Verstegan’s *A Complaint of St. Mary Magdalen* (1601) explored the concept of
the saint as a vessel for the departed Christ, with her heart as his tomb, and her body
engraved with his epitaph. William Alabaster’s Twenty-First Sonnet emphasized her
grief at the loss of Christ, expressed in weeping. Alabaster connected the tears with which

---

139 Jerome Nadal, Adnotationes et Meditationes in Evangelia: Quae in sacrosancto missae sacrificio toto
anno leguntur, cum evangeliorum concordantia, historiae integritati sufficienti (Antwerp: Martinus Nutius,
140 http://catholic-resources.org/Nadal/139.jpg.
141 http://catholic-resources.org/Nadal/141.jpg.
she once perceived her forgiveness of sins (as the sinful woman of Luke 7) and the tears she currently weeps over Christ’s death, continuing the association of the Magdalene with the penitent woman. “For as Christ’s presence my tears seasoned, when through my tears his love I clearer read, so now his loss through them doth more augment.”

Patricia Badir notes that her sadness is her source of insight, both in the perception of her own existential state, and in her relationship with Christ. Another sonnet by William Alabaster made a similar point about the knowledge granted through sorrow:

> And let these thousand thoughts pour on mine eyes  
> a thousand tears as glasses to behold him,  
> and thousand tears, thousand sweet words devise  
> upon my lips as pictures to unfold him.

This insight born of sorrow is then the wellspring of her testimony to others, the foundation of her speech. When the Magdalene does speak in the early modern Catholic tradition, the emphasis is not on God’s command that she deliver the message of salvation, as it is for Protestant preachers, but on her own emotional state and the passionate, interior encounter with the divine that cannot help but break forth in some outward manifestation.

Henry Constable’s *Spiritual Sonnets* (1594) added the traditional emphasis on Mary Magdalene’s grief at her sexual sins to the English recusant concern with Christ’s absence. Shame and regret at her former life of promiscuity continue to affect her even after the crucifixion; it is contrition, as much as mourning, that produces her weeping at the tomb. As we saw in Southwell’s work, the distress she feels in sympathy with

---

Christ’s suffering and death is almost enough to destroy her. She longs for death, so that she might be in perfect union with Christ.\textsuperscript{146} Constable’s imagery provides an interesting contrast to Luther’s famous metaphor of the soul clothed with divine grace:

My body is the garment of my spright  
while as the day time of my life doth last:  
when death shall bring the night of my delight  
my soul, unclothed, shall rest from labours past:  
and clasped in the arms of God, enjoy  
by sweet conjunction, everlasting joy.\textsuperscript{147}

Where, for Luther, the sinful soul is only made acceptable to God when it is covered with the beautiful, borrowed cloak of Christ’s righteousness, this Catholic Magdalene sheds the ugly garments of her fleshly existence after death, when her naked soul is finally united to God. Luther’s theology hews to an Augustinian model of sin as located in the will, not in the body. Constable displays a more neo-Platonic dichotomy between physical and spiritual existence; the flesh must be escaped, transcended, in order for the soul to achieve unity with the divine.

The community of English recusant Catholics produced Magdalenes that spoke to the needs of their context of persecution and discontinuity. A less conflicted Magdalene can be found in a long devotional poem by the seventeenth-century German Jesuit, Friedrich Spee (1640/49). Echoing medieval monastics’ self-identifications with the Magdalene, he described the soul’s longing for God as a desire to imitate the faithfulness of the saint, in order to achieve the intimacy she had with Christ: “Before your cross, by day and by year/ Will I sit with Magdalene.”\textsuperscript{148} After the Passion, “The weeping

\textsuperscript{146} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 82.  
\textsuperscript{147} Badir, \textit{The Maudlin Impression}, p. 82.  
\textsuperscript{148} Maisch, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 83.
“Magdalene” is shown mourning devoutly at the tomb, again, the place where the author would find himself. Spee uses the first person, indicating his presence at the Passion and resurrection, underscoring his identification with the nearest witnesses. In a later version of the poem the language has shifted from longing to friendship with Christ. The images presented of the saint are largely positive; she is a model for emulation, rather than an object lesson in the need for repentance. Any reference to her sinfulness is made only in passing; the focus is on her love for Christ. Spee maintains the Magdalene’s connection with Mary of Bethany and the “better part” she chose, and with the bride from the Song of Songs. His example of a truly regretful sinner is not the loyal Mary Magdalene, but rather Peter, who deserted Christ in his time of greatest need. As Ingrid Maisch argues, Spee offers the Magdalene as a model for aspiration. “Mary Magdalene is, in this context, the human being as such. She represents every person who seeks life in Jesus.”

The earlier version of Spee’s poem was published in his Güldenes Tugend-Buch, a book of advice for women on how to live a spiritual life outside the cloister, amid the cares and responsibilities of the home. Maisch contends that Spee’s elevation of the Magdalene was a veiled critique of the treatment of women in his time. Whether or not this was his principal aim, the attempt to form a domestic spirituality for married women

---

149 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 84.
150 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 84.
151 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 84.
152 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 85.
153 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 85.
154 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 85.
155 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 86.
156 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 86.
157 Maisch, Mary Magdalene, p. 88.
can be read as part of the Counter Reformation program of confessionalization in response to the Protestant threat. Protestant theologians and pastors, beginning with Luther and continuing through the seventeenth century, had addressed the spiritual lives of married persons; Catholic teachers, such as the Jesuit Spee, felt the need to add this arrow to a pedagogical arsenal that had previously centered on the lives of cloistered religious.

With Spee’s positive evaluation of the Magdalene, we can observe a continuity from the medieval hagiographic tradition in that the saint could provide a model for male spirituality. A discontinuity emerges where her teaching role is concerned. Where the Dominicans of the late Middle Ages had explicitly claimed her teaching role for themselves, monks of the Counter Reformation needed to adopt a different strategy. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, a Mexican Carmelite writing ca. 1650, acknowledged the association of his order’s patroness with contemplation, while arguing that a role in the Catholic Church’s great mission effort would not be inappropriate.

Our sacred religion, having determined the character of the Carmelite institute and found that its principal employment is the greater part that Mary Magdalene chose for herself and was so much approved by Christ, left for the other sacred religions this apostolic employment [missions], although even in doing so not omitting the pious occupation of winning souls to Christ when and in the manner that it can be done without losing the [souls] of its sons.¹⁵⁸

If men of the Carmelite order wished to follow an active vocation, they needed to renegotiate the prevailing interpretation of both their order and their patron saint, contending that evangelism could still be carried out with integrity even by those to

whom tradition assigned a contemplative life. The same question would be faced by women with a similar missionary impulse, as we shall see.

Nevertheless, the Magdalene’s image as contemplative penitent retained significant appeal for men, lay and religious alike. The records of the Carmelite order supply evidence of the extent to which lay men also participated in piety associated with the contemplative Magdalene. The records also describe the generosity of a M. Le Camus, benefactor of a Carmelite convent for the sake of his daughter, who was a nun there. In 1668 he paid for church decoration, including the chapel of the Magdalene, the place where he himself chose to be buried.\textsuperscript{159} In addition to the Carmelites, the records show that the Jesuit order benefited from the special devotion to the Magdalene of one M. le capitaine Béreur: “The reverend fathers of the Company of Jesus also regarded him as their benefactor: he had a chapel built in their church in the honor of St. Magdalene, whom he, and all his family, venerated with a particular devotion. He obtained for this chapel an indulgence for the help of the souls in Purgatory.”\textsuperscript{160}

\textit{In Praise of Women}

The positive embrace of the Magdalene in popular piety was shaped and sustained by instructive devotional literature. François de Sales’s enormously influential \textit{Introduction to the Devout Life} offered advice on making a good confession, and drew on


the Magdalene as the example of perfect penitence. As Jill Fehleison argues, de Sales “was one of the first to see the importance of a spiritual regimen for the laity.” His promotion of the Magdalene as an exemplary figure for ordinary penitents must be read in light of this project. Larissa Taylor has noted de Sales’s historical location, at some remove from the direst moments of religious conflict in the sixteenth century; this shift to a more “peaceful context” helps to inform our understanding of his positive evaluation of the Magdalene, and especially of her agency in her own redemption.

Adopting the conventional comparison of the Magdalene to the male disciples, in his correspondence de Sales had noted that Mary Magdalene’s conversion was perfect and complete, while St. Peter was allowed to stumble in sin after his calling, as when he discouraged Christ from martyrdom, or abandoned Christ during the Passion. Indeed, her contrition was so complete that it seemed, according to de Sales, to erase the consequences of her sin even before Christ proclaimed her forgiven. In Chapter 29, “Of Detraction,” de Sales warned his readers not to judge others as sinners, even if they appear to be so, because they may be similarly pure: “Simon the Leper called Magdalen a sinner, because she had been so long before; yet he lied, for she was then no longer a

161 Introduction to the Devout Life was the most printed book in seventeenth-century France, after the Bible; see Barbara R. Woshinsky, Imagining Women’s Conventual Spaces in France, 1600-1800: The Cloister Disclosed, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World (Farnham, U.K.; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), p. 80.
162 Fehleison, Boundaries of Faith, p. 41.
163 Larissa Taylor, Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period, A New History of the Sermon 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 26-27. See also Jason Sager, “François de Sales and Catholic Reform in Seventeenth-Century France,” in The Formation of Clerical and Confessional Identities in Early Modern Europe, eds. Wim Jansen and Barbara Pitkin, Dutch Review of Church History 85 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 270. Sager argues that de Sales’s rhetoric deliberately shifted to the guiding of lay piety, including the promotion of the devout life as a means of discouraging social disorder, such as confessional strife (279). The polemical efforts of the seventeenth century were thus more a program of positive pastoralism, rather than of violent opposition.
sinner, but a most holy penitent, and therefore our Savior took her cause into his most holy protection.” In contrast to the evangelical readings of this text, where her grateful love is the product of Christ’s unwarranted forgiveness of her sins, here it is most emphatically the Magdalene’s own praiseworthy attitude of hatred and regret for her sins that gains Christ’s approval, and therefore assures her salvation. Chapter 19, “How to Make a General Confession,” makes clear what exactly it is that achieves the remission of sin.

So sin is shameful only in the committing; but being converted into confession and repentance, it becomes both honourable and wholesome. Contrition and confession are so beautiful and so fragrant that they efface the ugliness and disperse the ill savour of sin. Simon the leper said that the Magdalen was a sinner; but our Saviour said she was not so, and spoke of nothing but the ointment she poured out, and of the greatness of her love.

Here Christ’s pronouncement is not so much absolution, as acknowledgement of what she has already become.

The Magdalene’s active participation in her own salvation is to be the model for de Sales’s readers, albeit with modifications for a realistic approach to self-improvement. Chapter 8.2, “Of the Means to Make This Second Purgation,” instructs that “We must, then, Philothea, increase our contrition and repentance as much as possible, that it may extend to the least belonging of our sin. St. Mary Magdalen, in her conversion, so utterly lost the taste for sin, and for the pleasure she had taken in it, that

---

166 François de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, p. 35.
167 On de Sales’s theology of the freedom of the will, which included cooperation with God’s saving grace, see Eunan McDonnell, The Concept of Freedom in the Writings of Saint Francis de Sales (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 89 and passim.
she never more thought of it.”

Readers must not forget, however, that the Magdalene presents an exalted model, an example of “perfect purgation,” like that of St. Paul; ordinary sinners should not expect this for themselves, but should rather think of a more gradual process, over a lifetime’s prayer and self-discipline. In a letter to Jeanne de Chantal, de Sales called on another aspect of the Magdalene’s traditional identity to counsel a humble persistence in virtue on a small scale. “Let us go by land, since the high sea is overwhelming and makes us seasick. Let us stay at our Lord’s feet, like Mary Magdalene, whose feast we are celebrating, and practice those ordinary virtues suited to our littleness.” It is a versatile saint, indeed, who can represent both sublime perfection and a becoming modesty of aim and achievement.

Other devotional works of the period followed de Sales’ pattern, encouraging imitation of the Magdalene. Charles Vialart was the superior-general of a convent founded in Paris by Henry III in 1587 as part of the Feuillant movement of Cistercian reform. His Tableau de la Magdelaine en l’état de parfaite amante de Jésus (1628) describes the Magdalene as an example of a loving intimacy with Christ. Jean-Luc Boucherat notes that Vialart’s interpretation provided an important contrast to the dominant image of the Magdalene in Counter Reformation piety. “One commits a great wrong on the side of a literature (and of an iconography) seen as overly black and white if one thinks that the seventeenth century saw in the Magdalene only a model of

---

168 François de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, p. 15.
169 François de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, ch. 5.1, “Necessity of Purifying the Soul,” p. 11.
170 François de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 98.
penitence.”  

Although most authors did explore her ascetic life in the Sainte-Baume, thinking of her as a model of eremiticism and penitence, Boucherat contends that it is as a model of love that she was most known to contemporary readers and the faithful. Vialart himself addresses Mary Magdalene in a prologue, noting that she is a complex character, but declaring that he has decided to celebrate her great love. He discusses the virtue of love in society, looking at the treatment of this subject by classical authors. Vialart then looks at the love of Jesus, the perfect love; Mary Magdalene was the recipient of that love, second in honor only to the Virgin Mary. He affirms the legendary tradition about her early life, claiming that she had every worldly advantage and power, from wealth and position to physical charm. He also continues the trope of comparing the Magdalene favorably to the male disciples, both through the means of their coming to discipleship, and in their behavior at the crucial moments of the Passion. In a section called “The love of the Magdalene was more perfect than that of the Apostles,” he contrasts the apostles, who were sought out by Jesus and needed to be convinced with speech and miracles, with Mary Magdalene, who sought Jesus out in the house of Simon on her own initiative, because of her great love. The apostles abandoned Jesus at the Passion, clinging to each other in relative safety, but the Magdalene accompanied Jesus courageously through danger and death, even to the

---


172 Vialart, Tableau de la Magdelaine, p. 9.

173 Vialart, Tableau de la Magdelaine, p. 34.

174 “L’Amour de la Madeleine a été plus parfait que celui des Apotres.” Vialart, Tableau de la Magdelaine, p. 36.
solitude of the tomb. Such devotion is rewarded with the graces of intimacy. The apostles are not permitted to wash Jesus’ feet, but the Magdalene does so, and is praised and promised eternal renown. “It is she, whom you first spoke to, after you left the tomb, her name is the first that your sacred mouth pronounced, you gave her the first commission that you delivered, which was to announce to your Apostles your glory and your resurrection.” Vialart stresses that the saint was selected for this prestigious role because of love, both Christ’s love for her and hers for him, making the choice appropriate. Far from the ordinary sinner of Protestant interpretation, whom God puts to work for his purposes as he might anyone, Mary Magdalene’s extraordinary affection for Christ nominated her, of all men and women, to carry the message of salvation. Where Protestants were empowered by the Magdalene’s story to confess the faith boldly among their neighbors, Vialart encouraged his fellow Catholics to imitate the saint’s great love, and so become more worthy of God’s love in return.

Conclusion

This assessment of Counter Reformation piety reveals those elements that survived, and those that were lost or rejected, from the previous cult of the Magdalene. The associations of the saint with Mary of Bethany as the paragon of the contemplative life and with the penitent woman of Luke 7 as the theological fulcrum of the sacrament of penance both persisted and were used in new ways according to the needs of the

175 Vialart, Tableau de la Magdelaine, pp. 37-38.
176 “C’est à elle, que vous avez preièrentement parlé, après que vous fûtes sorti du tombeau, son nom est le premier que votre sacrée bouche a prononcé, vous lui avez donné le première commission que vous délivrâtes, que fut d’annoncer à vos Apôtres votre gloire et votre résurrection.” Vialart, Tableau de la Magdelaine, p. 39.
contemporary church. The better part of Mary continued to reinforce teaching about the contemplative life, while the penitence of the sinful woman was given increasing attention as an example of properly abject contrition and amendment of life for prostitutes, as part of countering Protestant attacks on Catholic morality. Mary Magdalene was understood as a witness to Christ’s Passion and resurrection, though the concern was with how she herself was affected by compassion for what she saw, rather than with Christ’s command that she spread the Gospel to others. For those in a context of persecution, such as English recusant Catholics, the focus was on her grief at the loss of Christ and the encouragement of the faithful to find him in new ways. For continental Catholic authors such as François de Sales and Charles Vialart, the Magdalene’s great love for Christ was emphasized as a means of guiding their readers’ devotional lives. The character of witness, here, is an internal transformation of experience shaped by love, not the active role of testimony to which Protestants felt called by her story.

The distance traveled by the Counter Reformation church from the medieval image of the *apostola apostolorum* can be observed in the case of Mary Ward, the English founder of a female educational order in imitation of the hugely successful Society of Jesus. Ward was expelled from England and her work dismissed as contrary to Catholic doctrine and tradition, which was held to forbid women’s public teaching and ministry, not only at the time, but throughout history. The charges brought against Ward included the ironic claim that “It was never heard in the Church that women should

---

If the Magdalene’s image had been successfully purged of her preaching identity, then she could not be appealed to as a model for contemporary women. But did the charge’s assertion, suppressing the Magdalene’s legacy, hold true?

In the next chapter, we will examine the extent to which Catholic women embraced the Counter Reformation Magdalene, and how their sense of themselves and their relationship to God was formed by the preaching and teaching they heard, saw, and read about the saint. Did a more active, medieval Magdalene continue to capture the imaginations and imitation of religious women in Catholic countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contributing to their resistance to enforced clausura? Or were the fears about Protestant arguments for lay preaching shared by women as well as men? And, finally, did the character of the new Magdalene cause other women to set her aside in frustration as an unwieldy pattern for their vocations, because of her narrower identity?

---

178 Rapley, The Dévotes, p. 31.
Chapter Five
The Magdalene among Catholic Women

The teaching and preaching of Catholic men does not present the entire picture of Counter-Reformation piety. This chapter will explore early modern women, both lay and religious, taking up the subject of Magdalene, and will look at the texts they themselves authored, as well as their physical expressions in devotional practices and iconographic programs. These themes and practices will be examined in tension with the image of the saint that women received from male authors. We have observed the appeal of a sexualized Magdalene to male authors, audiences, and patrons, both within and outside of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. To what extent where these same images appropriated, edited, or dismissed by their female colleagues, neighbors, and consorts? Katherine Jansen has observed differences in how much sexual shame was included in the Magdalene devotion of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, based on the gender of the author or consumer of the tradition. Can any parallel patterns be observed for the saint in Baroque religious culture?

In examining the life of the Magdalene during this complex period, it will be important to remember the caution offered by Jean-Luc Boucherat, cited in the preceding chapter. Assigning a single vision of the saint to Counter Reformation spirituality would mean neglecting the variety of different approaches, contingent on the contexts and goals of each. Within the writing, artistic patronage, and recorded lives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic women, we will find whole-hearted embraces of the penitent Magdalene alongside rejections of the saint as an inappropriate model for what

---

1 See Vialart, Tableau de la Magdelaine, p. 7.
others are trying to do, with still others attempting to keep a more active, vocal
Magdalene alive.

John Conley has argued that “the Counter-Reformational cult of the saint
emphasized both the peccatory and the apostolic traits of the saint.” In the preceding
chapter, however, a survey of the male authors contributing to that cult revealed
significantly less evidence for promotion of the Magdalene’s apostolic traits. If an
apostolic Magdalene remained after Mary Ward was charged with attempting something
“never” known before in the church’s long history, then it was surely due to the voices,
often female, who spoke of her in those terms against the prevailing visions of the saint
as penitent whore and ascetic contemplative.

The Magdalene in Transition: Vittoria Colonna

One such voice, crucial to maintaining a diversity of Magdalene images for
women, belonged to the Italian noblewoman and humanist scholar, Vittoria Colonna
(1490-1547). Like Marguerite de Navarre, with whom she corresponded, Colonna
represents a transitional figure, a woman who lived a privileged life at the opening of the
early modern period. Not bound by religious vows and widowed early, she was able to
experiment with theological innovation without facing the constraints of the era of
confessionalization. An almost exact contemporary of Luther’s, her life coincides with
the very beginning of the church’s reaction to his reform, though she died just as the

---

3 On Colonna and her circle, see Diana Robin, *Salons, the Presses, and the Counter Reformation in
official response was being developed at the opening sessions of the Council of Trent. Her interpretation of the Magdalene can inform us about how the saint was being discussed in the evangelical circles that existed in early modern Catholicism before Trent. Alongside her interest in reform, Colonna was active in traditional practices of the Magdalene cult: she was involved with the reform of prostitutes and the Convent of the Convertite in Rome, and planned a trip, even applying for and receiving papal permission, to visit the saint’s pilgrimage site in Provence. As a woman of means, Colonna also patronized the arts with the saint in mind, collecting Magdalene images through the 1530s, perhaps with the intention of decorating a chapel.

So unusually renowned was she for her learning and creative ability that her correspondence was published in 1544, the first collection of letters by a woman to be published during her lifetime. In a letter to her aunt, Constanza D’Avalos Piccolomini, the Duchess of Amalfi, Colonna offers the Magdalene as a model in giving spiritual counsel, indicating that the saint is, in her estimation, to be ranked with Paul and Augustine as among the great religious guides. “When you already feel that earthly weights drag you back… pause a while with my most observant father Paul, or with my great luminary Augustine, or with my most ardent servant Mary Magdalene.” Abigail Brundlin has linked Colonna’s use of the Magdalene in this letter to the apostola apostolorum tradition, though one might question Brundlin’s identification of the

5 Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s Noli me tangere,” p. 241.
6 Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s Noli me tangere,” p. 241.
8 Brundlin, Vittoria Colonna, p. 148.
Magdalene’s scriptural role, the first witness and preacher of the resurrection, as a minor one not related to teaching.

The inclusion of Mary Magdalene here, whose role in the scriptures is minor and involves no teaching or great learning, together with two venerable ‘doctors of theology,’ demonstrates Colonna’s determination to include women in her ancestry of learned religious figures. Perhaps she was drawing on the Patristic tradition that represented the Magdalene as the *apostola apostolorum* and teacher to the disciples, a tradition that through the centuries came to be denied in favor of her role as a model of penitence and asceticism.9

Brundlin’s assessment that the trope had been rejected over “centuries” seems premature at the time of Colonna’s career. The work of Katherine Jansen documents the continued popularity of the preaching Magdalene through the late medieval period, and Beverly Kienzle has demonstrated the vitality of the image in late medieval drama.10

Another letter published in this collection discusses Mary Magdalene and St. Catherine of Alexandria, comparing their public, prophetic roles. As Brundlin observes for Colonna, “Both women inherit the active, preaching role… both are cited as reaching and converting *regine* (or, powerful females) through their work and faith: ‘and both of them through their passionate, wise, and sweet words I see converting queens with their kingdoms and a huge number of people.’”11 Here Colonna uses an evangelical interpretation of preaching as speech that leads to conversion, a definition of preaching that could embrace women’s work for the church even without trespassing on the office of the clergy. Colonna’s interpretation of the saint combined a focus on her eloquent preaching with an emphasis on her great love for Christ, which produced the intimacy between them and which led to her selection as the first witness of the resurrection.

---

10 See Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*; Kienzle, “Penitents and Preachers.”
11 Brundlin, *Vittoria Colonna*, p. 152.
Michelle Erhardt and Amy Morris have noted Colonna’s desire to combine these two themes of the love and witness: “Colonna wrote of the Magdalene’s ‘courage and love,’ her seeing Christ first as she ‘loved him most,’ in her meditation on Christ’s Passion, composed 1539-42… in letters she wrote of her as ‘beloved disciple,’ and ‘apostle,’ ‘messenger’ and ‘herald,’ and as the representative of women’s love and constancy.”\(^{12}\)

This ability to hold multiple images of the Magdalene together, to join an evangelical interest in the Magdalene as a preacher to a more Catholic attention to her character as Christ’s beloved may be traced to Colonna’s location as a Protestant sympathizer who yet remained loyal to the Catholic tradition; she was one of the leaders of the Nicodemite group in Renaissance Italy that included Michelangelo. Colonna’s spiritual director was Bernardino Ochino, a famous convert to Protestantism, whose homiletic treatment of Mary Magdalene inspired Colonna’s sonnet, *Donna acessa animosa, e da l’errante*.\(^{13}\) In a letter from 1544, Colonna compares both herself and her correspondent, Cardinal Giovanni Morone, himself imprisoned for three years on suspicion of Lutheranism, to Mary Magdalene. She excuses herself for writing so boldly by asking Christ’s forgiveness for her words, as he forgave the Magdalene. Colonna then observes that the cardinal “would probably have preferred a life of contemplation and retreat, but that he was compelled by Christ to actively serve his brothers, as the Magdalene did.”\(^{14}\)

Lisa Rafanelli’s analysis of Colonna as a female author and artistic patron acknowledges her association with Protestant sympathizers such as Ochino and

---

\(^{12}\) Erhardt and Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene*, xxxiv.

\(^{13}\) Brundlin, *Vittoria Colonna*, pp. 134-35.

\(^{14}\) Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s *Noli me tangere*,” p. 245.
Michelangelo, while noting that she did not herself convert. Rafanelli states later in her discussion that Colonna was described in a 1543 publication as a disciple of Ochino, just as Mary Magdalene was a disciple of Christ, though she fails to note that Ochino was by that time a notorious apostate and exile, and that such a public comparison was therefore a dangerous charge, not a straightforward, complimentary comparison between a living woman and a conventional saint. Rafanelli concludes with an assessment of Michelangelo’s crafting of a *Noli me tangere* scene commissioned by Colonna.

> It is clear that Michelangelo’s compositional choices were intended to give rhetorical clarity and visual form to the Magdalene’s privilege, stature, and active role in the faith, without making reference to her more sinful, penitential side. It also seems clear that this was done with the devotional needs and cultural expectations of Colonna in mind.  

Rafanelli reads this sympathy with the Magdalene as evidence of Michelangelo’s proto-feminism, in his desire to accommodate the personal interests of his erudite patroness. She notes that Mary Magdalene is standing (rather than kneeling) in Michelangelo’s composition, unusually for the genre. Rafanelli argues that this gives the saint greater stature and even points to her “acceptance of Christ’s charge to bring the news of his resurrection to others: the inquisitor will become the *annunciatrix*.” The humble woman who had come petitioning for forgiveness will inherit the mantle of prophetess and preacher, announcing the Gospel tidings.

The innovative arrangement of this scene reflects a larger cultural narrative, according to this interpretation. The *noli me tangere* had been part of traditional iconographic cycles through the Middle Ages but did not become a subject for

---

15 Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s *Noli me tangere,*” p. 247.
16 Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s *Noli me tangere,*” p. 232.
independent paintings until the sixteenth century, a shift Rafanelli attributes to progress in attention to women’s roles in society and in religious history.

The new-found popularity of the *Noli me tangere* in the sixteenth century may not only signify the changing standards of decorum for the representation of women in this period, but also the changing status of women as patrons and viewers… the audience for these images was often comprised of women… these women all identified with the Magdalene—not just the fractured Magdalene they were presented with in public (the sinful penitent), but with a more fully fleshed-out Magdalene—a woman both flawed and empowered.\(^\text{17}\)

Rafanelli rightly notes the importance of a complex, multi-faceted Magdalene for female piety. Missing from her provocative discussion, however, is a full engagement with the theological nature of the conversation between the artist and Colonna and the crypto-Protestant Magdalene they created. Without an understanding of the evangelical emphasis behind this vision of the Magdalene, the aims of Michelangelo can be read as anachronistically feminist, and Colonna’s own agenda isolated from its religious context.

In her Spiritual Poem no. 8, Colonna wrote,

> Seized in her sadness by that great desire which banishes all fear, this beautiful woman, all alone, by night, helpless, humble, pure, and armed only with a living, burning hope. Entered the sepulcher and wept and lamented; Ignoring the angels, caring nothing for herself, She fell at the feet of the Lord, secure, For her heart, aflame with love, feared nothing. And the men, chosen to share so many graces, Though strong, were shut up together in fear; The true Light seemed to them only a shadow. If, then, the true is not a friend to the false, We must give to women all due recognition For having a more loving and more constant heart.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{17}\) Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s *Noli me tangere,*” p. 237.

\(^{18}\) Rafanelli, “Michelangelo’s *Noli me tangere,*” pp. 244-45.
She draws on the traditional comparison between the Magdalene and the male disciples but extends her womanly devotion to all her sex, pleading for recognition of the faith of women, particularly in its affectionate strength. Here Colonna prefigures the arguments of seventeenth-century Quakers such as Margaret Fox, who would claim women’s right to preach publicly because of the Magdalene’s example. Neither Colonna nor Fox made such claims out of a belief purely in their own inherent value as persons, but as sinners redeemed by divine grace, the model for which they found in Mary Magdalene. The “recognition” due to women was not an end in itself, but a move in the reform of Christianity that replaced doctrine with loving and constant hearts, that is, with the faith of the ordinary believer. The appreciation of the worth of women did not arise only out of a secular philosophical tradition, but owes a debt to the devotional discourse of the era of Protestant and Catholic reform.

Colonna, like Marguerite de Navarre, incorporated elements of both Protestant and Catholic theology in her life and writing. In the earliest years of the era of Reformation this kind of religious inquiry, seemingly not limited by an exclusive loyalty to one confession or the other, was possible especially for women at elite levels of society. A woman’s faith commitments were less weighted than her male counterparts’ would have been as rulers’ religious affiliations were tied to the confessional identity of the territories in their charge, particularly following the Peace of Augsburg. Thus,

---

19 Colonna was not unique in exploring the Magdalene poetically. Virginia Cox has studied the interpretation of the Magdalene as an ideal of female beauty and penitence in the verse of Moderata Fonte (1555-92) and Lucrezia Marinella (1579-1653); see Cox, *The Prodigious Muse*, pp. 72-73, 131-37, 149.

wealthy and aristocratic women could pursue a certain amount of theological experimentation without the political risks men would have run, with the exception being those women who held positions of great political power, such as Mary I and Elizabeth I of England, whose faith had to be less equivocal and more guarded.

Even for women at less elite levels of society, the era of Reformation was a period of religious investigation and discovery. Women responded to the creative ferment of the spiritual life of the era, and often fostered it with innovations of their own. New institutions and mission drives were founded and supported by women, just as female authors and artists produced images to shape the piety that undergirded these efforts. The Council of Trent’s decrees attempted to regulate the institutions and imagery that affected religious women, producing a complex environment in which women often had to negotiate restrictions on their activity even as they were encouraged to intense devotion. Even as they reacted to changes in their cultural and spiritual context, the legacy of the medieval Magdalene as a model for contemplatives and mystics remained influential for Catholic women in the Counter Reformation, especially for women in religious orders. As they faced new circumstances that challenged previous understandings of the religious life, early modern Catholic women adapted the Magdalene tradition to create innovative models of female sanctity and vocation. These innovations were shaped by the legacy of medieval hagiography. The themes we observed in medieval Magdalene piety, of a spousal intimacy with Christ, exemplary contemplation, and ascetic penitence can be found activating the vocations of early modern nuns, as demonstrated by the life and writing of Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi.
Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi

While she embraces the Magdalene tradition, the sixteenth-century Italian Carmelite mystic, Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi (1566-1607) also reflects the influence of Counter Reformation spirituality, particularly through Ignatius of Loyola’s _Spiritual Exercises_, in her very visual and impassioned piety. Coming between the Council of Trent and the vigorous reform of the Discalced Carmelites, de’ Pazzi lived during a period of change and adaptation for women in early modern Catholicism. Her biography is shaped by the penitential emphasis of the post-Tridentine era, but without the challenges to the exercise of her vocation that would face those who attempted a more radical response to the impulses of reform. Her engagement with the Magdalene tradition correspondingly reflects this transitional period as it was experienced in the Carmelite Order, engaging both tradition and innovation. Born into a noble Florentine family, she entered the convent of Little St. John’s of the Knights at fourteen, and then joined the Carmelite convent of St. Mary’s of the Angels, at sixteen, just before Teresa’s reform first reached Italy in the 1580s.21 Entering the order of which the Magdalene was patron, De’ Pazzi described the fruits of a conventional ascetic withdrawal using Magdalene imagery. Despite her early vocation, her self-understanding was that of an abject sinner, as mired in crimes of the soul and body as the youthful Magdalene. She experienced

union with Christ in several visions, often during imagined reenactments of scriptural events, in which she accompanied Christ in his Passion. In her recorded speech, she constantly uses the title of lover or spouse for Christ, adopting the imagery of the Song of Songs with which the Magdalene had been associated in medieval exegesis. In parallel with Mary Magdalene’s legendary later life in the grotto at Ste. Baume, de’ Pazzi refused most food and otherwise followed a life of extreme discipline in her pursuit of a spiritual union with God.

The depth of her mystical connection with the divine was such that it could not help but seek expression—the typical justification for women’s religious speech or writing in the Counter Reformation. The ecstatic vision in which she embraced a crucifix implicitly alluded to both the artistic convention of the Magdalene’s embrace of the cross in crucifixion imagery and the saint’s role in carrying the message of the Good News after the resurrection. Her audible cries about the love of God during this vision, that love which we saw emphasized in the writing of Charles Vialart, voiced an irrepressible call to mission. In her recorded conversation, she described a wish to have been a man and so to have been able to evangelize like Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary to India and Japan. Her mysticism displayed a decidedly worldly savvy, with a concern for the ecclesiastical issues of her day that recalls the attempts at church reform of Catherine of Siena. Even from the sickbed where Maria Maddalena spent most of her life, she actively confronted the threat of Protestantism. She had visions, in 1584, and in 1603, of

---

Elizabeth I of England being punished by God for leading souls to hell in continuing that country’s apostasy from papal control.\(^{25}\)

Although her spirituality incorporated many of the traditional characteristics of the Magdalene, her self-professed ideal was not her namesake, but the Virgin Mary. The description of the Virgin that Maria Maddalena offers, however, also makes reference to both the Magdalene and her sister. “In heaven Mary fills the offices of both Mary and Martha. Like Mary Magdalene she enjoys God; like Martha she intercedes for us.”\(^{26}\) The Virgin Mary exceeds Mary and Martha because she combines both of their virtues, being both contemplative and active, a blessed witness of Christ’s suffering, and offering her testimony on behalf of supplicant sinners. De’ Pazzi here voices a desire to reconcile active and contemplative vocations, a desire that was to characterize the piety of nuns in the Catholic Reformation. De’Pazzi achieves a balance by substituting the Virgin Mary as the model of a flexible integration of the two paths.

The paradox of a radical commitment to God’s will combined with an absolute obedience to the human institutions of the church preoccupied one of the greatest spiritual authors of early modern Catholicism, Teresa of Avila. Like Maddalena de’ Pazzi Teresa would articulate the separation between mystical contact with the divine and active ministry in the church by exploring Mary Magdalene’s identity as Mary of Bethany in her relation to her sister Martha. Where de’ Pazzi looked to the Virgin Mary to combine the beatific vision with intercession, Teresa proposed a union of Mary’s enjoyment and Martha’s industry within the self.

\(^{25}\) Mary Minima, *Seraph among Angels*, pp. 50-51.

\(^{26}\) Mary Minima, *Seraph among Angels*, p. 248.
Teresa of Avila

The concern to resolve a perceived opposition between the active and the contemplative life, necessitating a union of the roles of Mary and Martha, can be seen in the development of Carmelite spirituality under the influence of its chief reformer, Teresa of Avila. Despite a consuming mystical life, Teresa was active in the management and expansion of her order, accomplishing an astonishing amount of travel and writing for a woman often subject to debilitating spiritual and physical crises.\(^{27}\) Her own experience therefore necessitated a reconciliation of the demands of the world and of the spirit.

Teresa was aware of an existing hierarchy between the two vocations within convents, between the lay sisters who performed most of the practical tasks of cleaning, cooking, and other care of the community, and the choir sisters who were supposed to devote their time to prayer. Teresa describes how this hierarchy of vocations had fostered a sense of competition. “I believe that when those of the active life see the contemplative favored a little, they think there is nothing else to the contemplative’s life than receiving favors.”\(^{28}\) The division of roles between those devoted to prayer and those performing the physical labor of the community seems to have led to resentment among the nuns who felt burdened with practical cares.\(^{29}\) The opposition between active and contemplative vocations within the convent mirrors a larger conflict in post-Tridentine Catholicism,


\(^{29}\) On the reality of such tensions, between sisters explicitly identified with the Magdalene or with Martha, see Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, p. 186.
between religious orders dedicated to the active life—such as the Jesuits—or to the contemplative life—such as the Carmelites. This conflict was not a simple class or organizational struggle, however, but a fundamental inquiry about the divided nature of the believer who must be in the world and yet not of it. Teresa characterized the antagonism also as an internal struggle within the person who must combine attention to daily tasks with more esoteric spiritual pursuits.

It seemed to her [Teresa] that there was, in a certain way, a division in her soul… She complained of that part of the soul, as Martha complained of Mary, and sometimes pointed out that it was there always enjoying that quietude at its own pleasure while leaving her in the midst of so many trials and occupations that she could not keep it company.30

And yet the path of the contemplative was not all joy and quietude, but a severe and challenging labor of its own. Teresa writes of the “great penances” performed by the Magdalene, likening them to the hunger and suffering for God of Elijah, Francis, and Dominic.31 Despite her own predilection for ascetic withdrawal, manifested in inedia, periods of bodily incapacitation, and divine visions, she marvels at the Magdalene’s experience of God as something surely overwhelming. “I at times wonder what the feeling of the saints must have been. What must St. Paul and the Magdalene and others like them have undergone, in whom this fire of the love of God had grown so intense?”32

Between the intensity of contemplation and the exigencies of daily life, then, lies the space Teresa must negotiate for herself and her nuns, and she does so by exploring the relationship between Mary and Martha.

30 The Interior Castle, CWT 2:431-32.
31 The Interior Castle, CWT 2:448.
32 The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:188.
One of her most common approaches is to assert a communion between them, to be achieved within each individual. The description of how this happens comes from her own experience, as presented in the *Spiritual Testimonies*. “The will is completely occupied in God, and sees it lacks the power to be engaged in any other work. The other two faculties are free for business and works of service of God. In sum, Mary and Martha walk together.”\(^{33}\) Likewise, in *The Way of Perfection*, “This is a great favor for those to whom the Lord grants it: the active and the contemplative lives are joined… Thus Martha and Mary walk together.”\(^{34}\) And in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, it is explained that the soul is always able to withdraw in contemplation, even during active ministry. “Martha and Mary never fail to work almost together when the soul is in this state. For in the active–and seemingly exterior–work the soul is working interiorly.”\(^{35}\) In the *Interior Castle*, she addressed the potential objections of those who might not see this tandem work as possible or desirable. “You will make two objections: one, that He said that Mary had chosen the better part. The answer is that she had already performed the task of Martha, pleasing the Lord by washing His feet and drying them with her hair.”\(^{36}\) Where medieval monastic theology had often valued the contemplative over the active, Teresa proclaims an equality between them as vital roles that must coexist within the individual and at the communal level.

Part of establishing parity between Mary and Martha lies in correcting the prevailing hierarchy of roles by emphasizing Martha’s importance. In considering the

\(^{33}\) The other two faculties are the intellect and the soul. *Spiritual Testimonies*, no. 59 (1576), CWT 1:426.

\(^{34}\) *The Way of Perfection*, CWT 2:155.

\(^{35}\) *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, CWT 2:257.

\(^{36}\) *The Interior Castle*, CWT 2:448.
interior struggle Martha must have faced when Christ praised Mary, Teresa sides with the industrious sister in daring sympathy.

I sometimes remember the complaint of that holy woman, Martha. She did not complain only about her sister, rather, I hold it is certain that her greatest sorrow was the thought that You, Lord, did not feel sad about the trial she was undergoing and didn’t care whether she was with you or not. Perhaps she thought You didn’t have as much love for her as for her sister… Love made her dare to ask why You weren’t concerned… for love alone is what gives value to all things; a kind of love so great that nothing hinders it is the one things necessary.³⁷

Martha’s physical care for Christ is thus shown to emerge from a love that exists in parallel to Mary’s, so that both women do “the one thing necessary.” Just how necessary Martha’s part was offers Teresa an opportunity for subtle humor. Issuing instructions for her fellow religious about how to combine the vocations of contemplation and service, Teresa writes of the need for Martha’s practical work.

This is what I want us to strive for, my Sisters; and let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve… Believe me, Martha and Mary must join together in order to show hospitality to the Lord and have Him always present and not host Him badly by failing to give Him something to eat. How would Mary, always seated at His feet, provide Him with food if her sister did not help her?⁳⁸

Religious communities must be organized to provide for material needs as Martha did.

“St. Martha was a saint, even though they do not say she was contemplative… If she had been enraptured like the Magdalene, there wouldn’t have been anyone to give food to the divine Guest. Well, think of this congregation as the home of St. Martha and that there must be people for every task.”³⁹ Proper husbandry of both spiritual and tangible resources marks the right ordering of both the convent and the soul. Those who might

---

³⁷ Soliloquies, no. 5, CWT 1:448.
³⁹ The Way of Perfection, CWT 2:100; see also The Interior Castle, CWT 2:448.
think themselves above menial tasks are sharply rebuked. “There is a small lack of humility in wanting to raise the soul up before the Lord raises it, in not being content to meditate on something so valuable, and in wanting to be Mary before having worked with Martha.”

This emphasis on Martha’s importance is not only a commendation of the necessity of doing the business of life competently; it marks a theological stance. For Teresa, the believer must not only receive from God, but must give to God, in the form of service to Christ in the neighbor. We have seen this interpretation, in which the two sides of religious life represented by Mary and Martha must be joined in the individual Christian, since Augustine. The idea that passive reception of God’s grace must be paired with the active response of loving the neighbor is also characteristic of Luther’s theology, a correspondence noted by the Inquisition in its investigations of Teresa’s reform movement. In another reference to the Magdalene, Teresa paralleled Luther’s anti-scholastic assertion that the Christian can do nothing to prepare for grace, this time discussing the saint’s worldly life before her conversion. “Seeking God would be very costly if we could not do so until we were dead to the world. The Magdalene was not dead to the world when she found him, nor was the Samaritan woman or the Canaanite

---

40 The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:195.
41 See Constable, Three Studies, p. 18.
42 Antonio Pérez-Romero, Subversion and Liberation in the Writings of St. Teresa of Avila (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), p. 200, citing the criticism of the Dominican Alonso de la Fuente during the period 1589-91. On the threat posed by the Protestant license to interpret Scripture, which caused her Meditations to be ordered burnt: “She was ordered to burn this book, since it seemed… very unorthodox and dangerous for a woman to write about the Song of Songs… And since at the time Luther’s heresy was doing much harm, for it had opened the doors for ignorant women and men to read and explicate divine works,… it seemed to him that the book should be burned.” Written by her confessor, Gracian; cited in Weber, Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity, p. 117.
woman.” Teresa argues that Christ comes for sinners such as the Magdalene and the oft-married Samaritan woman, who are chosen by God for union with him. The faithful do not go seeking him in their own righteousness but accept salvation gratefully when it finds them.

Teresa’s attempt to reconcile the gratitude of the believer with the response of service, the contemplative with the active, was, according to Tessa Bielecki, “one of her dominant themes, addressed in each of her major works… Here Mary and Martha walk together, since ‘love turns work into rest.’ At this stage we gladly sacrifice the delights of solitude and prayer in order to serve.” At times the urgency of human need seems to push contemplation into the background, as an almost self-indulgent preoccupation that must be set aside in order to take up important work in the world. Teresa affirms the ultimate primacy of the “best part” of Mary, however, in describing the true loyalty of the soul, even as it busies itself with external works.

[On the third degree of prayer] In the prayer of quiet the soul didn’t desire to move or stir, rejoicing in that holy idleness of Mary; and in this prayer it can also be Martha in such a way that it is as though engaged in both the active and contemplative life together. It tends to works of charity and to business affairs that have to do with its state of life and to reading; although it isn’t master of itself completely. And it understands clearly that the best part of the soul is somewhere else.

In this way the mystic can pursue the Magdalene’s intimacy with the divine while in the midst of assuming Martha’s responsibilities. Elsewhere she is more explicit in identifying Mary’s contemplation as her model, describing herself as setting aside exterior demands

---

43 From “A Satirical Critique,” a series of comments made on a theological discussion held at the abbey of St. Joseph in Avila in 1576, including John of the Cross; see CWT 3:360-61.
44 Bielecki, Teresa of Avila, p. 186.
45 The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:153-54.
in order to welcome Christ more completely.\textsuperscript{46} “Since she believed that this Lord truly entered her poor home, she freed herself from all exterior things when it was possible and entered to be with Him… She considered she was at His feet and wept with the Magdalene, no more nor less than if she were seeing Him with her bodily eyes in the house of the Pharisee.”\textsuperscript{47}

The attraction of that intimate contact, for Teresa, is evident in her descriptions of the visions of Christ that she experienced. As she summarized them, “The Lord almost always showed Himself to me as risen… Sometimes He appeared on the cross or in the garden,” though it is unclear from Teresa’s text whether the garden here is the Gethsemane of the Passion or the garden where the Magdalene encountered Christ on Easter morning.\textsuperscript{48} Some of the sense of intimacy is earned by the perseverance of having endured as witness to Christ’s suffering, where others might have departed. Teresa uses the Magdalene’s faithfulness as an admonition to her peers, to persist in contemplation of the most harrowing passages of Christ’s life. “Whoever doesn’t want to use a little effort now to recollect at least the sense of sight and look at this Lord within herself… would have been much less able to stay at the foot of the cross with the Magdalene, who saw His death with her own eyes.”\textsuperscript{49} At other times, the reward of such steadfastness becomes evident. A detailed account of her sense of Christ’s presence alludes more closely to Mary Magdalene’s meeting with the newly risen Christ, from John 20.

\textsuperscript{46} On Teresa’s identification with the Magdalene as a source for her own authority, see Elena Carrera, \textit{Teresa of Avila’s Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Spain} (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2005), pp. 53-54, 173-74, 176.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{The Way of Perfection}, CWT 2:171-72.

\textsuperscript{48} Bielecki, \textit{Teresa of Avila}, p. 177.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{The Way of Perfection}, 2:135-36.
It seemed to me that Christ was at my side—I saw that it was He, in my opinion, Who was speaking to me. Since I was completely unaware that there could be a vision like this one, it greatly frightened me in the beginning; I did nothing but weep. However, by speaking one word alone to assure me, the Lord left me feeling as I usually did: quiet, favored, and without any fear.\textsuperscript{50}

Like the Magdalene, Teresa fails at first to comprehend the identity of her companion and her bewildered distress is expressed in copious weeping. The single word spoken, like the Magdalene’s name addressed to her by Christ in the garden, at once recalls her to the blessed closeness to the divine she had been seeking. Indeed, Teresa’s yearning for an intimacy such as Mary Magdalene knew with Christ is so palpable that she even “complains that Jesus loves Mary Magdalene more than herself”?\textsuperscript{51} This yearning is resolved in a vision that assures Teresa that she does, in fact, have the same union with Christ that the Magdalene had known. “One day in Toledo, Teresa was envying St. Mary Magdalene for the love our Lord had for her. The Lord then appeared to Teresa and said: ‘While I was on earth, I took her for my friend; but now that I am in heaven, I have chosen you.’”\textsuperscript{52}

The promise of a relation to the divine like that of the Magdalene encouraged an imitative piety that constitutes a strong element in Teresa’s teaching on the saint. Again, she begins with her own experience. Writing of her early in her life in the convent, she describes her desire to be like her model.

I was very devoted to the glorious Magdalene and frequently thought about her conversion, especially when I received Communion. For since I knew the Lord was certainly present there within me, I, thinking that He would not despise my tears, placed myself at His feet… (He did a great deal who allowed me to shed

\textsuperscript{50} Bielecki, Teresa of Avila, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{51} Bielecki, Teresa of Avila, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{52} Notes to the Spiritual Testimonies, no. 28, CWT 1:494.
them for Him, since I so quickly forgot that sentiment); and I commended myself to this glorious saint that she might obtain pardon for me.\textsuperscript{53}

The reliance on the good desire of the soul as a guide shows the influence of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.\textsuperscript{54} God is portrayed as encouraging the believer with such impulses, with the Magdalene again used as the exemplar for the proper response to God’s direction. “Since the soul receives permission to remain at the feet of Christ, it should endeavor not to leave that place. Let it remain there as it desires; let it imitate the Magdalene, for if it is strong, God will lead it into the desert.”\textsuperscript{55} The inverse of holy desire, the temptation of the desert, is also an experience through which one must follow Mary Magdalene. Teresa’s reading of God as testing strong souls with a dark night of the soul participates in the Counter Reformation spiritual practice of self-examination.\textsuperscript{56} Her self-conscious imitation of Mary Magdalene produces resolutions and reflections specifically associated with the liturgical observances for the saint, as she recounts in her \textit{Spiritual Testimonies}. “The desires and impulses for death, which were so strong, have left me, especially since the feast day of St. Mary Magdalene; for I resolved to live very willingly in order to render much service to God.”\textsuperscript{57} And in another year, on the same date: “On the feast of St. Mary Magdalene while I was reflecting on the friendship with our Lord I’m obliged to maintain and also on the words He spoke to me about this saint,

\textsuperscript{53} The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:101.
\textsuperscript{54} See Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, \textit{The Collected Letters of Teresa of Avila} 2, letter 228, n. 5.
\textsuperscript{55} The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:197.
\textsuperscript{57} Spiritual Testimonies, no. 17 (1571), CWT 1:394.
and having insistent desires to imitate her, the Lord granted me a great favor and told me that from now on I should try hard.”

The strength of this bond, and of the desire for it, is what prompts Teresa’s own writing, and she gives it as her justification for public testimony. On the irrepressible nature of the spiritual experience, producing a speech that cannot be denied, she writes, “I receive a very intense, consuming impulse for God that I cannot resist… this impulse makes me cry out and call to God.” This impulse led, at times, to frustration at not being able to pursue a more active vocation. The perception that she was teaching publicly, in contravention of the Pauline prohibition, was one of the charges for which Teresa was investigated by the Inquisition. In such circumstances, Teresa wrote, “A woman in this stage of prayer is distressed by the natural hindrance there is to her entering the world, and she has great envy of those who have the freedom to cry out and spread the news abroad about who this great God of hosts is.” This apparent tension ought to be resolved, in Teresa’s own counsel to her sisters, by a return to the understanding of the dual roles of Mary and Martha. In a discussion of the need to combine active service to the neighbor with contemplation, Teresa had attempted to address her reader’s objections to the challenges of this project. In addition to the objection that Mary’s has traditionally been interpreted as “the better part,”

The other objection you will make is that you are unable to bring souls to God, that you do not have the means; that you would do it willingly but that not being teachers or preachers, as were the apostles, you do not know how… Sometimes the devil gives us great desires so that we will avoid setting ourselves to the task

---

58 Spiritual Testimonies, no. 37 (July 22, no year), CWT 1:408.
59 Bielecki, Teresa of Avila, p. 185.
61 Bielecki, Teresa of Avila, p. 79.
at hand, serving our Lord in possible things, and instead be content with having desired the impossible. Apart from the fact that by prayer you will be helping greatly, you need not be desiring to benefit the whole world but must concentrate on those who are in your company.  

The humble work of Martha, among those nearest to her, is the religious woman’s best means of extending the fruit of contemplation beyond herself, and so joining in the Counter Reformation’s mission drive.

Exploring the relationship between Martha and Mary allowed Teresa to theorize about some of her chief concerns in ordering the spirituality of her fellow nuns as well as in discerning her own vocation. She did, however, also engage some of the other tropes from the Magdalene hagiographic tradition. The saint’s identity as penitent sinner provided Teresa with imagery for confessions of her sinfulness. Her characterization of her debt to divine mercy makes reference to the language of Luke 7. “What I owe God is much more since He has pardoned me more.” She resolves the question of divine justice by observing the unreasonable grace of God’s forgiveness of notorious sinners such as the Magdalene, or Paul, the persecutor of the early church. “[God] doesn’t grant [favors] because the sanctity of the recipients is greater than that of those who don’t receive them but so that His glory may be known, as we see in St. Paul and the Magdalene.”

While assuring believers of her experience of God’s pardon, Teresa maintains an emphasis on the penitent’s inherent unworthiness, an awareness that creates ongoing misery. “No relief is afforded for this suffering by the thought that our Lord has already

---

62 The Interior Castle, CWT 2:449-450.
63 The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:139.
64 The Interior Castle, CWT 2:285.
pardoned and forgotten the sins. Rather, it adds to the suffering to see so much goodness and realize that favors are granted to one who deserves nothing but hell. I think such a realization was a great martyrdom for St. Peter and the Magdalene."65 This attitude of perpetual torment over the burden of sin places Teresa in accord with orthodox Catholic doctrine, which had been reasserted in opposition to Lutheran teaching on the joyful comfort of the Gospel.66

Also demonstrating her Counter Reformation theological orientation is Teresa’s reading of Mary Magdalene’s conversion. Luther and his followers had noted the instantaneous nature of the Magdalene’s redemption as a model for all believers, and Teresa agrees that her change from sin to grace is swift, as it had been with Paul. “Look at St. Paul or the Magdalene. Within three days the one began to realize he was sick with love; that was St. Paul. The Magdalene knew from the first day; and how well she knew!”67 Though she celebrates the Magdalene’s insight, however, Teresa finds such a swift conversion anomalous and does not wish it to discourage her contemporaries from a lifetime’s labor of cooperating with their salvation. “What He did in a short time for the Magdalene His Majesty does for other persons in conformity with what they themselves do in order to allow Him to work.”68 The saint is held up as an example of God’s defense of those whom he favors, particularly vulnerable women. “Observe how the Lord answered for the Magdalene both in the house of the Pharisee and when her sister

---

65 The Interior Castle, CWT 2:398.
68 The Book of Her Life, CWT 1:199.
accused her.”

*Teresa’s sisters are left with the assurance that though they may face opposition in the reform of their order, God will protect them as he did the Magdalene who fled to his feet, both in contrition and in contemplation. “He defends these souls in all things; when they are persecuted and criticized He answers for them as He did for the Magdalene.”*

*Carmelite Spirituality*

Teresa’s reading of the saint influenced the piety of her Spanish followers, strengthening them to face attacks on her reform project. Faced with the challenge of increasingly strict *clausura* and the end of an autonomous reform movement, the Spanish Carmelite Maria de San José Salazar (1548-1603) appealed to the Magdalene to defend her order. A follower of Teresa of Avila, who served as mentor to her over a long correspondence, Salazar became prioress of the Discalced Carmelite convent in Seville after Teresa was ordered to leave by local ecclesial authorities. In 1590, she led “the nuns’ revolt,” appealing to Pope Sixtus V to have Teresian reforms safeguarded from interference by the clergy.

---

70 *The Interior Castle*, CWT 2:426.
73 Salazar, *Book for the Hour of Recreation*, pp. 8-9. She was imprisoned by the Inquisition several times over the course of her career for alleged sexual offenses, including an inappropriate relationship with the Carmelites’ first provincial, Jeronimo Gracian, and was finally exiled to a remote convent in Cuerva, where she died shortly after making the arduous journey.
Her *Book of the Hour of Recreation* was written in 1585 as a protest against a new provincial’s attempt to end the Discalced Carmelites’ daily practice of hours of recreation. The text is an imagined conversation between nuns during such an hour, participating in the literary genre of the Renaissance dialogue.\(^{74}\) The work was never published and survives only in a fragmentary manuscript copy, and must therefore be considered as evidence for a dissenting view on the Counter Reformation Magdalene, not as a popular interpretation.\(^{75}\) In the Eighth Recreation, Salazar offers a complex reading of scriptural examples of women speaking, centered on the post-resurrection appearance to the Magdalene.

Our sweet Master acted in favor of women with that kindness He showed them when He did not disdain to hold a long and lofty conversation with the Samaritan woman… teaching her and making her the one to divulge His holy word. We also know that He first revealed the most high mystery of His Resurrection to Mary Magdalene and the other Marys and commanded them to announce it to their brothers. So there is no reason for us to be excluded from speaking and communicating with God, nor should we be kept from telling of His greatness or from wanting to know of the teachings; and in this lies what should serve as a bridle to curb bold women. I say we should speak and know of the teachings, not that we should teach. I believe the Lord Himself showed Mary Magdalene this point when, after having revealed to her a mystery so high and so necessary to our faith, and having commanded her to be the messenger of this good news to the grieving apostles, He did not allow her to come to Him, saying, ‘Touch me not.’ For in this we can see that, although we may be allowed to tell of God’s greatness and to help our brothers, it is not ours to pry into mysteries.\(^{76}\)

Alison Weber notes that Salazar is proposing only a very limited engagement with religious teaching for women. They may announce teaching given to them, after the model of the Magdalene’s passing on the news of the resurrection, but they cannot engage in speculative theology; this is the exclusive province of men and any aspiration

\(^{74}\) Salazar, *Book for the Hour of Recreation*, p. 16.

\(^{75}\) Salazar, *Book for the Hour of Recreation*, pp. 22-23.

\(^{76}\) Salazar, *Book for the Hour of Recreation*, pp. 101-02.
to that kind of intellectual work is the “touching” prohibited by Christ’s *noli me tangere*.77 Even such a circumscribed vision of women’s public ministry, however, proved unacceptable to the church officials in authority over the Spanish Carmelites, as can be seen from the treatment of both Salazar and her neglected work.

Elizabeth Rapley has chronicled the influence of the Carmelite reform movement as it spread to France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and the influx of an attendant “feminine spirituality.”78 She notes that Pierre de Bérulle, the cardinal who oversaw the introduction of the Discalced Carmelite Order in France, saw the Magdalene as “the humble and fervent disciple of Jesus, sitting constantly at his feet, attentive to his word,” the pattern for the prayerful withdrawal from the world that characterized Carmelite life.79 This apparent emphasis on the cloister is somewhat misleading. The spirituality that flourished among French Carmelites in fact incorporated much of the reconciliation of active and contemplative vocations that Teresa and her followers had pursued with varying success in Spain.80

Still, the Carmelite ideal of flight from worldly temptation into the cloister remained a compelling image for many women, through the end of the seventeenth century. Indeed, it was so attractive that it lured at least one renowned courtesan, from the cohort who had their likenesses painted as sensual, pre-conversion Magdalenes, away from royal dalliances and into the cloister. Louise de la Vallière had been the Sun-King,
Louis XIV’s first mistress; she later regretted her position and fled to a Carmelite convent for the rest of her life.\textsuperscript{81} Given her history, an identification with Mary Magdalene is perhaps unsurprising. In her \textit{Reflexions sur la misericorde de Dieu} (1680), she wrote extensively about the saint. She addresses Christ, begging that he “above all look at me without ceasing as you looked at Mary Magdalene and allow me, like this holy penitent, to wash your feet with my tears, and in attempting to love you much, try to erase the multitude of my crimes.”\textsuperscript{82} Making a personal connection to the Magdalene might indicate recognition of a general sense of sinfulness and need for forgiveness but, as in this case, it might also spring from a self-understanding as a sexual sinner in parallel with the beautiful and promiscuous young woman who became the saint.\textsuperscript{83}

Dramatic conversions and amendments of life could follow from such identifications, producing zealous devotions to Christ that appeared of a piece with the unbridled passion of both the Magdalene’s sensuality and her asceticism. These very public conversions then themselves became the models for subsequent imitators, through autobiography or the records made by male confessors. The \textit{Reflexions} includes a section clearly intended to shape the piety of de la Vallière’s readers after the pattern of scriptural examples and, by implication, after her own pattern as well. Reflection 3 is titled, “On the virtues necessary to approach Christ, according to the example of the Canaanite woman,


\textsuperscript{83} Alison Weber has noted that Teresa of Avila may have felt guilt over a flirtation in her adolescence and thereby felt a connection to the Magdalene’s sinful sexual history; see Weber, \textit{Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity}, pp. 53-54.
the Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene.”84 She prays to Christ, with the three women as mediators, “In the name of these three holy women who, one might say, are still living witnesses of your mercy towards us, and who teach us what must be, in return, our hope in your goodness.”85 For de la Vallière, what the Magdalene and the other women witness is that which they have received: Christ’s merciful forgiveness of their sins. They teach other sinful women to hope chiefly by their example; if they can be pardoned and redeemed, so might the contemporary prostitute or mistress. They witness and teach, not by words spoken, but by the mutely eloquent testimony of their changed circumstances. The character of witness displayed in Vallière’s writing is one that informed the Carmelite appropriations of the Magdalene that we have explored in Teresa and her followers, as well. It is the witness of a transformed life, in which unifying the individual will to the will of God reconciles the divided nature—divided between sin and virtue, secular and sacred, action and contemplation—of the human person.

*Women and an Active Apostolate*

Despite the persistence of the penitential, ascetic Magdalene as an attractive model, demonstrated in the work of Louise de la Vallière, the central theme that emerges from a survey of Magdalene piety among early modern Catholic nuns is that of the need to combine the roles of Mary and Martha. Women felt the need to maintain their identity as contemplatives even in the midst of everyday tasks, to see mundane or public work as an expression of the passions and guiding of the interior life. The experiences of

---

Protestant and Catholic women have often been contrasted in the historiography of the period. Ruth Liebowitz, for example, described the “self-image” of women in the era of Reformation, comparing the situations of Protestant and Catholic women.

Whereas in Protestantism the rejection of the ideals of virginity, celibacy and religious vows made for a situation in which women’s religious life was restructured from the ground up, in Roman Catholicism women continued to pursue religious experience, though often in new ways, within the inherited framework of medieval ideals and forms. Women who sought an active apostolate were highly innovative in terms of defining new spiritual vocations and institutional structures appropriate to express them.86

I would argue that the early modern nuns’ effort to discern a spirituality of daily work that connected it to contemplation places them closer to Protestant women—and men—than has previously been understood. The concern to find sacred worth in secular vocations, so commonly ascribed to the Protestant reformers, was in fact a direction in which Catholic religious women also sought to reform their own rules of life. They maintained that charitable and teaching work, by their nature often done outside the cloister, were the purest expression of the contemplative’s union with God’s will.

Recent scholarship has explored the nature and scope of these reforming innovations. Among the most prominent examples of active female vocations are those of the Ursulines, founded by Angela Merici in the early sixteenth century.87 The new foundations called themselves congregations or societies, rather than a religious order, because they favored active, public ministries, such as teaching, nursing, and charitable work, rather than a cloistered vocation.88 The Ursuline Order in France was started in

87 See Querciolo Mazzonis, Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula (1474-1540) (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).
1592, with a teaching mandate. Even after the French Ursulines became a formal, enclosed order, the attempt to unite the vocations of Mary and Martha remained. Laurence Lux-Sterritt has argued that this image of cooperation between Mary and Martha was central to the self-understanding of the Ursulines. The Ursulines’ guidelines for the integration of teaching into convent life assert that they must remain contemplatives on the model of Mary of Bethany: “The sisters […] will not take charge of more boarders than their regular institute will permit, lest the continual occupation occasioned by these girls […] should cause them to lose the spirit of Mary, without which they cannot fulfill their vocations with dignity.” Lux-Sterritt claims that the enclosure of the Ursulines and the practices imitating enclosure of Mary Ward’s English Ladies represented both orders’ understanding that the cloistered, contemplative life was fundamental to the exercise of a public vocation. Mary Ward, and the Ursulines, interpreted an active apostolate as the most demanding, and therefore the highest form of penance. Less self-indulgent than pure contemplation, the “mixed life” of Mary and Martha was seen as a worthy sacrifice to offer to God, a conception not opposed to the Counter Reformation’s emphasis on penitential withdrawal, but situated deep within it, seeking the most rigorous possible retreat, a retreat from God into the world, for God’s sake.

---

89 Lierheimer, “Preaching or Teaching?” p. 214.
91 Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life*, p. 189; see also Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, pp. 90, 243.
Denied entry into an enclosed order—in this case, the Carmelites—Marguerite Bourgeoys pursued the mixed life as a missionary member of a lay confraternity dedicated to education. In an autobiographical reminiscence Marguerite Bourgeoys wrote about how her confessor’s counsel formed her understanding of possible vocations for women:

Monsieur Gendret once said to me that our Lord had left three states in which women could follow and serve the Church; that of Saint Mary Magdalen was observed by the Carmelites and other recluses, and that of Saint Martha by the cloistered religious who serve their neighbour; but that the outgoing life of the Blessed Virgin was not honoured as it should be, and that even without veil and wimple one could be truly religious.92

In Gendret’s formula, Mary Magdalene is clearly and exclusively associated with the cloistered contemplative life, as opposed to the kind of work in the world that Bourgeoys sought for herself and the women she led in Québec as missionaries. In describing the eremitic vocation of a colleague in New France, Jeanne le Ber, Bourgeoys associates Ber’s entry into seclusion with the Magdalene’s desert retreat. “M. Dollier, vicar general of the diocese and superior of the seminary, conducted her to the room built for this purpose, in the chapel but outside the main part of the house. He spoke to her exhorting her to perseverance. Like St. Magdalene in her grotto, she never went out and she spoke to no one.”93 Like Maddalena de’Pazzi, Bourgeoys herself seemed to be searching for a means of combining the supposedly disparate vocations of activity and contemplation, to be “truly religious” after the manner of a devout contemplative, while venturing outside of the constraints of that life in order to perform works of service. There is, for

---

Bourgeoys, a desirable humility in turning away from the rewards and status of a cloistered retreat, to embrace the hard work of mission. Bourgeoys also wrote, in distinguishing the two kinds of life, that

The contemplative life was ‘austere,’ ‘in the deserts.’ [This was a clear allusion to the image of Mary Magdalen living as a hermit in her later years, and hence to the Carmelites, whose patron she was.] But it was also the portion of the rich. The ‘little life’ of hard work and simplicity was ‘fitted to the condition of a poor woman.’

The new asceticism proposed here is one that welcomes not only a vow of material poverty, such as had always accompanied the religious life, but the spiritual poverty of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.”

Whether this impulse arose out of dissatisfaction with existing religious options in the cloister, or emerged to meet a perceived need in the world, is difficult to distinguish. Women such as Bourgeoys witnessed the role many convents played in society, as respectable retreats for aristocratic daughters and widows. While formal religious vows and a focus on contemplation offered precisely the challenging, rigorous vocation for which some women longed, others felt called to work beyond convent walls in education and mission. As Barbara Diefendorf has argued, “however powerful the contemplative model of religious life remained, it was not a life that suited all women with religious vocations… many pious women wanted to combine Martha’s part with Mary’s.”

Jeanne de Chantal’s Visitandines, a religious foundation of the late sixteenth century for lay women who wished to engage in charitable work, initially identified

---

94 Rapley, The Dévotes, p. 191.
95 Matthew 5:3, NIV.
97 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, p. 173.
themselves simply with Martha. They wanted to take the name *Filles de Sainte-Marthe*, expressing their active vocation by associating themselves with the Magdalene’s traditional opposite. While the Visitandines were initially envisioned as an unenclosed foundation, free to come and go as their work demanded, they became an enclosed order with formal religious vows in 1618. One means by which their charitable work could continue was through a form of cloistered mission work. Barbara Diefendorf has described the Visitandines’ supervision of a convent for reformed prostitutes, the *Filles de la Madeleine*. So Martha was finally to get the better of her wayward sister! Though the opposition of identities is suggested by the names associated with the orders, a more nuanced interpretation of roles for the Visitandines eventually emerged. In a letter advising Chantal, her mentor François de Sales offers counsel similar to Teresa’s, pleading that both kinds of life be possible for every person; to segregate women between actives and contemplatives is inhumane, and contrary to the divine will:

> Do you know how I would have wanted to resolve those differences?... I would have wanted Saint Martha, our dear patron, to come to the feet of our Lord in the place of her sister, and her sister to have gone off to finish preparing supper; in this way they would have shared the work and the repose like good sisters.

Male clergy, too, participated in establishing appropriate models for Counter Reformation women’s orders by entering into a renegotiation of the dialogue between Mary and Martha.

---

98 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, p. 176.
100 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, pp. 176-77.
Susan Dinan has chronicled another such innovative partnership between men and women in the organization of the Daughters of Charity, noting that its founders, Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, subverted the church’s institutional structures in order to achieve their goals for female ministry. According to Dinan, they

Conspired deliberately to deceive a host of local and Roman Catholic authorities in order to establish an active, public, and religious role for women. Both de Paul and de Marillac viewed acts of charity as central to Christian piety, they employed a variety of devices to circumvent the clear intent of the reformers at Trent, and to ensure that the women took an active role in caring for the poor.101

The usefulness of their work eventually became apparent to both church and civic authorities, which ultimately elected to tolerate and even protect their activity. This public ministry for women was made acceptable, at least in part, by a model of explicit subservience to the spiritual authority of male confessors.102

Women engaged images such as a re-imagined Mary in a new partnership with her sister, Martha, to articulate their sense of call to serve the Counter-Reformation church’s mission drives. Missiologists and scholars of religious history in America have contributed significant insights on the expansive possibilities for women working in the mission field as part of the Catholic Church’s early-modern programs of conversion and education in North America.103 The integration of new vocations and new images in this

work was a complex process, not without opposition. Allan Greer has examined the
problems the church faced in comprehending the work of active female religious in the
New World, as their biographers often struggled to describe these women in terms that
would meet the expectations of their readers.

In the seventeenth century… full hagiographic veneration was reserved for
mystic-ascetic women with far less active careers. The traditions of European
hagiography prepared Catholics to marvel more at the visions and inward spiritual
experiences of sickly nuns such as the Ursuline Marie de St-Joseph and the
hospital sister Catherine de St-Augustin.104

Yet even these nuns’ stories allude to the active aspects of the Magdalene tradition. The
female “invalids” managed to accomplish impressive feats simply in order to reach the
field of their work in the Americas. Both Marie de St-Joseph and Catherine de St-
Augustin had contemporary biographies which described their dangerous sea crossings
on the way to mission work, surely evoking, for many in the seventeenth century, Mary
Magdalene’s legendary sea journey to pagan France.105 Greer argues that traditional
gender roles were subverted by the saints of New France, where women were active
evangelists, while men were celebrated for passive endurance in martyrdom.106 Such
reversals of conventional assumptions must have posed challenges for authors and clergy
attempting to shape popular understanding of the religious activity being carried out in
the church’s name.

104 Allan Greer, “Colonial Saints: Gender, Race, and Hagiography in New France,” The William and Mary
105 1652, by Marie de l’Incarnation on Marie de St-Joseph; 1671, Paul Ragueneau on Catherine de St-
In Europe, parishioners could see and assess for themselves new models of women’s mission activity in aid of the Counter Reformation. Accounts of Ursuline catechizers resemble the medieval legends of Mary Magdalene converting pagans in Marseille, to the point of including conflicts with local officials, though those are now not pagan priests but Catholic aristocrats:

Anne de Vesvres went like a missionary from village to village… ‘She even reproved the local nobility for their injustices and frankly told them that they were offending God.’ The crowds that gathered around her, ‘both men and women,’ were so great that she sometimes simply sat down on the ground, and taught them as the Spirit dictated. 

The overwhelming crowds and her directness of approach to them recall not only the medieval Magdalene hagiography, but the descriptions of Christ himself preaching in the Gospels. Similar is the story of Geneviève Fayet, a lay woman who catechized French villagers and recorded an instance of her own public speaking “in the presence of their priest and at least one hundred people.” Like Marguerite Bourgeoys, Fayet was a member of a confraternity, in Fayet’s case the Dames de la Charité; their example indicates that some lay women also took up a public teaching ministry. Her teaching produced such devotion that it inspired one priest to express his wish “to be able to end his days near me… just to listen to the words that would come from my lips,” again alluding to the posture of the Magdalene listening at Christ’s feet, but with the female speaker in the place of Christ. Fayet and the biographer of Anne de Vesvres used these allusions to assert the popularity of their messages, arguing for legitimacy through

---

108 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, p. 227.
appeals to scripture and to early church models. Contemporary comparisons were made between Ursulines and male preachers, including John the Baptist and Paul.\textsuperscript{109}

Such direct endorsements of female apostolates could prove problematic, and they existed alongside more cautious negotiations of the conventions about women’s roles. The Paris \textit{Rules} for Ursuline congregations warned that “Ursulines should instruct visitors without seeming to preach.”\textsuperscript{110} Claude Martin, son and biographer of Marie de l’Incarnation, a missionary in Canada, defended her ministry by arguing that she was not an apostle herself, but rather a euphemistically termed, “apostolic woman,” who supported male apostles through her prayer.\textsuperscript{111} These efforts were part of a public demonstration of placing constraints on women’s ministry, a feature of Catholic rhetoric noted in the previous chapter. Though this rhetorical posture may not always have been tied to actual opposition to women’s church work it was, nevertheless, a factor with which women had to contend; at times they even engaged in it themselves. In Paris, Barbe Acarie, a prominent \textit{dévote} who had founded the Discalced Carmelite order in France, “was reproved from the pulpit for neglecting her responsibilities as a wife and mother,”\textsuperscript{112} establishing the history of a public counter-argument to Teresa’s reconciliation of the duty of Martha and the contemplation of Mary. Teresa herself had faced opposition to her work; other women were likewise vulnerable to claims that they faced opposition to their work.

\textsuperscript{109} Lierheimer, “Preaching or Teaching?” pp. 216-17.
\textsuperscript{110} Lierheimer, “Preaching or Teaching?” p. 219.
\textsuperscript{111} Lierheimer, “Preaching or Teaching?” p. 220. Teresa of Avila’s biographer, Father Yepes, found it desirable to make claims for his subject’s lack of presumption, reporting that she once rebuked a novice with a Bible, “Bible, daughter? Don’t come around here, we don’t need you or your Bible, for we are ignorant women and we only know how to spin and do what we are ordered.” Cited in Weber, \textit{Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity}, p. 106. Weber herself argues that Teresa’s informal diction constituted a similar tactic to avoid competition with male homiletic discourse; see p. 78.
\textsuperscript{112} Rapley, \textit{The Dévotes}, p. 17; see also Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, p. 21.
were seeking an improperly public role. Mère Perrette de Bermond, an Ursuline who preached and taught in Moulins, was celebrated by her male biographer for her “unusual activity,” but he also praised the male Superiors who eventually stopped her.\textsuperscript{113} Despite the discussions of women’s public ministry as threatening and unorthodox, especially in the early years of the Catholic Reformation, the church ultimately recognized the value of the work itself to individuals, communities, and institutions. The mixed life of Mary and Martha contributed to the vitality of early modern Catholicism, becoming an indispensable part of the network of social care and education in Catholic regions. Language that mitigated the appearance of radical change, couching the women’s work carefully in terms of teaching, rather than preaching, and that emphasized female humility, helped make new vocations for women acceptable to their society.

Women themselves recognized the apostolic nature of the work of teaching, and took different positions on how and when that mission could be accomplished by female voices. Some demonstrated ambivalence about their right to engage in it, an ambivalence born perhaps out of their own sense of themselves as women, but just as much arising from a conviction of humility. Marie Barbier, schoolmistress of Montréal, was to write [on teaching], “It is a sublime employment, worthy of the apostles; it is the continuation of the work of the Saviour; I have never performed it without fear and confusion.”\textsuperscript{114} The


\textsuperscript{114} Linda Lierheimer, “Preaching or Teaching?: Defining the Ursuline Mission in Seventeenth-Century France,” in Kienzle and Walker, eds., Women Preachers and Prophets, p. 154. Linda Lierheimer describes the self-conscious development of a “female apostolate” involved in charity, teaching, nursing, and mission during the Counter Reformation, and the tensions this caused. She notes that Ursulines (and their male supporters) defended their activity by making a distinction between acceptable teaching and inappropriate preaching, claiming that teaching was private, domestic work. See Lierheimer, Preaching or Teaching?,” pp. 213, 221-22.
justification of need, used by Protestants, seems to have served as an *apologia pro vita sua* for diffident Catholic women, too:

The sorry state of pastoral care at the beginning of the seventeenth century helps to explain why many Ursulines felt justified in taking on public roles that were traditionally the preserve of men… Stories about members of the clergy who did not tend to their flocks—and of Ursulines instructing them about how to do so—are commonplace in Ursuline histories and biographies.115

The case of need must be interpreted in a different way in looking at the art produced by early modern Catholic women. Following the Council of Trent, which had established a strongly directive program of pedagogical goals for religious art, artistic decisions were made based on a complex calculus of aesthetic and doctrinal considerations. John O’Malley cautions, however, against attributing too much control over artistic production to the church as a whole, but advises attending to interactions at the local level between artists, patrons, and ecclesiastical authorities as they interpreted Tridentine decrees.116 An examination of women’s connection to Mary Magdalene as artists and as patrons will therefore provide important insights into how early modern Catholic women negotiated institutional circumstances to frame their understanding of themselves as religious subjects.

*Religious Women as Artists*

---

115 Lierheimer, “Preaching or Teaching?” p. 215. Lierheimer argues that the church recognized the importance of the Ursulines’ teaching ministry for confessionalization and combating Protestantism, and allowed only it until that threat had passed, beginning the enclosure of Ursuline convents in the 1620s and 30s.

Identifications with the Magdalene are abundant in the work of female spiritual writers and monastic reformers of the Counter Reformation; such self-comparisons went a step further in the artistic production of women who authored plays and choral music in which they actually performed as the saint herself, actively taking on her persona but more than that, speaking their own words with her authority. The feast of Mary Magdalene was one of the days on which topical plays were produced at the convent of San Guglielmo in Bologna, for example.\textsuperscript{117}

This kind of dramatic self-identification was actively encouraged by Federigo Borromeo, one of the most important patrons of convent music and female composers in the Counter Reformation era. The Milanese cardinal encouraged Magdalene piety in his correspondence with women religious, using “the Magdalen as a model for nuns (by virtue of her penitence and contemplation).”\textsuperscript{118} Borromeo’s female monastic correspondents frequently referred to themselves in their letters as the bride from the Song of Songs, repeating the imagery in the motet repertory of the convent choirs, as well as following his explicit direction.\textsuperscript{119} Borromeo’s Letter 30 tells the reader to think of herself as the spouse in the Song of Songs. The intimacy of this relationship makes the Magdalene, and therefore the contemporary nun, a true disciple of Christ:

So then, you should do the office of the sweetest disciple Magdalene, who was a disciple of Christ... Oh true disciple at what hour would you think to go? [A reference to the Magdalene’s visit to the tomb at dawn.] I will pray that you be the most devoted to the Magdalene, because in love she can be the mistress of all

\textsuperscript{117} Elissa Weaver, \textit{Convent Theater in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women} (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 61.
\textsuperscript{118} Kendrick, \textit{Celestial Sirens}, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{119} Kendrick, \textit{Celestial Sirens}, p. 169.
souls… Yet take for your advocate this Magdalene, because she is the sweetest and greatest, resting in peace with the contemplatives.  

The title of disciple was again applied to the Magdalene and her imitators in Letter 83, “The thought has come to me of calling you by the… name of disciple,… of this great disciple, Magdalene, who so loved the Savior.”  

In Letter 15, written for her feast day, the reason for her discipleship is made clear, using language drawn from the Gospel text for the feast, Luke 7:47: she is the same woman who was forgiven at the house of Simon the Pharisee. “This is the feast of the Magdalene, who was a disciple of love, and was so because she loved much [Borromeo gives the final clause in the liturgical Latin].”  

Borromeo also drew on the medieval hagiography for his Magdalene imagery. In letter 10, he writes about Mary Magdalene being lifted up by the angels in the daily ravishing she was said to have experienced during her desert sojourn.  

His encouragement worked. Borromeo’s spiritual direction inspired one of his female correspondents, Suor Aurelia Maria at the convent of S. Caterina, Brera, to write:

Bitterly I prayed my Lord, with humility, that He would reveal to me what He wanted of me… and I seemed to hear an inner voice which said, ‘Why are you crying, my daughter?’ and this made me break out in greater tears than before; and I saw St. Mary Magdalene, when she mourned at the Tomb, and the Lord asked her, ‘Woman, why are you mourning?’ and she responded, ‘They have taken away my Lord and I don’t know where they put him; if you took Him, tell

\[\text{References}\]


me and I will take Him.’ And that is how my soul could respond, and it did; namely, I find myself without, deprived of my Lord’s presence, and I don’t know why.  

Aurelia Maria compares her own sorrowful weeping to that of the mourning Magdalene at the tomb. The shared grief makes possible a parallel dialogue with Christ, even as it arises from a sense of despairing absence. The language she used was likely suggested by Federigo’s own application of the Magdalene as a model, but it also drew on the nuns’ musical environment. Contemporary motets featuring Mary Magdalene included Dic nobis, Maria, by Agostino Soderini, published as part of his collection, Sacrae cantiones a 8-9, in 1598, featuring the exchange from the Victimae paschali laudes.  

Published in the same year, Giuseppe Gallo’s Sacer opus musici… liber primus, contained Ecce angelus de caelo, with a “Dialogismum Angeli cum mulieribus.” Both of these compositions were based on the synoptic Gospels. As Robert Kendrick has observed, “Easter dialogues of angels and the women at the Tomb, both favorite models among Borromeo’s similes for sisters, would have a long tradition in nuns’ polyphony.”  

Not only were Milanese nuns surrounded by music and guided by clergy describing the life of the Magdalene; they also hymned her in their own words. Chiara Margarita Cozzolani composed a motet dialogue on the Magdalene at the empty Tomb in 1650. Cozzolani (1602-ca. 1676) was part of the second generation of nuns under the leadership of Federigo Borromeo, a generation more concerned, according to Kendrick,

---

124 Kendrick, Celestial Sirens, p. 168.  
125 Kendrick, Celestial Sirens, p. 223.  
126 Kendrick, Celestial Sirens, p. 222.  
127 Kendrick, Celestial Sirens, pp. 222-23.
with “internal spiritual states” than with outward manifestations of severe asceticism. She was from a wealthy family, served as abbess and prioress of her convent, and composed and published choral music between 1640 and 1650. Unlike Soderini and Gallo, Cozzolani used the Johannine narrative for her Easter motet, which gives the Magdalene a more detailed role than the Synoptic versions. She makes the association with the Song of Songs, in the line, “Dilectus meus... crucifixus Jesus est.” Kendrick argues that this connection is not merely a rote repetition of a traditional association, but served to enliven the text for its performers and audience. Cozzolani, he writes, “expand[s] the brief and fairly cold interchange at the Tomb by use of canticle verses and free text into the kind of emotive, affect-laden statement of Mary’s grief and questing for Jesus that was central to sisters’ own consideration of themselves as female religious and believers.” The mood of the piece as a whole is joyous and hopeful, painting a positive picture of convent life, Kendrick concludes; with a “clear portrayal of the central themes in female monastic spirituality, emphasis on the Magdalen, and overall tone of Christian optimism, it sums up the intellectual atmosphere of the post-Federican generation.”

Just as it is possible to find rich examples of a vigorous Magdalene devotion among nuns reflecting artistically on their own spiritual lives, there is also evidence of female artists applying Magdalene imagery to the religious roles of men. The English noblewoman, Helena Wintour, embroidered vestments for male Catholic clergy in the mid-seventeenth century. Her work uses garden imagery suggestive of both the garden in

130 Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens*, p. 335.
which Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene and the archetypal bower in the Song of Songs.133 The man celebrating the Eucharist, clothed in visual references to Eden and Gethsemane and to the Magdalene’s gardens, enacted within himself the Fall and redemption of humanity, which would have reminded the assembled congregation of themselves as the sinful, yet forgiven, woman in the garden, the Magdalene as everyman.

Secular Women as Authors and Patrons

A survey of Magdalene imagery adopted by secular women attests to the ubiquity of the saint in the life and work of the laity, as well as to demonstrate the creativity with which she was used to meet the needs of women’s particular circumstances. Mary Magdalene’s retreat from the world, from the sorrowful city into the joyful garden where she found an ecstatic intimacy with Christ, served as a model for contemplatives both male and female in the secular context, just as she did for avowed religious. One early example of this practice is Ludovica Torelli, Countess of Guastalla. Widowed in 1527, she felt called to the contemplative life and took the Magdalene as her pattern of perfect conversion, engaging in contemplative prayer at her court and working with a confessor to shape a life of holy hermitage.134 The connection between the Magdalene and sacred retreat persisted through the early modern period; it was allegorized in a seventeenth-century French devotional work, Antoine de Nervège’s L’Hermitage de l’Isle saincte (1612), in which the Magdalene’s body, which shared in Christ’s physical suffering,

becomes the hermitage into which the reader can retreat.\textsuperscript{135} So prevalent did the Magdalene’s association with ascetic withdrawal for the laity become, that a fashion arose for princely retreats located in lonely and wild places, known as Magdalene cells. Ingrid Maisch has chronicled the phenomenon in southern Germany as late as the early eighteenth century, at Rastatt and Nymphenburg.\textsuperscript{136} The same saint who led the world-weary into the wilderness, however, was also adapted, throughout this period, by secular women in positions of political leadership, as an appropriate provider of spiritual solace for a woman forced forth into society at need.

For example, Mary Magdalene’s contemplative, penitential image was used in support of the regency of Archduchess Maria Magdalena in Florence, at the turn of the seventeenth century. The association suggested by her name may well have played a part in fostering the archduchess’s devotion to the Magdalene, who was the saint most featured in art of her patronage.\textsuperscript{137} The archduchess commissioned a painting cycle of Mary Magdalene’s life for her private chapel at Poggio Imperiale, and her villa contained more than twenty-five other paintings of the Magdalene.\textsuperscript{138} Joining in the trend of aristocratic portraiture in the guise of the Magdalene, Maria Magdalena had herself painted as the saint by Justus Sustermans, ca. 1625-30. She appears with all of the typical Baroque iconography: her hair down, clasped hands and a gaze directed upwards, the ointment jar at her feet, a cross in the background, and a memento mori skull next to her,

\textsuperscript{135} Woshinsky, \textit{Imagining Women’s Conventual Spaces in France, 1600-1800}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{136} Maisch, \textit{Mary Magdalene}, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{138} Harness, \textit{Echoes of Women’s Voices}, p. 55.
though the tone of the painting suggests not so much sensuality as a spiritual longing.\textsuperscript{139}

The duchess and her family celebrated the feast of Mary Magdalene each year with a Mass followed by a ceremonial dinner and the performance of a play about the saint.\textsuperscript{140} Riccardo Riccardi’s \textit{Conversione di Santa Maria Maddalena} had been written to form part of the festivities for the marriage between Maria Magdalena and Cosimo de’ Medici in 1608. A surviving manuscript version of the play contains the following stanza:

\begin{quote}
And here, to the new goddess of Florence,  
Whence she is happy and serene,  
O gracious Astraea of Austria and Graz [the birthplace of Maria Magdalena],  
I want to reenact, on this humble stage,  
The lofty conversion of the Magdalen;  
Of your Magdalen, whom you so honor,  
For her name and her virtue adorn you.\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

The action of the play focuses on the penitent, weeping Magdalen in her grotto.\textsuperscript{142} Kelly Ann Harness contends that this focus on the contemplative penitent characterized the duchess’s private piety related to the saint, while for state performances the heroines chosen were those who performed more public deeds, such as the early Christian virgin martyrs or Judith, emphasizing important virtues for a female leader. So the identity of Mary Magdalene that was valued by the archduchess was not the public preacher boldly carrying the Gospel around the Mediterranean world, but the impassioned soul yearning for Christ.\textsuperscript{143}

Other secular women in positions of power also seemed to find the life and image of the Magdalene appealing, whether because of a natural connection in their family

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{139} Harness, \textit{Echoes of Women’s Voices}, fig. 2.3.  
\textsuperscript{140} Harness, \textit{Echoes of Women’s Voices}, p. 56.  
\textsuperscript{141} Harness, \textit{Echoes of Women’s Voices}, p. 58.  
\textsuperscript{142} Harness, \textit{Echoes of Women’s Voices}, pp. 58-61.  
\textsuperscript{143} Harness, \textit{Echoes of Women’s Voices}, p. 61.  
\end{flushright}
history, or due to a perceived sympathy between the Magdalene’s life and their own. The French rulers were especially likely to associate themselves with the Magdalene because of her legendary conversion of the pagan king in Provence. Interestingly, there were three female regents in the French royal family who made the identification through their artistic patronage, just as Maria Magdalena did during her regency in Florence. As we have seen, Louise of Savoy, a prominent female regent during the earliest years of the Reformation era, had included the Magdalene in her piety and patronage. She commissioned the *Vie de la Magdaleine* from François Demoulins de Rochefort, making the traditional connection between the Magdalene and the Burgundian royal house for both political and personal reasons.\(^{144}\) The precedent of a special relationship between the Magdalene and French female leaders influenced regent queens through the seventeenth century, even after the transition from the Valois to the Bourbon dynasty. Marie de Medici donated a chapel with a decorative scheme depicting the penitent Magdalene to the Carmelite order in Paris, in 1611.\(^{145}\) In the mid-seventeenth century, Anne of Austria commissioned decoration from Philippe de Champaigne for her suite at the convent of Val-de-Grace when she retired there following the end of her own responsibilities as French regent. The dominant elements of the interior are a painting of Mary Magdalene paired with a depiction of the assumption of the Virgin Mary. Both provide images of female escape from the world into the life of the Spirit, symbolizing Anne’s desired

---

\(^{144}\) Erhart and Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene*, p. xxxiii.

\(^{145}\) *Chroniques de l’ordre des Carmélites*, 1:156-57, 236.
retreat from the demands of court life. In none of these royal examples does the Magdalene’s identity as a prostitute receive emphasis, and her preaching career is also not of apparent interest. In all cases, her special intimacy with Christ is the characteristic most desired as a model for relief from the rigors of a political career, and also, perhaps, as bestowing the quality of holiness that may have given authority to women who would not ordinarily have taken up such public roles.

Not all women experienced the tensions between Christian humility and a public vocation, as two examples of seventeenth-century female authors indicate. The French philosopher and author Marie de Jars de Gournay (who had produced editions of Montaigne and Roman classics) celebrated the Magdalene as a hopeful precedent for women’s public speech. She deployed the saint to feminist purpose in her treatise, “Egalité des hommes et des femmes,” (1622) arguing against the exclusion of women from the priesthood. Gournay appealed specifically to the medieval trope of the apostola apostolorum, identifying a surviving reference to her as such in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy. In a passage addressing Paul’s prohibition on women’s speech from 1 Corinthians 14, Gournay notes exceptional women, from the scriptural Phoebe to the legendary daughter of St. Peter, who had held public roles in the church. In her catalogue, she includes Mary Magdalene as perhaps the greatest of such exceptions.

And so also the Magdalene is called in the Church ‘Equal to the Apostles’ by the apostles. (marginal note: Among others, in the Greek liturgical calendar, published by Génebrard.) See how they themselves and the Church permitted an

---

147 Gössmann, “Maria Magdalena als Typus der Kirche,” p. 60.
exception to this rule of silence for she who preached for thirty years in La-
Baume-de-Marseilles, according to all of Provence.  

Gournay takes up the Magdalene’s legendary preaching career, which had moved to the
background in many seventeenth-century iterations of the saint’s life. She locates Mary
Magdalene within the tradition of female prophets. Making her argument for an active
ministry for women from outside the confines of the church hierarchy, Gournay clearly
had greater freedom to appropriate those aspects of the Magdalene’s identity that served
her rhetoric, than had those women who had to justify their authority in positions of
political leadership. She was also able to explore images of female activity without
wrestling with the requirements of silence and humility, as did avowed religious women.

Though Gournay may have achieved such freedom, secular women did
sometimes face opposition to their public testimony of faith. Articulations of the
experience of union with Christ could create official suspicion, as happened to Jeanne
Guyon (1648-1717). Guyon was born into a wealthy family. She had wanted to become a
nun but was married off by her parents at a young age. A celebrated beauty in court
society, she wrote that following her marriage she had been “tempted by the worldly life
of Paris.”  

Influenced by François de Sales’s Introduction to the Devout Life, she wrote
her own devotional manual, A Short and Easy Method of Prayer.  

As with Maddalena
de’ Pazzi and Teresa of Avila, part of Guyon’s religious enthusiasm was directly inspired

---

148 Marie de Jars de Gournay, Égalité des homes et des femmes; Grief des dames, suivi du Proumenoir de
Also cited in Conley, The Suspicion of Virtue, p. 108.
150 Ward, “Madame Guyon,” p. 163; The Prison Narratives of Jeanne Guyon, eds. Ronney Mourad and
by the confrontation with Protestantism. Patricia Ward describes her “sense of ‘apostolic mission’” and her understanding of a call to convert Protestants.  

The two primary spiritual turning points in her life occurred on the feast of Mary Magdalene, and her interpretations of those events feature language that makes the association between the saint and the bride in the Song of Songs. In the vision from July 22, 1676, she experienced a spiritual marriage to Christ, in which she saw herself as united to him in suffering, as his spouse. The dowry of this marriage was “crosses, scorn, confusion, opposition, ignominy… These words were first placed in my mind, that he would be ‘a bridegroom of blood.’ Since then he has taken me so strongly as his own, that he has perfectly consecrated my body and my mind unto himself by the cross.” On July 22, 1680, she experienced another feeling of unity with God, but this time in joy, with a profound sense of the forgiveness of sins and newness of life. After the death of her husband, Guyon entered the Ursuline convent at Thonon in 1682, then began to practice automatic writing, feeling that in this state she was communicating as God’s “instrument.” The church was critical of her writing, particularly of the claims about mystical experience, which was perceived as dangerously idiosyncratic by contrast with the practice of participation in the church’s sacramental program. The “links between female sanctity and heresy” that were personified in the Middle Ages as a conflict between the orthodoxy of Peter and the prophecy of Mary Magdalene persisted into the

---

early modern period as a suspicion of women’s intimate, personal encounter with the
divine in mystical visions.\textsuperscript{157} Guyon was tried for heresy and imprisoned for the final
years of her life. As such, her work has had little influence in the Catholic tradition, but
she was celebrated among Pietists, both during her lifetime and since, for an interior
spirituality that they found sympathetic to their theology. Only her commentary on the
Song of Songs was published during her lifetime, but her poetry was published
posthumously and cherished by Protestants, especially of the Radical Reformation
traditions.\textsuperscript{158} Like the work of Maria de San José Salazar, then, Guyon’s interpretation of
the Magdalene must remain a record of possibility that she strove to keep alive, rather
than a representation of popular piety.

Conclusion

The Magdalenes that emerge from women’s writing, patronage, and artistic
production in early modern Catholicism testify to both the possibilities and the challenges
for women’s vocations during a creative and turbulent era. A rich variety of Magdalene
images were adapted to meet the needs perceived by women in their spiritual lives. As
women negotiated their place within the Counter Reformation’s religious culture, they
most often turned to the relationship between Mary and Martha to assert the necessity of
an active expression for a contemplative vocation. This was a negotiation difficult but
rewarding, between the demands and expectations of institutional life, and the ineffable
call of the spirit. Women such as Teresa of Avila insisted, when they praised the

\textsuperscript{157} Hsia, \textit{The World of Catholic Renewal}, p. 146. See above, ch. 1.
contemplative Magdalene, that she must represent one part of a whole life, reconciled
with her more pragmatic sister to achieve the will of God in the self and for the world.
Alongside this innovation, with its effect on the institutions of religious life, charity, and
education, evidence exists for the continued presence of the preaching Magdalene of the
Johannine resurrection narrative. She was celebrated among early feminist authors and
Protestant sympathizers but was also a model for religious women discerning their
identity as bearers of the incarnate Word, through longstanding expressions of the
contemplative life, such as prayer and music.159

The penitent Magdalene also remained a central focus of devotion, from spiritual
writers contemplating human sinfulness to secular leaders seeking an escape from the
press of worldly responsibility—and who may have found their positions paradoxically
strengthened by a posture of preferring her humility. There is less evidence, though, of
women voluntarily assigning themselves the role of degraded sexual sinner. The
troubling nature of an eroticized, debased Magdalene may explain some women’s desire
to explore alternate models for self-identification, such as an industrious Martha or the
Virgin Mary. For those women who participated in the practice of having themselves
portrayed as the penitent Magdalene, it is difficult to determine the deciding power
behind the choice: did it lie with the women themselves, with the artists anxious to create
a successful genre piece, or with the men who would in most cases have commissioned
the works? For the aristocratic mistresses who were the subjects of many of these

159 On the question of ascribing “feminist” projects, such as arguing for the authority to speak in public, to
early modern women, see Merry E. Wiesner, “The Early Modern Period: Religion, the Family, and
Women’s Public Roles,” in Religion, Feminism, and the Family, eds. Anne E. Carr and Mary Stewart van
149-65.
paintings, any religious impulse behind the connection seems doubtful. The association with a notoriously beautiful prostitute added sensual mystique to their court personas and prestige to their royal lovers; the Magdalene’s eventual redemption gave a merely superficial corrective to otherwise amoral iconography. When the commission came from its female subject, such as in the portrait of Archduchess Maria Magdalena of Florence as the Magdalene, the devotional goals of the painting are expressed in the composition, especially in the depiction of a less sexualized, more contemplative figure.

When viewing the paintings of the eroticized Magdalene, or reading the rhetoric of the Counter Reformation, it can appear as though the male clerics of that movement were determined to force the Magdalene, and all religious women with her, to vanish behind convent walls in order to preserve a ladylike sainthood—or to retrieve a damaged womanhood, in the case of the image presented to former prostitutes. The cloistered life that the Magdalene represented in that rhetoric did, indeed, hold great power for early modern Catholic women; many sought its disciplines in grateful retreat while others were forced into involuntary confinement. Women did not simply receive those images and institutions, however; they themselves shaped and transformed them. Counter Reformation culture presents a diverse picture of Magdalene imagery as it was preached and then adopted for a variety of projects by Catholic women. The rhetorical posture of the church, in which the Magdalene was emphatically rejected as a precedent for lay and female preaching, contrasts with the profusion of Counter Reformation Magdalenes that women used in the service of contemplative and active vocations. Through their persistence and resourcefulness, the Magdalene remained their own: a flexible, potent
model of female sanctity in a variety of expressions. Next we will turn to an examination of the Protestantism that took shape in tandem with the Counter Reformation, looking at how the communities and authors of the Reformed traditions defined their own Magdalenes in opposition and response to Catholic models.
Chapter Six
The Magdalene of the Reformed Tradition

A discrepancy between clerical exegesis and doctrine on the one hand and popular practice on the other is evident in the Magdalene interpretations of the Reformed tradition, just as it was in Counter Reformation religious culture. Although the attitude to the saint that emerged early in the Reformation, in the preaching of Luther and his colleagues, included both an embrace of the character of her piety and a qualified use of her example for universal evangelism, this approach was not shared across the Protestant world.

There were reformers who argued against women’s public preaching by refusing to allow that Mary Magdalene was anything but an exception in this regard, criticizing her maudlin behavior or the credulity of the followers of her cult, and taking up Lefèvre d’Étaples’s deconstruction of her entwined identities. This school of Magdalene interpretation characterized the Reformed tradition from its beginnings in Calvin’s exegesis of New Testament pericopes involving Mary Magdalene. Calvin had an ambivalent relationship to the Magdalene pericopes and Calvin’s interpretation, much different from Luther’s, exerted a profound influence over the image of the Magdalene in Reformed preaching and discourse. Far from praising her role and conduct as exemplary, as Luther and his followers had done, Calvin contended that her preaching, like that of other women in the Bible, serves principally to shame educated men who ought themselves to be preaching and teaching correct doctrine. And where Lutheran pastors commended the Magdalene’s emotional expressions of devotion to Christ, Calvin
dismissed her weeping at Christ’s tomb as a feminine display of “idle and useless” emotion.¹

The Reformed rejection of emotional piety, the legacy of Calvin’s own teaching and preaching, has been documented by Susan Karant-Nunn in her study, *The Reformation of Feeling*. She argues that “the establishment of greater distance between the individual soul and its divine Progenitor is a feature of Reformed preaching in general.”² This character for Calvinist preaching would mean that one major focus of the Magdalene tradition, the intimacy of her relationship with Christ, would not be an effective carrier of Calvin’s theology. Calvin’s aim in preaching was not to console his audience with the promise of an almost familial connection to the divine (arguably one of the chief elements of Lutheran homiletics), but rather to convey the seriousness of the human predicament.³ He avoided preaching about Christ’s suffering almost entirely,⁴ leaving it unlikely that he would have dwelt on Mary Magdalene’s compassion with that suffering. Instead he hoped to impress his audience with an appalled sense of the total depravity of human nature: “Everything that humankind is able to contrive in his spirit is

---

nothing but unseemliness and vanity. From our infancy we show that we are steeped in all the infection of sin."\(^5\)

Calvin’s evident disapproval of Mary Magdalene as an exemplar for believers did not, however, prove definitive for the Reformed tradition. Philip Benedict has observed the dichotomy between theology and practice in the Reformed tradition, paralleling the contradictions within early modern Catholicism. “In alerting historians to the large gap that often existed between the parish-level practices of a given religion and its formal rules and doctrines, the new social or anthropological history of early modern religion has revealed how risky it is to infer the psychological experience and social behavior of the members of a given faith from its theology.”\(^6\) Complicating this divergence was a diversity across the Reformed communities of different regions, in institutional structures and in patterns of devotion.\(^7\)

This chapter will explore the variety of Magdalenes available in the religious cultures of communities that claimed allegiance to Calvin’s theology, looking especially at England as providing a remarkable diversity and depth of Reformed interpretations of the saint. The Magdalene was adopted in English drama and poetry to express aspects of Reformed teaching, including the ideal of penitence, the nature of salvation, and a memorial understanding of the Eucharist. The Magdalene’s role in the cultural transmission of Calvin’s theology is not, however, the sole focus of a poetic tradition that also features intricate biographical narratives, incorporating aspects of her legendary

---


\(^7\) Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, pp. xx-xxi.
history and celebrating her emotional attachment to Christ. Such literary portraits, appearing alongside stern Puritan homilies, can reveal a surprising range to the Reformed devotional repertoire. Perhaps the common element that can be identified among Reformed Magdalenes is the seriousness of the attempt to reconcile her image with theology faithful to Calvin’s teaching, even though this resulted in very different readings across the Reformed world.

*Calvin’s Exegesis on Mary Magdalene*

Calvin’s work with the Magdalene was limited to her role in the resurrection narrative and his interpretation of her restricted her still more, through a diminishing of her agency and character. Calvin published his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* in 1553, two years before his work on the Synoptics, indicating the importance the Johannine text held for his theology. The high Christology conveyed in John comes for Calvin at the expense of Mary Magdalene, who acts as a debased counterpoint to divine Providence, and even to the righteousness of the elect, the other disciples. The male disciples had often been compared unfavorably to Mary Magdalene in the tradition, a trope Luther upheld, but Calvin takes a different approach. In his explication of the Easter morning narrative, Calvin reads Peter and John sympathetically, excusing them both for leaving the tomb and for not yet having faith in the resurrection. Indeed, expecting faith at that point would have been nonsensical, he argues, until it had been confirmed by experience and reason. “Their faith was not strong, but was only some confused

---

remembrance of the miracle and resembled a trace, until it was more fully confirmed; and
indeed, a strong faith could not be produced merely by the sight which they had beheld.”

If Peter and John are not at fault for a lack of faith in circumstances that did not
yet warrant belief, those who did remain at the tomb—the women—must have done so
unfoundedly. What were their reasons, then?

As to the women remaining at the sepulcher, while the disciples return to the city,
they are not entitled to great accommodation on this account; for the disciples
carry with them consolation and joy, but the women torment themselves by idle
and useless weeping. In short, it is superstition alone, accompanied by carnal
feelings, that keeps them near the sepulcher. Calvin deliberately scorns previous interpretations praising the women’s loyalty and is
instead careful to give the women no comparative praise for remaining when the men had
fled. The male disciples had already, apparently, seen enough to give them hope until the
resurrection would be confirmed by an appearance from Christ. The women stay only to
indulge in excessive grief, fueled by their natural tendency to look for some occult
explanation, or else because they are simply in thrall to primitive emotions. Grouping the
women and their reactions together, as in the other three Gospels, Calvin purposefully
rejects the unique Johannine focus on Mary Magdalene. Calvin surmises that Mary was
most likely not alone in returning to the tomb after Peter and John had left, but that she
was probably accompanied by the other women, thus reducing the attention she seems to
deserve if one follows John’s account.

Whether she was alone or with the other mourning women, Calvin pauses in his
narrative to marvel over the particular unworthiness of any women as witnesses to the

---

resurrection: “What an amazing forbearance displayed by our Lord, in bearing with so many faults in Mary and her companions! … One purpose, surely, which Christ had in view in selecting the women, to make the first manifestation of himself to them, was to fill the apostles with shame.”\textsuperscript{12} Even though Peter and John have already been exempted from censure for having left the scene, Calvin here ensures that any remaining blame that might attach to the absent male disciples serves as explanation for the puzzling fact of Christ’s having chosen such miserable vessels for the \textit{euangelion}.

Mary herself is shown to be the worst of a bad lot. The women as a group had already been condemned for their inappropriate tears, but Calvin interprets the angel’s question in John 20:13, “Woman, why are you weeping?” not as evidence of cosmic incomprehension of human ignorance, almost a divine jest on so joyful a morning, but rather as a solemn rebuke. He notes that “the angel reproves Mary for her excessive weeping, [for which there is] no reason,”\textsuperscript{13} implicitly contrasting Mary to Peter and John, who were praiseworthy for their reasonable behavior, because they had failed to credit a resurrection with no sensible proof. He then ponders why the Magdalene does not recognize Jesus as soon as he appears, deciding that the fault lies with her eyes. Calvin acknowledges that both she and the male disciples were kept in ignorance by God, but more than that, he claims that their eyes were “bewitched by the world and by Satan, that they may have no perception of the truth.”\textsuperscript{14} Among the witnesses present on Easter Sunday, Mary is the most pointed example of a person so bound by sin that her intellect and perceptions are clouded. “In Mary we have an example of the mistakes into which

the human mind frequently falls.”  

Calvin then addresses an inconsistency between the different Gospel resurrection narratives, again using the occasion to heap special opprobrium on Mary Magdalene. The other women, in the Synoptic accounts, are portrayed as being allowed to touch Christ’s feet (e.g., Matt. 28:9) to assure themselves of his resurrection, but Mary takes this impulse too far, according to Calvin. In her attempt to reach out and embrace the risen Christ she has gone “to excess… perceiving that their attention was too much occupied with embracing his feet, he restrained and corrected that immoderate zeal.”  

Where Luther had taken pains to contradict medieval readings of the noli me tangere text, arguing that Mary Magdalene simply did not yet understand the nature of Christ’s resurrected relationship to humanity, Calvin returns to an interpretation that limits her to a craven longing for physical contact. She and the other women are irredeemably carnal: “Christ saw that, by their foolish and unreasonable desire, they wished to keep him in the world.”  

Amongst these largely negative readings, Calvin’s exegetical work on John 20 does make some positive use of the Magdalene. In a sermon preached on the same text, the fact of the women’s having gone to the sepulcher is used as a model of seeking God in faith, though the insistence on their ignorance is still made.  

We will have no profit from the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ unless we seek him by faith, to be united to him… And the example for that is offered to us here, when it is said that Mary Magdalene and her companions came to the sepulcher. It is true that there is some fault and roughness, … in that they wanted

---

to anoint our Lord Jesus Christ and they never thought of what he had foretold and testified so many times, that he must be resurrected.\footnote{John Calvin, \textit{Writings on Pastoral Piety}, ed. and trans. Elsie Anne McKee, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2001), p. 113.}

On the other side of the relationship between believers and God, Calvin’s John Commentary explores Jesus’ calling of Mary by name as an image of how God calls all persons.\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the Gospel of John}, vol. 2, 20:16.} The praiseworthy action is, however, all Christ’s; Mary’s passive receipt of grace is the only good that can be said of her. In dealing with an unambiguous example of the Magdalene’s own action, discussing the mission Christ gives her to the disciples, he grudgingly concedes, “It must also be admitted that Mary Magdalene fully obeyed the injunctions of Christ.”\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the Gospel of John}, vol. 2, 20:17.} He goes on to reiterate his interpretation that Mary Magdalene and the other women were used in order to shame the male disciples into taking up the office of evangelism. So reprobate were the disciples, indeed, that they ought to have had not just women deliver Christ’s word to them, but animals.

I consider that this was done by way of reproach, because they had been so tardy and sluggish to believe. And, indeed, they deserve not only to have women for their teachers, but also oxen and asses, since the Son of God had been so long and laboriously employed in teaching, and yet they had made so little, or hardly any progress. Yet this is a mild and gentle chastisement, when Christ sends his disciples to the school of the women…\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the Gospel of John}, vol. 2, 20:17; see also John Calvin, \textit{Writings on Pastoral Piety}, p. 114.}

Calvin’s mocking tone diminishes the importance of the choice of women as messengers, making its only purpose a negative one, the spurring on of the true preachers to their work. In this way he moves to an assertion that the action of Mary and the other women must therefore not be taken as a precedent or rule for the practice of the church. He
rejects the Lutherans’ argument that women can baptize in case of need, and the concomitant claim that they might also preach in a similar necessity.  

It ought likewise to be observed, however, that this occurrence was extraordinary, and—we might almost say—accidental. They are commanded to make known to the Apostles what they afterwards, in the exercise of the office commanded to them, proclaimed to the whole world. But, in executing this injunction, they do not act as if they had been Apostles; and therefore it is wrong to frame a law out of this injunction of Christ, and to allow women to perform the office of baptizing. Let us be satisfied with knowing that Christ displayed in them the boundless treasures of his grace, when he once appointed them to be the teachers of the Apostles, and yet did not intend that what was done by a singular privilege should be viewed as an example.

Here Mary’s reputation as a special sinner serves his point particularly well. He takes care to point out the unworthiness of Mary Magdalene even among women, capping his discussion of women’s preaching as neither endorsed nor even permitted by the scriptural record. “This is peculiarly apparent in Mary Magdalene, who had formerly been possessed by seven devils.”

Mary Magdalene is fundamentally, for Calvin, an example of the sinful human person at her most depraved. His only reference to her in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* offers the Magdalene as proof of the overwhelming complexity of the devil’s assaults and the need for surrender to God, rather than reliance on works. “That we may feel the more strongly urged to do so, the Scripture declares that the enemies who war against us are not one or two, or few in number, but a great host. Mary Magdalene is said to have been delivered from seven devils by which she was possessed.”

---

22 As in Spangenberg, *Postilla Teutsch*, 10r.
commentary, her example is most positive when her individuality is subsumed in a study of her existential predicament and the interposition of divine grace. The character that Luther and his colleagues had found worthy of praise and imitation in her profound affection for Christ, especially as expressed in her copious weeping, is for Calvin merely maudlin self-indulgence. Karant-Nunn has described his attitude to tears as a matter of confessional identity. Weeping is a vain show of emotion, in women as in men; but worse, tears betoken an appeal for mercy from one’s fellows and from God. “Remarking on Peter’s tears, he opines that if we only weep before men, we show our hypocrisy… Public tears were a symbol of Catholicism.”26 Although penitence was at the heart of his evangelical theology, as it was for Luther, emotional outbursts were extraneous to Calvin’s clear-eyed contemplation of the soul’s peril before God’s just wrath. To stop and give way to tears before the abyss of hellfire might come dangerously close to a suspicion that one was deserving of divine pity, or could earn it through pathetic displays. In Calvin’s theology it is not compassion that ensures the salvation of the elect, but the necessary fulfillment of the glory of God.27

The Reformed Community

The piety Calvin sought to instill in his followers included unflinching submission to an arbitrary Providence. There was no room in this conception of the world and humanity’s place in it for sentimental figures who might plead with God on behalf of sinners. Calvin’s particular brand of reform demanded the complete renunciation of

27 See Cornelis P. Venema, Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The “Two-fold Grace of God” and the Interpretation of Calvin’s Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 204-07.
medieval hagiography, with its colorful pantheon of supernatural intercessors. Phyllis Mack has described iconoclasm, including defacing images of the saints, as a central impulse of the Calvinist Reformation. That program is typified by the polemical work of Pierre Viret (1511-1571), a Reformed pastor in Lausanne but also a friend and supporter of Calvin in the reform of Geneva, and an influential figure for the English Reformation. Viret’s 1560 *De le vraie et fausse religion* presents a catalogue of pagan practices and Christian heresies—including the cult of the saints—from the classical period through Viret’s own context. Among them is the traditional identification of the Magdalene with the sinful woman and with Mary of Bethany. While he labels the misidentifications, as a whole, “a great impudence,” it is clearly the association with prostitution that disturbs him most. He is dismayed that in Rome the Magdalene was being portrayed as a new incarnation of Venus, an equation that was being made in Counter Reformation art, as we have seen. This connection has made the saint into “a patroness of johns and whores,” with her festival having devolved into a drunken orgy in Rome and at her shrine in southern France. No longer the simple adulteress of the Luke 7 account, she has become a “public prostitute, the most notorious, debauched, and infamous that ever was in the world,” and her story gives misguided hope to those in that profession: “I do not know if the priests and monks wrote these things of Mary Magdalene… in order to encourage prostitutes, seeing that this greatest of prostitutes was

31 Viret, *De la vraie et fausse religion*, p. 587. On the Magdalene’s portrayal as Venus in Counter-Reformation pamphlets, see Erhardt and Morris, eds., *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 120-21.
32 Viret, *De la vraie et fausse religion*, pp. 588-89.
received in paradise in such honor.”

Interestingly, in discussing the Repenties, he shares the concern of Counter-Reformation clerics that old and unattractive prostitutes may be entering them with a false pretence of conversion, because they can no longer ply their trade profitably. Similarly derogatory is his logical proof that the woman named Mary Magdalene in the New Testament could not have been this sinful woman: for Mary Magdalene was known as the one from whom Christ had exorcised seven demons, and what man, he asks, would want to go with a demon-possessed whore?

His description of the hagiographic treatment of Mary of Bethany is scarcely more flattering. He lampoons the idea that Martha’s preaching had converted her, and mentions a variation on the story in which Martha had told her promiscuous sister that Jesus was the most beautiful man she had ever known, and this is what had convinced Mary to go and see for herself. Ridiculing the identification of the wedding at Cana as that of the Magdalene and John the Evangelist, he points out caustically that it was hardly honorable of Christ to ruin a marriage contracted in accordance with divine law, creating a prostitute from a respectable woman in order to gain a disciple. Finally, having dispensed with the accretions of legend, he even dismisses her preaching role. “I leave aside also what they have written, that she performed the office of Apostle and minister, preaching the Gospel, and that she had this authority from St. Peter, the pope of Rome. For these are such weighty lies…” His tone throughout is as mocking as Calvin’s in

33 Viret, De la vraie et fausse religion, pp. 590, 595-96.  
34 Viret, De la vraie et fausse religion, p. 588.  
35 Viret, De la vraie et fausse religion, p. 596.  
36 Viret, De la vraie et fausse religion, p. 591.  
37 Viret, De la vraie et fausse religion, p. 590.  
38 Viret, De la vraie et fausse religion, p. 595.
belittling Catholic tradition by linking it to a culture promoting women’s speech and sinfulness.

Both Calvin and Viret endorsed the scholarship of Lefèvre d’Étaples on the Magdalene that attacked the traditions of the saints, and Calvin criticized the cult of the saints as it existed in the France of his youth.\(^{39}\) One center of the Magdalene cult in France, Vézelay, had experienced the twin extremes of hagiography and iconoclasm, becoming home to a Protestant community in 1557.\(^ {40}\) The town was one of the few designated sites for Protestant worship, when it was permitted under Charles IX.\(^ {41}\) In the late 1560s members of that community engaged in iconoclastic vandalism at the abbey church that had housed the saint’s relics in the Middle Ages.\(^ {42}\) The town faced attack and ultimate capture by royal forces in the fall and winter of 1569-70.\(^ {43}\) With its reputation for Protestant loyalty, then, it was there that surviving Protestants fled from Paris after the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre. Vézelay’s brief tenure as a Protestant refuge came to a final end, however, with the reconquest of the town and the murder of the refugees on what is known as the Champ des Huguenots, in 1572.\(^ {44}\)

---


Not all of Calvin’s closest partners in reform shared his interpretation of Mary Magdalene. Vézelay had been the birthplace of one of Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin’s successor in the religious leadership of Geneva. Beza’s origins in a stronghold of her cult perhaps informed his divergence from the dismissive tone with which his mentor and his colleague Viret rejected the hagiographic tradition. Beza adopted the Magdalene as a metaphor for the church, a positive image developed by patristic and medieval exegetes. And although certainly aware of Lefèvre d’Étaples’s work on the saint’s scriptural identity, and of Calvin’s scorn for her as a model, Beza also invokes her connection to the sinful woman of Luke 7, identifying the beginning of the church with Mary Magdalene’s anointing of Christ. In his *Sermons sur le Cantique* (1586), a text traditionally associated with the Magdalene, Beza writes, “The Christian Church began with a small flock: when Mary Magdalene poured oil over Christ’s head (Luke 7:37ff.) the Church consisted only of Christ’s disciples and her.”

The connection between the Magdalene and the Church is also made in a series of sermons on the Gospel resurrection narratives, published by Beza in 1593, *Sermons sur l’histoire de la resurrection*. The first several sermons in the series constitute a fascinating attempt to re-engage many of the medieval Magdalene traditions in the exposition of Calvinist doctrine on salvation and the soul. The first sermon establishes the Magdalene’s great and ardent devotion, in coming so early to the tomb.

---

46 See above, ch. 1.
Calvin had credited the women’s presence at the sepulcher to superstition and “useless emotion,” for Beza, Mary Magdalene and the other women are “courageous,” and her perseverance is rewarded by Christ with the first resurrection appearance.\(^49\)

The third sermon echoes Calvin’s interpretation of the choice to manifest the resurrection first to women in order to shame the male disciples, but with a different emphasis. Beza takes up the traditional contrast between the women and the men, noting the women’s greater constancy.

This is the reason we must place in front of those who could find it strange that [the resurrection] was manifested to these women rather than to the Apostles or to other disciples. The story clearly shows us that though there were many faults in these women… [yet the disciples] showed less faith and constancy than these poor women, who had accompanied [Christ] to death and to the sepulcher, and now visited him at the sepulcher, in place of the disciples, who were so lost that it was as if they had forgotten their Master.\(^50\)

Rather than dwelling on the degradation the men faced in being schooled by women, Beza instead compares this reversal of convention to the reform and rebuke of human authority that must always purify the Church.\(^51\) Here and elsewhere in the series, Beza seems conflicted between a desire to recognize the women’s great love for Christ, and faulting them for their lack of faith in the resurrection. He condemns ignorance as no excuse for neglecting our duty of faith and obedience, a position that recalls Marguerite de Navarre’s poem on the Magdalene’s tragic ignorance.\(^52\) Searching for Christ among the dead, as the angels reprimand the women for doing, is here equated with Catholic “superstitions,” expressing the Reformed theology that Christ is now to be encountered

\(^{49}\) Beza, *Sermons*, pp. 5-6. The second sermon does not contain a specific discussion of Mary Magdalene or the other women at the tomb.

\(^{50}\) Beza, *Sermons*, pp. 67-68.

\(^{51}\) Beza, *Sermons*, p. 68.

\(^{52}\) Beza, *Sermons*, p. 92.
only spiritually, not as a physical presence in the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{53} Fundamentally, however, Christ’s forgiveness of the women, and their response, is presented as a message of hope to everyone. “Notwithstanding this great fault [of not believing in the resurrection], the Lord had regard for this sincere love, that these women showed him in life and death,… [and] passed over all this imperfection, making himself better known to them than ever before.”\textsuperscript{54} The great fault Beza laments in the women is not associated with them uniquely, nor even with women in general, but with all sinners. He then praises the women for profiting from the angel’s admonishment, exhorting his listeners to follow their good example. He concludes by claiming that Christ’s commission to the women to tell the news to the disciples should show us two things: 1) the importance of preaching the mercy of God and his teaching about things physical and spiritual to the church, carefully and in charity, lest we be condemned; 2) that all are not prophets and apostles, as these women were not, and that everything must be done according to order in the church, referring to the prohibition on women’s public speech in 1 Cor. 14:40.\textsuperscript{55} He thus includes an affirmation of Calvin’s position on women’s religious leadership, but his tone is markedly more positive, seeing the women more as praiseworthy, universal examples, rather than as notably flawed and unworthy.

Beza’s fourth sermon, also on Christ’s command to the women, elaborates on the same interpretations articulated in the previous sermon. The women’s search for a dead Christ is inexcusable, showing all the more Christ’s goodness in tolerating human infirmity. This misconception is again connected with Catholic theology and practice.

\textsuperscript{53} Beza, \textit{Sermons}, pp. 93-94.
\textsuperscript{54} Beza, \textit{Sermons}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{55} Beza, \textit{Sermons}, pp. 96-97.
Like Calvin, Beza believes that the commission to the women of public evangelism is not a precedent, but “a singular favor from the Savior.” Immediately after this, though, he introduces the Magdalene’s medieval title, observing that the women “were like apostles to the apostles in this message, with an ineffable consolation.” The time for such a direct encounter with Christ is over, Beza cautions, and now things must be conducted in the church with proper order. As in the previous sermon, the women’s actions in response to Christ are commended as exemplary. In an imagined dialogue, they confess that they had come seeking to anoint a dead body, testifying joyfully that they had instead found the Savior seeking them with the balm of consolation. The Savior is seeking all sinners in the same way, and all should respond in the same way.

The fifth sermon, on the disciples’ not believing the women’s testimony, begins with a remarkable disquisition on the sinful woman of Luke 7. Though Beza introduces the section by noting the falseness of the identification of this figure (and of Mary of Bethany) with Mary Magdalene, he nonetheless launches into a three-page discussion of the value of this woman’s story for believers. Again, he uses the text to teach a Reformed theology of justification. Pardon and repentance cannot be separated, for amendment of life is the fruit and end of pardon; true repentance comes not from us, but from God. Again, she is held up as a model: all should ask God for the same grace she received. Her image of loving service to God gives him an opportunity to criticize others in the history of the church and in his own day. “We have in this woman a beautiful witness…

56 Beza, Sermons, p. 103.
57 Beza, Sermons, p. 103.
58 Beza, Sermons, p. 108.
59 Beza, Sermons, pp. 128-29.
for is it not true of all time, that rarest among men is a true and constant amity?" He gives many examples of conflict in the church, contrasting them with the example of the woman who followed Jesus out of ardent affection and gratitude, courageously exposing herself to danger in doing so. He then returns to Mary Magdalene at the tomb without distinguishing her from the penitent woman, lauding “the perseverance of the saint,” a formulation from Calvin’s *Institutes*. Calvin had compared the Magdalene unfavorably to Peter and John in this scene, maintaining that their reasonable consideration of events led them to an appropriate measure of belief, while she was simply emotional and unproductively distraught. Beza describes her rather as wrestling with the competing claims of faith and natural reason within herself, an example of the self-inflicted torments of any who engage in such a futile effort. Dismissing the loyalty to sense and reason that confused her, Beza points to faith as the “one thing necessary,” referring to Luke 10:42, Christ’s praise of Mary of Bethany. Even when she is presented as a cautionary lesson, though, her character has inherent value for Beza, who notes that her ardent devotion to Christ should be a rebuke us in our coldness to grace. This sermon thus includes praise for all three of the figures and characteristics traditionally associated with the Magdalene, in interpretations that advance a Reformed homiletical program.

In these interpretations, Beza generally achieves a reconciliation between Calvin’s theology and a more positive view of the Magdalene than his mentor had taken, though there are passages where the tension between the two positions becomes evident. He

---

60 Beza, *Sermons*, p. 130.  
departs most pointedly from Calvin’s readings of the Magdalene texts in his sixth sermon, on the *noli me tangere* pericope. Beza begins with his most emphatic statement yet in celebration of Mary Magdalene and her role in the resurrection narrative. Christ gives her a “double grace” in choosing her to be the first witness of his rising from the dead, and “he made her like an apostle to the apostles: they taught by her, and we after them.”  

64 He considers her famous weeping, not derisively, as Calvin had, but as a mark of her fidelity, approved by God. “But to whom does the Savior manifest himself here? To the one who weeps, not to those who remained in Jerusalem.”  

65 Tears coming before joy will often be the lot of God’s children, as other biblical texts are used to confirm, though Beza admits that much of her sorrow came from her own lack of faith. He alternates between finding fault with her faith and acknowledging that her grief came from a real affection for Christ, rewarded by him with this consolation and yet reprimanded as well. This oscillation illustrates the predicament of all sinners before the gift of grace, at once condemned and saved. Beza uses the ambiguity of her role to advantage here, directing his audience to accept blame for their own faults and lack of faith, responding to Christ with joyful humility.  

66 She becomes a symbol for the church again in a discussion of Christ’s calling her by name, proposed as a model for pastors to know their congregations, unlike absentee bishops in Beza’s own context. Strikingly, the example given for the ideal response of the church to pastoral direction is that of Lydia,

---

in Acts 16:15, a woman who was converted by Paul’s preaching, then hosting him for his ministry in Thyatira and converting her household.\(^67\)

Beza acknowledges that the discussion that follows, an explanation of Jesus’ command to the Magdalene not to touch him, is his own “opinion,” which he has decided on as the simplest reading of a much-misunderstood passage.\(^68\) Where medieval exegetes and Calvin had seen this as proof of the Magdalene’s–and all women’s–carnality being condemned by God, and even Luther had found her uncomprehending of the nature of the risen Christ, Beza simply sees Christ hurrying her on to her evangelical mission. He argues that Christ knew that her great love would have made her wish to stay with him, to embrace him and talk about everything that had happened to him since the crucifixion. There was not time for this at the moment, though there would be, later. “The Lord simply did not want to reprimand her touching, but wanted Mary to delay it for another time.”\(^69\) Not only is there nothing wrong with her desire to touch Jesus, but she is again offered as a universal example, in this case of those who tarry in doing God’s work, for reasons of their own. Concluding the sermon, Beza affirms the importance of her role in the strongest terms, while being careful to note that it does not permit women to preach today. The Magdalene held

\[\text{The greatest and most honorable commission that was ever given by our Lord to any prophet or apostles whatsoever, and containing a teaching exceeding the capacity even of angels. But [this office] must not be held by everyone, in consequence of the person to whom this charge was given; it is not the ordinary administration of the house of God, that women teach in the assembly, but on the contrary they are commanded to listen in silence, 1 Cor. 14:34.}\(^70\)\]

\(^{67}\) Beza, *Sermons*, p. 166.

\(^{68}\) Beza, *Sermons*, pp. 168, 170.

\(^{69}\) Beza, *Sermons*, p. 170.

His emphasis remains on the affirmation of God’s call, rather than the limitation. He
maintains that God can open the mouth of the least, making even stones speak [Luke
19:40], not limiting himself to distinctions of sex or age. Finally, Beza expresses
incredulity that the disciples did not believe Mary Magdalene, when she bore witness
with such vivid expression and from the direct evidence of her own eyes and ears.71

Taken altogether, Beza’s narrative offers an unusually positive interpretation of
the Magdalene’s character and role. Where she is criticized for her lack of faith in the
resurrection, the connection is immediately drawn to the faithlessness of all sinners, and
her response to Christ’s and the angels’ correction is commended to all believers as
exemplary. Her personal history and character are therefore not faulted uniquely, but only
as typical of human frailty. Beza includes elements from the medieval and hagiographic
tradition to emphasize Reformed ideals and to expand them. He advances the sinful
woman of Luke 7 to sketch the theology of justification, and Mary of Bethany’s example
places faith above all else. The “apostle to the apostles” title serves to emphasize the
importance of evangelical testimony and perseverance in adhering to the word of God in
the face of opposition. The Magdalene’s weeping and intimate attachment to Christ
incorporate a degree of emotive piety not present, except where it is criticized, in
Calvin’s preaching. Beza’s exegesis of the resurrection narratives represents a
contribution to Reformed religious culture from someone whose faith was surely formed
by a youth immersed in Magdalene piety, who sought to preserve the value of that
tradition and to ally its strengths with Reformed theology.

71 Beza, Sermons, p. 182.
Thus, while Calvin did not embrace Mary Magdalene in the same way as Luther and his followers had, she did not pass from sight even in the culture of his most immediate influence. Susan Karant-Nunn has noted the example of another Reformed pastor whose interpretation of the Magdalene was markedly more positive than Calvin’s. Like Beza, Georg Spindler (1525-1605) came from an environment in which the Magdalene was celebrated. Spindler had been educated in the Lutheran culture of Wittenberg University, but eventually converted to Calvinism. In his 1596 devotional work, *Passio et Resurrectio Christi*, Spindler offered praise for the Magdalene’s role at the sepulcher. Karant-Nunn has noted the license Spindler seems to have felt to depart from Calvin’s interpretation.

In contrast with John Calvin’s perspective, Spindler regards with admiration the Lord’s mother under the cross as well as Mary Magdalene and other women who are present. He praises the faith and constancy of the Magdalene, and he seems not to notice anything amiss in the women’s desiring to embalm Jesus’ corpse. ‘Even though Mary [Magdalene] errs and is betrayed by her emotions when she thinks that the Lord has been stolen, nonetheless she is correct in seeking Christ and in wanting to have him again.’ He finds nothing wrong in Jesus’ appearing first to Mary Magdalene.72

Spindler’s willingness to draw on the Magdalene tradition in Calvinist piety may have been influenced by his Lutheran origins, but he was not alone in his attempt to retain and adapt this figure of the medieval religious culture to serve the needs of a Reformed audience.

Reformed pastors such as Beza and Spindler evidently maintained significant attachments to the Magdalene even as they demonstrated allegiance to their Reformed faith. Such attachments existed among the laity as well, and are better interpreted as a

---

combination of enduring cultural ties and authentic faith commitments, rather than religious confusion. Raymond Mentzer has noted that French Huguenots continued to participate in local and regional Catholic festivals, such as those held for Mary Magdalene. The practice of naming women after the saint persisted even in Huguenot exile communities, as can be seen from probate records in North America. The other major site, outside of the French and Swiss contexts, where Calvinist theology came to dominate the religious landscape was in England. There, too, we will find an enduring home for the Magdalene. Where we might have expected to find only a scarred and empty niche left behind after iconoclastic purges, instead we see a space carved out for a reinterpreted figure, one who illustrates Reformed ideas about penitence.

*Puritanical Magdalenes*

To be sure, many relics of the Catholic tradition had been consciously removed from England’s state church, beginning with the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII in the late 1530s, through the reform of worship under Edward VII (1547-

---

74 The daughter of Philip Gendron, for example, is mentioned in his will as a Mary Magdalen born in 1691; the family lived in the Huguenot settlement on the Santee River in Craven County, South Carolina. *Transactions of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina*, no. 14 (Charleston, SC: Huguenot Society of South Carolina, 1907), p. 17.
1553) and Elizabeth I. All aspects of religious life were affected, from images to institutions, though the purgative effect was not as thorough as some advocates of English reform desired. While some elements of Catholic tradition endured, such as bishops, other areas of religious culture, such as monasticism, were almost erased. Amy Froide has described the dearth of options for single, Anglican women to live in community in the cloistered, contemplative model that the Magdalene had represented. Within the general Protestant rejection of the religious life for women, the particular application of the saint as a patron for houses of redeemed prostitutes was emphatically scorned. Documented exceptions to the ban on religious foundations, such as the house endowed by Mary Wandesforde in York, were strictly policed. The York community, under the control of the cathedral, refused entrants below the age of 50 and with any history of scandal or even low birth, so as not to be thought a Magdalene House.

Though Mary Magdalene’s role as an exemplar for avowed contemplatives had ended, Lisa McClain has noted the continued popularity of the saint for English Protestants:

With Protestant reforms of the sixteenth century, opportunities for believers in England to incorporate the Magdalene into patterns of worship underwent significant change. Mary Magdalene, however, remained a popular exemplar for the Protestant faithful in England. She enjoyed the distinction of being the only

---


female saint remaining in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, and Magdalene narratives remained popular into the first part of the seventeenth century.78 McClain argues that Mary Magdalene was seen exclusively as a penitent by Protestants, an example of depravity being redeemed by grace.79

That interpretation is on view in Lewis Wager’s 1567 Protestant morality play, The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene. Wager’s Calvinist theology is evident when Mary Magdalene is confronted by a looking glass that represents the Law, who reveals the depth of her sinfulness, and its proper punishment, to her, “Wherefore as I sayd to a glasse compared I may be,/ Wherin clerely as in the sunne lyght,’/ The weaknesse and sinne of him self he may se,/ Yea and his owne damnation as it is ryght.”80 The saint’s conversion parallels the conversion of England underway at the time of the play’s production. Patricia Badir has compared the Magdalene’s change from the elaborate costume of her sinful state into sober, plain clothes after her conversion to the “stripping of the altars” that occurred in England in the late 1540s, after Edward’s 1547 decree, and Cranmer’s 1548 Catechism.81 Over the course of the drama the Magdalene is transformed from an attractive image for viewers’ consumption “into a Protestant exemplar whose words and works illustrate that salvation is awarded only by means of grace.”82 This shift in identity is clearly meant to guide viewers’ own process of embracing and internalizing the nation’s reform. The final speech of the play, made by

---

79 McClain, “‘They have taken away my Lord’,” p. 93.
81 Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” pp. 2, 12-13.
82 Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” p. 4.
Love, chronicles a congregation’s journey from misconceived Catholic piety to proper
Reformed theology:

First the lawe made a playne declaration,
That she was a chylde of eternall damnation:
By hearyng of the lawe came knowledge of synne,
Then for to lament truely she dyd begynne.
Nothyng but desperation dyd in hir remayne,
Lokyng for none other comfort but for hell payne.
But Christ whose nature is mercy to haue,
Came into this world sinners to saue,
Which preached repentance synners to forgeue,
To as many as in hym faithfully dyd belieue.
By the Word came faith, Faith brought penitence,
But bothe the gyft of Gods magnificence.
Thus by faith onely, Marie was iustified,
Like as before it is playnly veri
From thens came Loue, as a testification
Of Gods mercy and her iustification. 83

As Badir notes, this metaphor renews the medieval trope of interpreting Mary
Magdalene as an allegorical figure of the church, linking it with new Protestant polemical
representations of the Catholic church as a whore. The Magdalene, the reformed whore,
is thus a perfect symbol of the new, reformed church. The play’s language exploits both
sides of the comparison. In her sinful state, she is a “house” that the seven deadly sins
enter. 84 Echoing Calvin and Viret, the trope is dependent on the misogyny of
contemporary polemical discourse for its power: the Catholic church is effeminate when
compared to a sexually sinful woman, and makes those effeminate who belong to it. 85
Badir refers to Keith Thomas’ work on Puritans despising cleanliness as effeminate and
sexual; Mary Magdalene is described in Wager’s play as clean—a less readily appreciable

83 Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” p. 4 (III.2119-34).
84 Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” pp. 5-6.
85 Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” p. 7.
insult to a modern reader!\textsuperscript{86} England’s manhood is better served, in the rhetoric of the play, by the courageous, masculine theology of the Reformation than by a Catholicism that encouraged a slavish and feminine devotion to precious idols.

The play’s language of conversion reinterprets an ancient theme, initiated by Gregory the Great, of cataloguing the Magdalene’s senses and comparing their uses in her sinful and saved states. Her conversion is accomplished as a purification of feminine attributes once given over to sinful temptation, now rightly directed to spiritual ends.

As thus, like as the eyes haue been vaynly spent,
Vpon worldlly and carnall delectations,
So henceforth to wepyng and teares must be spent,
And wholly giuen to godly contemplations.

Likewise as the eares haue ben open alway,
To here the blasphemyng of Gods holy name,
And fylthy talkyng euermore night and day,
Nowe they must be turned away from the same…

The tong which blasphemie hath spoken,
Yea and filthily, to the hurt of soule and body,
Werby the precepts of God haue been broken,
Must hence forth praise God for his mercy daily.\textsuperscript{87}

A generation after Wager’s catechetical drama, Gervase Markham wrote his long poem in praise of Mary Magdalene, \textit{Marie Magdalens Lamentations for the Losse of Her Master Iesus} (1601/04). The poem’s emphasis differs from that of Wager’s explicitly didactic play; Markham meditates on the Magdalene’s experience. Rather than being a symbol of Protestant conversion, she has become a character whose emotions contribute to the reader’s understanding of faith. Although this work was formally influenced by the

\textsuperscript{86} Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” p. 10.
\textsuperscript{87} Badir, “‘To Allure Vnto Their Loue’,” pp. 18-19 (II.1441-56).
poetry of the Jesuit Robert Southwell, Markham’s confessional allegiance is a subject of
debate. His work lacks an explicitly Catholic sacramental theology and any expression of
mourning over the loss of that tradition, elements that dominate Southwell’s verse.\(^8\)
Patricia Badir argues that perhaps Markham was trying to redeem the saint for
Protestantism in the wake of the popularity of Southwell’s work, even among confessed
Anglicans.\(^8\) The poem can be read as a Protestant theological statement about the power
of the divine Word to bring the sinner to salvation: Mary Magdalene is grieving in the
garden at the injustice of Christ’s death; he speaks her name, and she is instantly filled
with confidence and joy. “His words authority which all obey,/ this foggy darkness clean
away doth chase,/ and brings a calm and bright well-tempered day.”\(^9\) Unlike in
Southwell’s treatment, where her distress is so overwhelming that she loses her judgment
and almost her senses, Markham’s Magdalene has enough self-awareness to rebuke
herself for having mistaken the risen Christ for the gardener.\(^1\) Markham suggests in his
preface that this quality of self-awareness, particularly as it informs her penitence, is what
ordinary believers should emulate. Those converted to amendment of life must imitate
the saint in her tears.

Ah could they see what sin from sense hath shut,
How sweet it were to summon deeds misdone,
To have their lives in equal balance put,
To weigh each work ere that the judge do come:
Ah then their tears would trickle like the rain…
They would with Mary send forth bitter cries,
To get the joys of their soul-saving love,
They would gush forth fresh fountains from their eyes,

\(^{8}\) Badir, *The Maudlin Impression*, p. 83.
\(^{8}\) Badir, *The Maudlin Impression*, p. 83
\(^{9}\) Badir, *The Maudlin Impression*, p. 84.
\(^{1}\) Badir, *The Maudlin Impression*, p. 84.
To win his favour, and his mercy prove:
Eyes, heart, and tongue, should pour, breathe out, and send,
Tears, sighs, and plaints, until their love they find. 92

This passage seems to call readers to evaluate their deeds as condemning them, and then to perform works of contrition and penance, in order to “win [God’s] favour,” which would place the poem within a Catholic framework. Patricia Phillippy argues however, along with Badir, that it is Mary’s movement of repulsion from her own sins that is being commended, while elsewhere in the poem Markham explicitly rejects Catholic ritual and the theology of works.

But being too precise to keepe the Law;
The lawes sweet maker I have thereby lost
And bearing to his ceremonies too much awe,
I misse his sweet self, of far more cost,
Sith rather with the Truth I should have beene,
Than working that, which by a Tipe was seene. 93

Phillippy contends that Markham takes on Southwell’s expression of the Magdalene’s grief, as though she were mourning for the Host removed from Anglican churches following the Reformation, and “corrects” it to conform to a Protestant, memorial understanding of the Eucharist.

And to this shrine Ile sacrifice my heart,
Though it be spoiled of the soveraigne host,
It shall the altar be and sacred part,
Where I my teares will offer with the most. 94

---

94 Phillippy, Women, Death, and Literature, p. 67 (B4v).
In Phillippy’s reading, this vow made by the Magdalene indicates a resignation to encounter Christ only in memory and in the spiritual state produced by reflecting on his life, death, and resurrection.

Despite its arguably Protestant theology, Markham’s poem has been included in lists of English Catholic devotional poetry about the Magdalene. Such lists often also include the work of Thomas Robinson, *The Life and Death of Marie Magdalen* (1620). Stylistically the poem is a showcase for its author’s facility with classical allusions. This practice is an instance of the Renaissance’s connection between the Magdalene and Venus as a means of signaling her sensuality, the parallel that had so offended Pierre Viret. Here this symbolism also serves her role as a representation of the church: within the narrative of her life she encompasses the whole of salvation history, from a pagan origin to a Christian conversion.

The first section of the poem chronicles the pleasures of her sinful past, while the second describes her conversion. The youthful devotion to pleasure is an expression of her character at the time: she is vain, fickle, and spoiled. Robinson dwells at length on the sensual delights of these years in a literary parallel to erotic Baroque portraits of the Magdalene. The latter section is more brief, and focuses on the radical nature of her penitence, both in the instantaneous joy it produces, and in the continuing need for such

---

95 The difficulty of establishing clear confessional identities for English religious poets may be due to the syncretistic character of elements in that tradition in the seventeenth century; see Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, p. xxiv.

96 Robinson describes her, for instance, as “Goddesse of all pleasure,/ Amorous, younge, faire slender Aphrodite.” She is variously compared to the Nereïdes and Diana’s nymphs (her feet), Circe’s wand (her arms), a painting by Apelles, and the apples of the Hesperides. The account of her amorous career before her encounter with Christ equates her and her paramours with a list of doomed classical lovers. Thomas Robinson, *The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992), pp. 11-12, 16-18, 32.
an attitude to one’s inherent sinfulness.

The binary structure of the poem, encouraging the reader to compare her life before and after her conversion, is assisted by literary devices and inverted parallelisms. Like Markham, Robinson engages in an interesting variation on the trope of contrasting the Magdalene’s features or senses as they were used in sin and as they would be rightly used in faithfulness to Christ. In this early passage, he compares the Magdalene herself to a sepulcher, prefiguring the tomb scene of her later life:

A breast so white, and yet so black a heart;
Her worst the best, her best y worser parte.
Can such fair hiues enclose such idle Drones?
So white a wall immure such worthlesse stones?
So beauteous a sepulcher, such rotten bones?
A ‘sepulchre’ that caue I rightly call,
Wherein her soul so long imu’d hath been,
Bound with y fetters of a willinge thrall:
And yet that sepulcher must bury sin.

When she comes to the tomb on Easter morning, her faithful heart, consumed by grief, will be a fitting sepulcher for Christ, as fitting then as it is now unfit, a body caught in the living death of a wasted existence. The minatory oppositions are renewed later in the poem, where the true uses of her body are discussed. Again, Robinson deploys the traditional trope of the sinful and salutary uses of the parts of the saint’s body, though this time in a more hopeful passage. Here the promise of the body’s correct activities relieves the anxiety of the reader, who can contemplate the catalogue of former transgressions alongside the picture of a redeemed physicality.

Thees cheekes should blush at sin with crimson die,

---

97 For an example of the use of the trope in late medieval preaching, see Thayer, *Penitence, Preaching, and the Coming of the Reformation*, p. 85.
98 Robinson, *The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene*, p. 18.
But they to lewdnesse cheefely doe inuite,
With smiles deceiuinge y e behoulders eye:
Thees lippes were made to prayse, and pray arright,
Not to delude y e soone-deluded sight:
This tongue should singe out Halleluiahs,
Not accent vaine lasciuious essayes:
Hands, feet, heart, all were made, to speake y r makers prayse.\textsuperscript{99}

After the preparation of discordant contradictions, suggesting the need for change and resolution, comes the crucial turning point of self-awareness. The carefree Magdalene is suddenly gripped by a burning pain, a brief realization of her predicament. The bitter truth is put off for a while, however, “But sorrowe soon in streamss of pleasure’s drown’d,/ And conscience away doth vanish quite;/ So little truth in women’s teares are found.”\textsuperscript{100} As Mary Magdalene is sinful and inconstant, so are all women. The echo of Calvin’s contempt for the saint’s traditional weeping, and of the carnal emotionalism of women in general, can be heard in Robinson’s dismissal of the Magdalene’s first experience of contrition. She cannot return to the ease of her former pleasure garden, however, as her moral landscape has already been irrevocably altered. There follows a long description of haunting by demons and snakes, with a blasted wasteland replacing the lovers’ bower. The ravaged form of Melancholy takes the place of the beautiful young body of Mary. The confrontation with a barren nature, reflecting the jejune reality of her soul, produces self-knowledge: “A guilty conscience she within her brest can finde.”\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{99} Robinson, \textit{The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{100} Robinson, \textit{The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{101} Robinson, \textit{The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene}, p. 34.
A Calvinist emphasis on conscience is evident in the description of how she is brought to her senses. The traditional seven demons are set upon her by Nemesis and the young Magdalene goes mad and roves around the blighted terrain.\textsuperscript{102} Her journey is a parable of conscience, in which she is all but devoured by its ferocious revelations.

\begin{quote}
Witnesses distressed Maries sad estate, 
Who erst with worldly happiness was blest, 
And liu'd in Pleasures affluence of late: 
But gnawinge Conscience, deuoy'd of rest, 
Her shorte-liu'd pleasure quickly dispossesst, 
Her former iollity, tormenting thought, 
Terrour of conscience, melancholy wrought 
That misery, and misery to Mercy brought.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

The theme of the terror of conscience bringing the sinner to recognition of her peril was central to Calvin’s theology.\textsuperscript{104} Calvin himself had used the metaphor of a dangerous natural environment to evoke the soul’s vulnerability, even to the point of insanity, in the grip of conscience.

The metaphor of the sea is elegant and very well fitted to describe the uneasiness of the wicked, for in itself the sea is troubled. Though it is not driven by the wind or agitated by frightful tempests, its billows carry on mutual war and dash against each other with terrible violence. In the same manner wicked men are disturbed by inner distress which originates in their spirits. They are terrified and confused by conscience, which is the most agonizing of all torments and the most cruel of all executioners. The furies agitate and pursue the wicked, not with burning torches, as in fables, but with anguish of conscience and torment of deceit. For everyone is distressed by his own deceit, and his own terror grows; everyone is driven to madness by his own wickedness; he is terrified by his own evil thoughts and by conscience.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{102} Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, pp. 35-36. 
\textsuperscript{103} Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, p. 41. 
\textsuperscript{105} Quoted in Bouwsma, John Calvin, p. 41.
Robinson constructs his fable of the Magdalene’s early life and conversion precisely on such terms, and peoples it with demonic personifications of the terrible powers of Calvin’s conscience. Though Robinson’s own theological formation is unknown, this imagery for the terrors of conscience was in common use in early seventeenth-century Reformed sermons. Nick Bunker has described the use of natural metaphors about wildernesses, storms, and pirates for the dangers facing the soul, in early modern Puritan preaching from England and North America.\(^{106}\)

Once the soul is stricken with the awareness of her peril, salvation is not long in coming. The transition to the second part, “Marie Magdalen’s Death to Sinne, or Her Life in Righteousnesse” is instant. Her path toward righteousness is not a prolonged labor through good works and increasing fluency in prayer, as Catholic devotional writers such as Teresa of Avila and François de Sales cautioned, but a night-and-day opposition, resembling the simultaneity of the Law/Gospel compositions of Lucas Cranach.\(^{107}\) Robinson relates how quickly the peril is overcome by the presence of Christ:

> Soe night with sable weedes 'gan disapeare,  
> So melancholy vanishd quite away;  
> So ioy her chearfull countenance did reare,  
> So did the orient day-springe bringe the day,  
> And all the trees were clad with bloominge May.\(^{108}\)

In contrast to the destroyed garden of her illicit pleasure, now Mary Magdalene meets Christ coming through a verdant springtime. Robinson describes him with the language of the bridegroom from the Song of Songs, taking up the long-standing tradition of

---

108 Robinson, *The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene*, p. 42.
connecting the Magdalene with this text. Christ casts out the demons that had been tormenting her, and her release is so complete that she does not even need to weep.

Soone as they tooke y † leaue, y † causd her thrall,
Downe sunke y † Damsell in amazement deepe,
(After an earth-quake, soe the ground doth fall,)  
And soundinge, yeelded to a sencelesse sleepe,
Ne could shee speake a worde, ne could shee weepe:
But he y † conquered all the powers beneath,
The Hell of sin, and sin of Hell, and Death.109

Robinson’s Magdalene is thus more Calvinist than the one Calvin had balked at in the Gospel of John; neither talkative nor teary, she is the perfect Protestant penitent, utterly submissive to grace.

After the evangelical conversion, the need for an attitude of perpetual penitence remains. The saved soul must be constantly vigilant, in continual fear of sin. As Christ orders her,

“Goe to y † courts of Wisedome, gentle guest;
There seeke Repentance, and with her, find rest:
Repentance hath a flood, doth euer flowe,
A flood of brinish teares and bitter woe,
That, bee thou n'er soe blacke,
will make thee white as snowe.”110

The Magdalene goes toward the tower of Wisdom, facing the challenges of another devastated, allegorical landscape, guided by the figure of Humility. She meets the beautiful Wisdom and then the miserable Repentance, who sits in perpetual weeping, guarded by angels.111 There follows an ode on tears of repentance and their salutary effect, in which Robinson reclaims the value of tears for Reformed piety.112 Now tears

---

109 Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, p. 45.
110 Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, p. 51.
111 Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, p. 51.
112 Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, pp. 52-53.
are again appropriate, not in the moment of evangelical confidence, when they are wasted tokens of useless sentiment, but in a lifetime’s vigilance against the soul’s depravity.

Having portrayed her story as the type of a perfect Calvinist conversion, Robinson offers the Magdalene’s response as an example to the believer. She hears of Christ in the house of the Pharisee, brings her costly ointment, and enters to perform her deed of love. The poet advises the reader to imitate her and this imitative piety begins with the author himself. He writes a paean to her love and its captivating effect on him, following the description of her action.

Faine would I leaue of Maries loue to writ[e],
But still her loue y’ will not let me leaue:
In loue shee liu’d, and now with loues delight,
Her former loue, y’ did her eyes deceiue,
In stead of loue, of life shee doth bereaue:
Faire mayde, redeemed from y’ iawes of Hell,
Howe hardly can I bidde thy loue fare-well!
That which thou lou' st to doe, so doe I loue to tell.113

This love is framed in strictly Reformed terms as the awareness of the sinner’s need for grace, not as the impressive quality that earns her absolution. Robinson reads the forgiveness she receives with the evangelical interpretation we observed in Lutheran preaching, making her love the response to a sense of gratitude. “Great is her loue, because her Sin is great.”114

Her future after this episode is prefigured, but not chronicled, though the insightful reader can infer that she will spend it in appropriate ways that will testify to her position among the elect. Robinson tells very briefly how she then followed Jesus with the other Marys. He closes with a short section on her witness of the crucifixion, then her

113 Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, p. 65.
114 Robinson, The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene, p. 65. On Lutheran preaching, see above, ch. 2.
visit to the tomb, comparing her favorably with Peter and John, a departure from Calvin’s
exegesis of this text. Unlike in Southwell’s poem, where the saint’s grief over the absent
Christ is inescapable and perhaps even worsened by his too-brief reappearance,
Robinson’s Magdalene is made joyful by the news of the resurrection and gladly goes to
spread it to the disciples. There is no trace here of Southwell’s troubled, recusant
experience. “Ioye closes all, (such ioye no style hath penn’d)/ So end I with y † ioye; ner
may y † ioye haue end!”\(^{115}\)

Scholars have been divided on Robinson’s identity and confessional allegiance.
One school of thought identifies him as Protestant, reworking the story of the Magdalene
to counter the well-known interpretation of Southwell and to offer a Magdalene suitable
for Reformed piety. Heinrich Oskar Sommer’s introduction to his 1887 edition of the
poem indicates that the work testifies to a Protestant context of authorship, comparing the
allegory of the poem to the work of Spenser and Bunyan.\(^{116}\) Sommer explains that the
Magdalene constitutes an exception to the general rule of Protestant withdrawal from
veneration of the saints. “Protestantism, with its clarifying tendency, no longer observed
the cult of the saints, but Mary Magdalene was nevertheless still counted as a saint,
because the savior himself declared her a saint.”\(^{117}\) In discussing Robinson’s possible
sources, such as the *Acta Sanctorum*, *Legenda Aurea*, and the *Digby Mysteries*, Sommer
concludes that Robinson’s main source was the Bible, including the Gospels but also the

\(^{115}\) Robinson, *The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene*, p. 68.
\(^{116}\) Heinrich Oskar Sommer, ed., *Life and Death of Mary Magdalene: Ein Legendengedicht* (Marburg: N.
\(^{117}\) “Der Protestantismus mit seiner klärenden Tendenz erkannte den Heiligendienst nicht länger an, aber
Maria Magdalena fuhr nichts destoweniger fort für eine Heilige zu gelten, weil der Heiland selbst sie für
Song of Songs and the Wisdom of Solomon. Focusing on the scriptural Magdalene rather than on her legend is evidence of Protestant authorship; Sommer finds Robinson’s theological stance most plainly in line 1006, where Christ pronounces forgiveness on the Magdalene, a part of the pericope that, as we have seen, Robinson reads in agreement with evangelical preaching on the text. More recently, Götz Schmitz also identifies Robinson as Protestant, claiming that “The legend was probably devised to counteract the elegiac Magdalen literature of the Counter-Reformation” and that it was “apparently aimed at a popular audience.” The existence of a contemporary author of the same name, the explicitly Protestant Thomas Robinson who wrote the polemical, anti-monastic pamphlet, *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon* (1622), suggests an interesting possible identification for the obscure creator of the Magdalene poem.

Given that little is known of the author of *The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene*, and that it does participate in the genre of long poems about the Magdalene, other scholars have concluded that Robinson was Catholic. Margaret Hannay lists Thomas Robinson among the Catholic authors of seventeenth-century Magdalene literature, though she includes no explanation for so locating him and his work.

Likewise, Lily Campbell thought that Robinson was Catholic, proposing the possibility

---

118 Sommer, ed., *Life and Death of Mary Magdalene*, p. 25.  
119 Sommer, ed., *Life and Death of Mary Magdalene*, p. 20.  
121 Christopher Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 188.  
that he was a sixteenth-century Catholic figure, the Dean of Durham under Queen Mary, and therefore writing before 1569.\textsuperscript{123}

The theology behind Robinson’s reading of the Magdalene may be assessed by contrasting it with Southwell’s overtly Catholic poem, but also by comparing it with other Protestant poetry on the saint. Daniel Cudmore (1637?-1701) was the Anglican rector of Holsworthy, in Devon. He is recorded as having studied at Oxford, though his life is otherwise undокументed.\textsuperscript{124} His collection of poems published in 1657, \textit{Euchodia. Or, A prayer-song; being sacred poems on the history of the birth and passion of our blessed Saviour, and several other choice texts of scripture}, contains a section, “On Mary Magdalene,”\textsuperscript{125} which takes as its text the Matthew 26:6-7 account of the anointing at Bethany. Cudmore begins by hymning the surpassing sweetness of her copious tears.\textsuperscript{126} Working, like Beza and Markham, to find a place for tears in Calvinist piety, he uses her example to condemn contemporary people who are hard of heart and dry-eyed.\textsuperscript{127} In describing her, he makes a statement against cosmetics and elaborate hair-dressing, taking up a theme seen in both Catholic and Protestant authors, from Juan Luis de Vives to Menno Simons.\textsuperscript{128} The passage commends genuine sorrow over sin, with weeping as its proper manifestation. “Good-woman! Who esteem’d no paint/ Like to a face blubber’d

\textsuperscript{123} Lily B. Campbell, \textit{Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 95. Campbell claims that this was Oskar Sommer’s thesis, though I was unable to find the identification to which Campbell refers; Sommer appeared to posit Robinson as a Reformed pastor, and placed the date of publication at 1621. See Thomas Robinson, \textit{The Life and Death of Mary Magdalene}, ed. Oskar Sommer, Early English Text Society 78 (London: Kegan Paul, 1899), pp. xi-xii.


\textsuperscript{125} Daniel Cudmore, \textit{Euchodia. Or, A prayer-song; being sacred poems on the history of the birth and passion of our blessed Saviour, and several other choice texts of scripture. In two parts} (London: J.C. for William Ley in Paul’s Chain, 1657), pp. 25-29.


\textsuperscript{127} Cudmore, \textit{Euchodia}, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{128} On Simons, see below, ch. 7.
with tears;/ All other tinctures are but faint,/ But these outwear all age and years./ No Venus-mole bespeaks a Saint,/ No beauty-spot like these appears." As in Robinson’s poem, the author enters into a relationship with the Magdalene as his spiritual muse. Cudmore describes himself as Lazarus because of his sinful mortality, with Mary Magdalene mourning him. He concludes with praise for her great love and faithfulness, stronger than that of men.

For Lazarus my outward man,
Is sick, my Mary, Lord, can mourn;
Groan like a dove, throb like a swan,
Til thou hast rais’d him from his urn:
But for her self she now and than [sic]
Can weep, but doth her grief adjourn.
And yet we see, when thou dost move
Womens devotion unto love,
Men ever doth the weaker vessel prove.

In the seventeenth-century English context, Reformed authors employed tropes from the Catholic tradition that Calvin himself had scorned, such as celebrations of the Magdalene’s weeping or the positive comparison between her and the male disciples. These images expanded the language of Reformed piety while still expressing fundamental elements of Calvinist theology: the mortal peril of the sinful soul and its dependence on divine grace.

**Radical Puritans**

The development of the Reformed tradition in England included radical elements, particularly during the generation of the Commonwealth, who persisted as non-

---

129 Cudmore, *Euchodia*, p. 27.
conformists following the restoration of the monarchy. Their applications of ancient
Magdalene tropes to radical Reformed polemic and pastoralia present a striking contrast
to the dismissal of Mary Magdalene in Calvin’s own exegesis. Even in strictly
iconoclastic traditions, the utility of these time-honored tropes for teaching lessons old
and new proved impossible to resist.

The Presbyterian minister John Rogers wrote a 500 page pamphlet, *Ohel or Beth-
shemesh* (1653), addressed to Oliver Cromwell. Among his prophetic and millenarian
calls, Rogers advances the spiritual equality of women. In a list of scriptural figures
including Abigail, Priscilla, the Canaanite woman, Deborah, Lydia, and the Samaritan
woman, he gives evidence of women “surpassing men for piety and judgment; and
therefore [they] ought to have equal liberty with them in church-affairs.” The
resurrection narrative takes pride of place in this enumeration of biblical examples,
repeating the convention of Mary’s comparison to the male disciples, and including a
celebration of her role as *apostola apostolorum*. “And Mary Magdalene, for piety and
spirit, outran, and outreached all the twelve disciples in her diligence to seek out Christ:
to whom Christ first discovered himself after his resurrection, and bid her declare it to his
disciples; she was the first preacher of Christ’s resurrection.” In the same passage,
Rogers also notes the metaphor linking the kingdom of heaven to the woman in the Song

---

131 See Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-
p. 174.
134 Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*, p. 175.
He goes on to address the thorny problem of the injunctions to women’s silence in church, from 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. He concedes that Paul meant that women are not to preach and minister as public officers of the church, as men do, but claims that they ought to be allowed to testify to the Gospel and vote on the business of the church as equal members.

Richard Baxter, a more influential, but still non-conformist Puritan theologian, addressed his *A Christian Directory: Or, A Summ of Practical Theologie, and Cases of Conscience* (1673) to both men and women. His text is engaged with questions that might preoccupy any believer, as well as those more specifically applicable to women, such as the hardships women bear in marriage and childbirth, in which sections he adopts the second person pronoun. His advice on how to manage the distractions of a family and household invoke the conflict between Mary and Martha. While noting the superiority of a pure devotion to the divine, he does not simply relegate women to one sphere or other exclusively, but notes with the realism of the married person—as Baxter was at the time he wrote *A Christian Directory*—that life does not always permit such undivided attention.

The business, care, and trouble of a married life, is a great temptation to call down our thoughts from God, and to divert them from the ‘one thing necessary’ (Luke 10:42) … How hard it is to pray, or meditate with any serious fervency, when you come out of a crowd of cares and businesses… You think yourselves (as Martha) under a greater necessity of dispatching your business, than of sitting at Christ’s

---

135 Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*, p. 175.
138 Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*, p. 117.
feet to hear his Word. O that single persons knew... the preciousness of their leisure.¹⁴⁰

The wistfulness of his closing seems to imply an acquaintance, on the part of husbands as well as wives, with the frustrations of everyday demands. He seems to be recommending a faithfulness to one’s vocation and duty, acknowledging its rigors, rather than an ultimate postponement of spiritual pursuits or an abandonment of daily responsibilities.

Magdalene language was, then, being used to describe the exemplary faith of contemporary Reformed women, both ideal and real. The author of a 1675 epitaph for a noted female patron of the Anglican church, Lady Mary Armine, engaged the Magdalene tradition, including a conflation of the saint’s multiple identities, in order to praise his subject as a defender of the Reformed faith. Though a loyal Anglican, Armine gave money in support of dissenting clergy in 1662, and apparently took an interest in the case of Richard Baxter, who faced persecution as a dissenter.¹⁴¹ Armine lived in Lincolnshire, but used her means to support church missions in Massachusetts, particularly John Eliot’s schools at Natick and Grafton.¹⁴² This patronage led to her biography’s preservation in a nineteenth-century study of Massachusetts’s history whose focus was the Reformed heritage of the region, including accounts of the Huguenot community that immigrated to Massachusetts. Her epitaph is held up by the study’s authors, Chrystia and Mary DeWitt Freeland, as part of that collective legacy.

An Epitaph for Lady Mary Armine (1675):

¹⁴⁰ Irwin, Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, p. 116.
Hail Mary, full of grace, 'bove women blest;
A Name more rich in Saints than all the rest;
An army of them fam’d in sacred Story:
All good, none bad, an unparallel’d Glory!

Next follows Mary the Bethanien;

How much is spoke of Mary Magdalen?

A Mary was the Mother of our Lord.
A Mary ‘twas laid up in heart his word.
A Mary ‘twas that chose the better part.
A Mary ‘twas that wept with broken heart.
A Mary ‘twas that did anoint Christ’s feet.
A Mary pour’d on’s Head the Spikenard sweet.
At Christ’s Cross standing Maries three I find.
When others fled, they were not so unkind.
Christ dead, interr’d, at the Sepulchre door
Two Maries stand, I find no Women more.

So that from the Cradle to the Passion;
From Passion to the Resurrection;
From Resurrection to the Ascention;
Observe you may a Mary still was one,
The Army of such Ladies so divine,
This Lady said, I’le follow they all Ar-mine,

Lady Elect! In whom there did combine
So many Maries, might’st say all Ar-mine.
Thou Mother Sister, Spouse wa’st of the Lord,
In that in Heart and Life thou kept’st his Word,
With th’other Mary chose the better part;
With Mary Magdalen had’st a most tender heart.

On Christ a Mary spent all that she could;
Tho’ others grudg’d, more if she had she would,
To th’Head above could’st not, on the Feet below
Thou did’st not spare much cost for to bestow.
Thy name a precious Ointment, and the Armies
Of Saints, and Angels are the Lady Armines.

Now God and Christ are thine, and what’s Divine
In Heaven’s enjoyment, Blest Soul! Now All are thine.
Here we see another Reformed author apparently comfortable in exploring aspects of the Magdalene tradition that would have fallen afoul of Calvin’s own estimation. And, again, we observe the theme of incorporating a variety of roles, active and contemplative, within the life of the individual, as part of fulfilling the vocation of the priesthood of all believers. The saint’s position as a scriptural figure would certainly have leant some latitude to Protestants considering apt role models for their communities. It is possible, too, that the English context, in which both Protestant and Catholic texts were widely read and published, and in which confessional identity continued to be a matter of some fluidity in the lives of families and individuals, permitted or even encouraged more diversity in devotional options.

One prominent example of a Protestant author whose own religious identity had been Catholic in his youth is John Donne, the metaphysical poet and Anglican clergyman who had been raised in a recusant family. His poem celebrating the piety of Lady Magdalen Herbert, the mother of Donne’s fellow poet and cleric George Herbert, was offered as a gift to its subject on the Feast of the Magdalene, 1607.144 Like Mary Armine’s epitaph, it uses the many Marys on offer as a literary device. Having renounced his Catholicism, Donne was apparently unwilling, at least in the conceit of the poem, to abandon the multifaceted Magdalene of the hagiographic tradition.

Her of your name, whose fair inheritance
Bethina was, and jointure Magdalo,
An active faith so highly did advance,

143 Freeland and Freeland, The Records of Oxford, Massachusetts, pp. 4-5.
That she once knew, more than the Church did know,
The Resurrection; so much good there is
Deliver'd of her, that some Fathers be
Loth to believe one woman could do this;
But think these Magdalens were two or three.
Increase their number, Lady, and their fame;
To their devotion add your innocence;
Take so much of th' example as of the name,
The latter half; and in some recompense,
That they did harbour Christ Himself, a guest,
Harbour these hymns, to His dear Name address'd.\textsuperscript{145}

Though he includes all of her potential identities in the poem, listing both Bethany and Magdala as places associated with her, it is her “active faith,” marked by her special, early knowledge of the resurrection, and the news of it that she delivered, that Donne selects for his chief praise.

Such celebrations of aristocratic women’s active faith stood within a context of debate over the proper role for women in religious life in England. Women had been forbidden to read scriptures aloud in male hearing in 1543, an offence for which some had been arrested, including one “Mrs. Castle of St. Andrews, Holborn known as ‘a reader of the scripture in church,’ or for ‘disturbing the service of the church with brabbling of the New Testament.’”\textsuperscript{146} Susan Wabuda has chronicled the struggle over this point in England’s Reformation, and the stakes involved.

Women’s reading raised the most uncomfortable of all the questions that Bible reading encouraged about ministry. Women were bound by St. Paul’s strictures that prevented them from teaching men... the most restrictive aspects of St. Paul’s dictates had to be altered during the Reformation to allow women greater access to reading and teaching than they had enjoyed hitherto. As early as the beginning of the 1530s, Lambert’s thinking reflected this important alteration... In times of

great necessity, women as well as laymen could preach. To support his claim, he cited scriptural authorities that would become the standard points of reference for women’s teaching [Joel 2:28; Anna; the Magnificat].

The law against reading was reversed by Edward VI, acknowledging the validity of the evangelical argument in favor of women’s public ministry in time of need. The question of the Magdalene, of her active ministry as well as of the personal relationship to the divine thus given outward expression, was therefore central to the working out of the English Reformation’s religious culture, to its interpretation of how individuals, including women, are called to be members of the community of the elect.

Conclusion

Although the Reformed Magdalene is emphatically a figure of penitence, of divine accommodation to human frailty, and of the radical nature of conversion, there is evidence for a surprising diversity of interpretation at the level of popular devotion and literature. Even the continued attachment of these themes to the Magdalene, whom Calvin had separated from the Luke 7 text, demonstrates the latitude of exegesis and devotional practice that existed in the larger Reformed community. Loyalty to the figure of the Magdalene that included Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman persisted among Calvinist communities, from French exiles in Geneva and the Americas to English clergymen serving an increasingly Puritan church.

The theology of penitence and evangelical conversion is best represented in Reformed preaching on the pericopes involving the saint. Our case study of the English

---

Church can provide numerous examples of this emphasis, as well. Nicholas Breton’s 1595 sermon on John 20, *Marie Magdalen’s Love, upon the Twentieth Chapter of John*, invokes Mary to discuss “divine love, proper humility, and repentance.”\(^{149}\) Lancelot Andrewes’s 1620 Easter sermon offers the Magdalene as a model of faith.\(^{150}\) John Bunyan’s *Good News for the Vilest of Men* “cites Mary Magdalene as proof that true repentance produces forgiveness.”\(^{151}\) Preaching in this mold conveyed the Magdalene of Calvin’s own interpretation, or did not stray too far from it.

While the positive role of the Reformed Magdalene as a figure of exemplary penitence is attested by these sermons and texts, the mocking misogyny of Calvin’s exegesis is also visible in Reformed English culture. A late seventeenth-century play, *The Damoselle*, by Richard Brome, features a comical, drunken Mrs. Magdalen, who is always in tears. “She’s in her maudlin fit; all her wine showers out in tears.”\(^{152}\) Brome’s figure of fun is not a carnival inversion of social power after the understanding of Victor Turner,\(^{153}\) but rather signifies the confidence of its society’s iconoclasm, resonating with the strident derision of Calvin and Viret. Images that had stood for centuries, sanctifying various elements of religious experience, were often displaced by the rigor of their reform movement. In a religious context deeply distrustful of emotive, mystical experience, the Magdalene could provide a straightforward warning about sin or doubt, with the more extravagant manifestations of her spiritual identity explained away as the ravings of female hysteria. There were those, however, who chose to pause with the weeping

\(^{149}\) Hannay, “Mary Magdalene,” p. 58.
\(^{150}\) Hannay, “Mary Magdalene,” p. 58.
\(^{151}\) Hannay, “Mary Magdalene,” p. 58.
\(^{152}\) Hannay, “Mary Magdalene,” p. 59.
Magdalene at the empty tomb. Authors from Theodore Beza to John Donne found valuable lessons in the story of a sinner’s profound devotion to Christ, lessons they applied to the lives of congregations and fellow Christians. The Calvinist clerics and poets who took up her story as a tool for encouraging Protestant piety saw something still of use in the long tradition of Magdalene iconography. They dared to sketch captivating dramas of conversion, pity, and passion on the whitewashed walls of the Reformed imagination.
Almost from its first days, the Protestant movement gave rise to more radical theologies and practices of reform than Luther had espoused.¹ His immediate colleagues and contemporaries, such as Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Ulrich Zwingli, and Caspar Schwenckfeld, broke with Luther’s teaching on the Eucharist and infant Baptism.² Anabaptism was named for the Donatist groups that had been condemned by Augustine for promoting rebaptism of those who had received the sacrament from apostate clergy.³ Sixteenth-century Anabaptists espoused a believer’s baptism, which could not be undertaken for those beneath the age of consent and religious education; its promises could not be pledged for another, such as a godchild, but must be made as expressions of an individual’s experience of conversion and self-dedication to God. Those whom Luther labeled “Spiritualists” and “Enthusiasts” sought a direct, personal encounter with the Spirit through an unorthodox reading of the scriptures or through the channels of mystical experience.⁴ Some, such as the militant revolutionary, Thomas Münzer, attempted to create new communities limited only to those who had themselves experienced authentic conversions, purging the so-called ungodly through violence.⁵ Following the failure of experiments in politicizing the vision of a purified community, Anabaptists resolved to

⁴ See, e.g., Table Talk no. 342 (1532), LW 54:48; *A Letter of Dr. Martin Luther Concerning the His Book on the Private Mass* (1534), LW 38:221.
live in the surrounding world but distinct from it, setting themselves apart by their confessions of faith. Those who insisted on nonconformity to the established confession of a territory often faced persecution and even death for their beliefs. This chapter will examine interpretations of Mary Magdalene to be found among the adherents of two communities that emerged from the Radical Reformation, from its beginnings through the close of the seventeenth century, when wider toleration for these groups changed the nature of their identity within their contexts.\(^6\) I will look first at Continental Anabaptists from the sixteenth century, as a group that documented considerable activity among women through its martyrological literature, and then at Quakers in seventeenth-century England, a movement whose founders embraced the Magdalene as an example of women’s public leadership.

Just as we have seen in the denominations that emerged from the magisterial Reformation, the churches of the Radical Reformation had their own theological programs to advance, and would take up different aspects of the Magdalene tradition, or not, as they helped to achieve those goals. References to Mary Magdalene, and to Mary of Bethany, with whom she had been associated, are infrequent in the documents preserved from the Anabaptist martyrs, despite their overwhelming dependence on scriptural citation as the means of confession, exhortation, and spiritual counsel. There are some instances of her use, however, which help locate the parts of the saint’s identity most relevant to Anabaptist theology. The relative absence of the saint, even as other

scriptural figures did become common rallying points, may help us to draw some conclusions about the appeal of Mary Magdalene in different church contexts. Mary Magdalene’s identification with prostitution may have been an undesirable connection for Anabaptists, who emphasized the moral life as an expression of conversion and who sought to distance themselves from Lutheran clergy and communities whom they criticized for immorality. Though the woman whom Jesus commanded to speak his message may find a likely home in evangelical churches, churches that need to grow through the work of their members, she may be less useful in a context of immediate persecution, both because open proselytizing is dangerous for illegal sects, and because the Magdalene’s story does not feature a martyrdom with which the reader can identify.

In seventeenth-century England, for example, members of new sects faced persecution, but confronted death much more rarely than did continental Anabaptists. Both Margaret Fell and her husband, George Fox, leaders of the English Quaker movement, held up the resurrection narrative as the center of their argument for female preaching; their work on this question would come to form the theology and practice of that denomination. The Quakers’ embrace of Mary Magdalene alongside other prominent female scriptural prophets established a foundation for women’s leadership in the Society of Friends. How, then, did the different free church traditions, which do not emphasize sainthood apart from the lives of ordinary believers, reject or reinterpret a hagiographic legacy and, in both cases, derive authority in so doing?

7 Margaret Fell, *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed by the Scriptures* (London, 1666).
8 The Free Churches that emerged in the early modern period were Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites, and Hutterites. For a discussion of this term, see Graydon F. Snyder and Doreen M. McFarlane, *The People Are Holy: The History and Theology of Free Church Worship* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), pp.
Anabaptists

Anabaptists faced severe persecution from their beginnings in the sixteenth century, as documented in martyrological literature that shaped the piety of the members of the movement. This literature participated in larger impulses of the era of Reformation, including attempts to establish authenticating connections between reform movements and the early church and its martyrs, and expressions of an apocalyptic worldview. Inheriting more than a century of martyrological documents and publications, Thieleman van Braght’s 1660 *Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror* collected narratives of torture and execution, legal sentences, interrogation records, and letters from those imprisoned and condemned, written to their communities and loved ones. Van Braght’s work presents these accounts of Anabaptist persecutions with a long introductory section on the Christian martyrs of the early church and medieval era, clearly proclaiming that the Anabaptists represent the true heirs of such faithful perseverance unto death.

Explicit references to Mary Magdalene are few in the *Martyrs Mirror*, despite a rhetorical culture, in both the original letters and the editorial material, which seems almost exclusively composed of biblical citations. In a movement strongly oriented toward iconoclasm, one might expect to find an absence of medieval saints used as examples. The paucity of references to the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene, and the

3-4. In this chapter, I will use Free Church to denote the theological and liturgical connections between the traditions discussed.
subtlety of those that can be found, require some interpretation of the sources and the
theological goals of the communities they present. Clifford Snyder and Linda Hecht have
documented the strategy of silence and equivocation that was often adopted by early
Anabaptists.\textsuperscript{11} In many cases, silence was clearly the safest course, and a self-comparison
to an active preacher of the Gospel would have been too dangerous. Silence in the face of
persecution went beyond a pragmatic caution for Anabaptists, however. Diarmaid
McCulloch argues that passive resistance to suffering, including silent endurance, was
held by Anabaptists to be a mark of the true church.\textsuperscript{12} Anabaptist communities
established their authority, paradoxically, by not claiming it with eloquent testimonials.

In the third-person narratives of executions, particularly those of female martyrs,
there are many descriptions of Anabaptists facing death eagerly, going joyfully to meet
Christ, their promised bridegroom.\textsuperscript{13} This image for the relationship between the believer
and Christ begs the question of a woman’s proper allegiance, to her heavenly bridegroom
or to her earthly home and husband, which is the theme of the story of Mary and Martha.
This question underlies one such use of the marriage metaphor, in the account of the
deaths of David and Levina, in 1554. Van Braght writes of Levina that she “rather
forsook, not only her six dear children, but also her temporal life, than her dear Lord and
Bridegroom Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{14} The Anabaptist martyrs’ loyalty to Christ above all else

\footnotesize\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{11}]Profiles of Anabaptist Women, p. 39.
\item[\textsuperscript{12}]See Gregory, Salvation at Stake, pp. 202, 228, 246; Diarmaid McCulloch, Silence: A Christian History
(New York: Penguin, 2013), especially the section, “Silences for Survival,” on “Reformation Radicals:
Word and Silence.”
\item[\textsuperscript{13}]Martyrs Mirror, 569.
\item[\textsuperscript{14}]Martyrs Mirror, 549.
\end{itemize}
made the leave-taking of children a frequent subject of the letters to family members. The assertion that Christ is one’s true spouse, taking priority over one’s earthly husband and children, therefore links two of the themes of the Magdalene tradition: both Mary of Bethany’s intimacy with Christ and the marriage imagery of the Song of Songs. References to particular passages from the Song of Songs in the martyrological context establish the profound nature of the bond between believers and Christ, as in the narrative for Maria and Ursula van Beckum, executed in 1544, where the two women accompany one another to death, and it is noted that “Here love was stronger than death, and firmer than the grave. Cant. 8:6.” The same text figures in a contemporary Anabaptist hymn that praised the two women. The use of marital language to describe faith as making an absolute claim is especially significant in light of the permission and even encouragement granted to Anabaptist women to divorce a spouse who did not share her religious affiliation. The obligation to Christ took priority over the human wedding vows, as an early Swiss Anabaptist tract affirmed.

The spiritual marriage and obligation to Christ, yea, faith, love, and obedience to God… takes precedence over the earthly marriage, and one ought rather forsake such earthly companion than the spiritual companion. And by not removing the designated one from the bond of marriage we care more for earthly than for spiritual obligations and debts.

---

15 Elisabeth’s Manly Courage, p. 165; see also Profiles of Anabaptist Women, p. 4; Gregory, Salvation at Stake, p. 213.
16 Martyrs Mirror, 467.
17 Elisabeth’s Manly Courage, p. 127.
18 Williams, The Radical Reformation, p. 779.
In the conceit established by the comparison of spiritual life to a marital relationship, martyrdom becomes the act of consummation, or the public wedding ceremony of the spiritual marriage.

While the reference to bridal imagery from the Song of Songs is present, however, it remains largely general, with the identification of Christ as the believer’s spouse often made abstractly. The marriage language is also used in the martyrological literature in connection with the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, whose relative preparation for the coming of the bridegroom made the difference between those who would go into the wedding feast and those who would be cast into the outer darkness. There are no explicit references at all in the Martyrs Mirror to Mary Magdalene’s traditional identification with the female figure of the Song of Songs. By contrast, the figures of Susannah and Judith are openly recommended as examples of suffering and sacrifice; perhaps the violence attached to their stories made them more appealing models for those facing persecution. Two of the features of the Magdalene’s character, however, her intimacy with Christ, including the implicit echo in references to the bride from the Song of Songs, and the primacy that Mary of Bethany gave to her devotion to Christ, before her role in the family, remain as strong theological currents in the martyr narratives.

The only places where unambiguous references to Mary Magdalene, in her various identities, are to be found is in the letters Anabaptists wrote to their families, as they awaited execution. The special importance Anabaptists placed on the Scriptures as

---

19 For a reference to both the Song of Songs and the wise and foolish virgins, see Martyrs Mirror, 908.
20 Martyrs Mirror, 918; Elisabeth’s Manly Courage, 167.
the sole means of salvation suggested a suitable theological role for Mary of Bethany, with her particular dedication to the incarnate Word, listening attentively to the person of Christ.  

A letter from Jerome Segers to his wife, Lijksen Dircks, in 1551, while both were imprisoned, makes use of Mary’s example at a crucial time of testing. He encourages his wife to persevere in reading the Bible for herself, even though she may be urged otherwise by those anxious to turn her from the faith. He writes, “And though they may tell you to attend to your sewing, this does not prevent us; for Christ has called us all, and commanded us to search the Scriptures, since they testify of Him; and Christ also said that Magdalene had chosen the better part, because she searched the Scriptures. Matt. 11.28, John 5:39, Luke 10:42.” Segers here continues the identification of the Magdalene as Mary of Bethany, and uses her example to argue for the supreme importance of the spiritual life for both men and women, even at the expense of domestic responsibilities. The “sewing” Lijksen was advised to concentrate on may have had a more pointed meaning than simply a standard female task. It may have meant the preparation of clothing for the child she was expecting; she was executed by drowning shortly after giving birth. One can conclude from Segers’s entreaty that reminders to consider one’s traditional duties and family loyalties may well have been one part of the approach that was taken to reconvert Anabaptist women. Segers and his wife were imprisoned and killed in Antwerp, a Catholic community, where arguments against female scripture reading might be expected as part of the standard arsenal against Protestantism, more than they might be in a Lutheran or Reformed context.

---


22 Martyrs Mirror, REF.
Similarly, Jan Wouters, in a letter to the family of his sister and brother-in-law, written in 1572, offered parting counsel to his nieces and nephews, encouraging them all to follow Christ’s teaching. The particular advice he gives to his niece includes a reference to Mary of Bethany. “Hence I beseech you, my dear, beloved niece, to shun evil, diligently to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and to work to satisfy [your soul’s] hunger with bread, and quench her thirst with drink. If you do this, my dear niece, you will be one who with Mary has chosen the good part; and I will then await you there with Christ Jesus.”

Wouters was imprisoned and burned at the stake in Dortrecht in March, 1572, just before the Dutch rebellion against Hapsburg rule achieved a coup in the city, establishing Protestant rule. Though Dortrecht had, by that time, developed as a staunch outpost of Reformed theology, it remained confessionally divided and officially loyal to Catholic Spain at the time of Wouters’s death. Indeed, some of Wouters’s own family remained Catholic, and so, as for Segers, the very reading of the scriptures was in jeopardy for his female correspondents.

Anabaptist men can thus be seen applying the identity of the Magdalene, especially as Mary of Bethany, to their correspondents, mostly intimate members of their families. The identification is an interesting one in the context of the early-modern family, in which men held authority over their households and women were generally understood to be relegated to domestic roles. In the case of religious persecution,

23 Martyrs Mirror, 923.
25 See his letter to his sister-in-law, a nun still “among the Papists,” Martyrs Mirror, 918.
however, that hierarchy of value appears to have been disrupted, with the spiritual
equality of the priesthood of all believers and the evangelical imperative of a public
confession of faith taking precedence over social conventions and duties. Though many
of the letters include discussions of a couple’s children, they never counsel abandonment
of the faith in order to protect them or maintain a home for them. Under the conditions of
imprisonment and martyrdom, Anabaptist husbands and fathers felt compelled to call
their wives away from home and hearth, to a devotion to the word of God that might cost
them their families and lives. The women who followed that call were celebrated in the
martyrological literature. Sigrun Haude refers to the story of Anneken Jansz, “who gave
her child to a stranger in the crowd and suffered death rather than be a hypocrite when it
came to her belief,” noting that “this was diametrically opposed to what a woman ought
to do.” Yet women had been doing what they were not supposed to do in the Christian
tradition from its beginnings, from Mary of Bethany’s unseemly devotion to Christ to the
Magdalene’s untrustworthy chatter about the resurrection, which so amused medieval
Passion play audiences.

Though the Magdalene’s traditional identities were used explicitly to fortify
Anabaptist women for a radical commitment to God, the question of women’s preaching
and public testimony among early-modern Anabaptists also draws on the subtler but
enduring echoes of the Magdalene’s roles as preacher and as one possessed by an
emphatically undomesticated spirituality. These echoes can be detected by looking
carefully at how women’s activity developed among Anabaptists, and how it was

---

characterized by contemporaries. There has been considerable debate in the historiography of Anabaptism, over the public roles allowed women in the movement. Keith Thomas described radical communities as having a greater openness to women’s preaching, as compared to the churches of the magisterial Reformation. “After the Reformation it was not unusual for Protestant leaders to admit that, under exceptional circumstances, in a heathen country, for example, women might be allowed to preach as a temporary expedient. But this conclusion was reluctant and largely theoretical and it was left to the radical sects to work out the logical consequences of the extreme Protestant position.” Hans-Jürgen Goertz uncovers the theological basis for this possibility, arguing that Anabaptist women did engage in public preaching, because of the movement’s radical interpretation of the priesthood of all believers. “The laity, both men and women, began to take over priestly ministries, preaching, celebrating communion and baptizing. There is documentary evidence that women engaged in ‘corner’ preaching and evangelism.” Other scholars have been more cautious about the degree to which women participated in preaching, and how it would have been regarded by Anabaptists themselves or their opponents. While acknowledging that there were considerable limitations placed on women’s public activity, especially after the initial freedom of the early movement, Snyder and Hecht seek to broaden consideration of preaching to explore the ways women exercised “remarkable ‘informal’ leadership in proselytization, in Bible reading (in some cases), in ‘unofficial’ teaching and preaching, in hymn-writing, and, in

---

28 See Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, pp. 8-10.
the early movement, in prophetic utterance." These categories include very different activities, combining communication that produces conversion with actions and teaching that claim a degree of acknowledged authority. The persecution of women, as Anabaptists and as witches, establishes the threat that communities perceived in any public activity by women, as Gary Waite points out. His list of Anabaptist women’s roles includes "preachers, visionaries, prophets, missionaries, and informal house-church leaders [sic]" as well as authors of "impromptu sermons" preached by imprisoned women writing to their families, and by martyrs during execution.32

Contemporary observers did record various kinds of public testimony by women. Some of the first descriptions of Anabaptist meetings feature demonstrations of charisms by both women and men, who testified by confessing the faith and speaking in tongues, as happened in Switzerland and Germany in the mid-1520s.33 The spiritual authority thus established was translated into the terms of Anabaptist polity. The Schleitheim Articles gave congregations, including women, the power to evaluate and discipline pastors.34 Anabaptist women as a whole contributed to the mutual governance of the community.

In addition to participating in public, mixed gatherings, they also proclaimed the Gospel among themselves, and to convert other women.35 Päivi Räisänen Schröder describes women evangelizing through networks of female occupations, such as the

31 Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, p. 11.
33 Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, pp. 19, 49-50, 73, 84.
34 Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, pp. 21, 51.
35 Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, p. 38.
teaching of children and servants in the home, and in work as itinerant seamstresses.\footnote{Päivi Räisänen Schröder, “Between Martyrdom and Everyday Pragmatism: Gender, Family, and Anabaptism in Early Modern Germany,” in \textit{Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe}, eds. Marianna G. Muravyeva and Raisa Maria Torvo, Routledge Research in Gender and History (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 96.}

Snyder and Hecht note that women’s meeting together was sometimes regarded by local authorities as merely domestic, social, or simply not as ominous as a male gathering, and so women’s proselytizing proved crucial—through evading some persecution—for the survival of the movement.\footnote{Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, p. 48.} Despite the relative invisibility of these kinds of networks, such efforts did not pass entirely unnoticed. In Switzerland, Margaret Hellwart, for example, was punished for her successful evangelism of women.\footnote{Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, pp. 21, 66.}

The recorded testimonies of those women tried and punished for their Anabaptist faith constitute one of the most formal kinds of Snyder and Hecht’s “informal” female religious leadership. As Waite observes, “Even when… leaders disallowed their female members from formal preaching, the authorities inadvertently provided them with other pulpits: the scaffold and the martyr testimonies, letters, and songs that were central to proselytizing efforts.”\footnote{Waite, \textit{Eradicating the Devil’s Minions}, p. 192.} Women used these forums to give voice to their theological commitments. Not only the women’s words, but the ways in which they were interpreted by contemporary martyrologists conveyed their character as preached messages to the faithful. Genelle Gertz finds John Foxe describing female martyrs’ “homiletic speech before interrogators, demonstrating that women continued to preach in court.”\footnote{Genelle Gertz, \textit{Heresy Trials and English Women Writers, 1400-1670} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 10.} These court sermons feature the standard elements of the preaching genre: they outline the

\footnotetext[37]{Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, p. 48.}
\footnotetext[38]{Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, pp. 21, 66.}
\footnotetext[39]{Waite, \textit{Eradicating the Devil’s Minions}, p. 192.}
speaker’s theological position, distinguishing it from opposing positions, and they use evidence from scripture. Margret Hottinger, when questioned in Zurich in 1525-26, denied the validity of infant baptism. One of her companions, Winbrat Fanwiler, supported this claim by noting the absence of infant baptism in scripture, showing that she was confident in interpreting scripture in public.\(^{41}\) Agnes Linck, interrogated in 1528 in Solothurn, Switzerland, openly questioned both Catholic and Evangelical Eucharistic theology, and proclaimed her own baptism “in spirit and in truth,” directly from God.\(^{42}\) She affirmed this understanding of baptism, as well as the importance of living a biblical life and of condemning the cult of the saints, in another public interrogation two years later, in Basel.\(^{43}\) Her confession includes an admission that she had been teaching children in her household.\(^{44}\) She criticized the preaching of local clergy, with the implication that her own publicly voiced theological opinions were, by contrast, true.\(^{45}\) Because she was also accused of having purchased a New Testament, all of this activity can be said to have an exegetical impetus; like the pronouncements and programs of male clergy, the “preaching” of Linck and other Anabaptist women was the expression of their own interpretation of scripture. This intimate experience of the word of God, that transforms the believer’s life and commands her to speak, parallels the Magdalene’s relationship to Christ, the incarnate word. While members of other confessional traditions

\(^{41}\) Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, p. 47.  
\(^{42}\) Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, p. 32.  
\(^{43}\) Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, pp. 33-34.  
\(^{44}\) Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, p. 34.  
\(^{45}\) Snyder and Hecht, eds., \textit{Profiles of Anabaptist Women}, p. 35.
made this parallel explicit, in describing their impulse to speak or write, for Anabaptist women the comparison is implicit.

Implicit, subtle, or coded messages were a common feature of Anabaptist discourse. Sometimes the speech made by Anabaptist women was not a straightforward confession of faith, but demonstrated the strategy of silence or carefully manipulated speech, in order to safeguard the movement. One tactic was a pretence of mental defect or “simplemindedness.”46 Adelheit Schwartz and her companions, interrogated in Zurich in 1529, gave answers that stymied the questioners through mumbling, self-contradiction, and the offering of inarguable generalities.47 Margaret Hellwart’s demeanor, smiling and laughing through her interrogations in Beutelsbach in the early seventeenth century, conveyed courage and disdain for other religious authorities.48 Goertz documents women’s “anti-clerical action,” which included publicly mocking ecclesiastical visitors and preachers, desecrating holy water, and proclaiming visions of violence done to prominent members of the clergy.49 Women evangelized through such subversive actions and speech acts as well as through the tacit but powerful testimony of their lives. Margret Hottinger was renowned and respected for her disciplined manner of life; the authority this garnered gave credence to her claims about a direct connection to God, which she justified with scriptural references.50

Thus, although they were not permitted to serve as preachers and pastors of congregations, women in early modern Anabaptism effectively ‘preached’ in a variety of

47 Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, p. 39.
49 Goertz, The Anabaptists, p. 115.
50 Snyder and Hecht, eds., Profiles of Anabaptist Women, p. 49.
ways, including conversation, hospitality, teaching, civil disobedience, religious protest, singing and ecstatic utterance, and testimony in the face of persecution. While their work was not described as preaching by either the women or their audiences, it was clearly understood and feared for its power to convert and for its claims of authoritative teaching. Women’s public speech was crucial to the spread of the Anabaptist movement, through informal networks of evangelism and through the more formal statements made by martyred women, whose words were treasured and recorded by their local communities and in the wider Anabaptist tradition. The very importance of women’s evangelism links their work to the role of the Magdalene, the first preacher of the Christian church. Other features of women’s activity in early modern Anabaptism recall other aspects of the Magdalene legacy: persistent devotion to Christ in the face of physical suffering and at the expense of one’s family duties; prophetic testimony that is viewed as insubordinate or at least inappropriate; support of the church’s growth (and of a charismatic preacher) from within a community of women.

*Anabaptist Preachers*

Where laypersons can be found invoking the scriptural images and cultural resonances of Mary Magdalene at need, the professional theologians of the Anabaptist movement also adapted the Magdalene legacy to address pastoral and hermeneutical questions. The leader of the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, Menno Simons,
explored the story of the sinful woman from Luke 7 in his essay *The True Christian Faith* (1541). Simons assumed the leadership of Dutch Anabaptism after the failure of Münster; his concern to direct the community away from social activism and toward personal holiness is evident in the use he makes of the Magdalene. Following the traditional association—Simons had been a Catholic priest before becoming an Anabaptist—he connects her with Mary Magdalene, though he does allude to the controversy over her identity: “She had been possessed of seven devils (if indeed she was that woman, or Mary, of whom the evangelists make mention).” Simons describes her conversion, which produced in her the virtuous response of humility. He uses her example to embark on a long excursus, reproving the proud in his community and congregation. In particular, he attacks those who wear fine clothes, taking up the rich heritage of depictions of the Magdalene as a worldly sensualist, a wealthy heiress tempted to sin by her beauty, which she had exploited with cosmetics, elaborate hair arrangements, and fashionable dress. Christian women, he writes, should not do so, and even if they are inclined to, their husbands should curb such inclinations. This last counsel demonstrates that Anabaptist culture in this period affirmed a traditional hierarchy of marital authority, only encouraging departure from it under conditions of persecution or potential apostasy. As the Dutch Anabaptist community retreated from the perilous political experiments of their earlier history, the assertion of an ethical emphasis that would support social order promoted the long-term survival of their movement.

---

52 Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*, p. 57.
Distancing themselves from a freedom created in the crucible of revolution, Anabaptists were concerned to promote adherence to a strict moral code. In a work that engaged the community on the fraught question of the role of good works in Christian life, the penitent woman provided Simons with an important example of amendment of life.\textsuperscript{53} According to his reading, her story should shame those who profess to be Christians and yet continue in sin, especially sexual sin. In this, Simons applies the caution equally to men and women.\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, he goes on mostly to criticize those men who seduce and use women for selfish pleasure, without any commitment to honorable marriage. Simons lists the admirable characteristics of the penitent woman: she “adorned her soul inwardly and not her appearance outwardly;” she “sighed and wept and feared the wrath and judgment of the Lord;” she “was compassionate and merciful;” she “sought the company of the righteous;” she “sat at the feet of Jesus and heard his holy Word.”\textsuperscript{55} The character he sketches includes all of the elements of the composite, medieval Magdalene: asceticism, penitence, compassion, weeping, discipleship, and Mary of Bethany’s devotion to the incarnate word. He then portrays sinful men and women doing the opposite in each case, adorning themselves with fancy clothes, wasting themselves in frivolity, being proud and cruel, keeping bad company, and turning away from the study of God’s word.

In the conclusion of his treatment of the text, Simons returns to a consideration of its special application to women, using the Magdalene as a pedagogical image of ideal

\textsuperscript{53} Harry Loewen, \textit{Luther and the Radicals: Another Look at Some Aspects of the Struggle between Luther and the Radical Reformers} (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University, 1974), p. 27.
\textsuperscript{54} Irwin, \textit{Womanhood in Radical Protestantism}, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{55} Irwin, \textit{Womanhood in Radical Protestantism}, pp. 58-62.
female spirituality. “I, therefore, entreat and desire all women through the mercy of the Lord to take this sorrowful, sorrowing woman as a pattern and follow her faith.” Simons, though, draws the opposite conclusion to the one that Anabaptist martyr Jerome Segers found in this text. Where Segers would urge his wife to remain true by reading the scriptures for herself, even if others remind her to attend to her sewing, Simons advises women to display their faithfulness through industrious domesticity. The imitation of Mary that Simons recommends means being humble and obedient, and staying quietly and dutifully at home. “Remain within your houses and gates… attend faithfully to your charge, to your children, house, and family… and walk in all things as the sinful woman did after her conversion.” The lesson drawn here is unusual, given that amidst the numerous Magdalene identities, that of mother is nowhere found, the figure of Mary of Bethany was a traditional symbol of the neglect of household duties in favor of more spiritual pursuits, and the Magdalene herself was known to have wandered stubbornly out of doors on the morning of the resurrection, when the male disciples remained prudently hidden. Again, Simons’s interpretation confirms that outside of the context of persecution, in more pastoral situations, Anabaptists emphasized moral duties, reshaping the Magdalene tradition to convey ethical positions on marriage and the family that conflicted with their teaching when salvation was at stake.

In another pastoral context, that of catechesis about the sacraments, Mary Magdalene’s example was also used to support and advance an Anabaptist textual interpretation. Mary Magdalene’s daring actions following the resurrection are the

56 Irwin, Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, p. 62.
57 Irwin, Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, p. 63.
subject of a letter written on Easter Sunday, 1561, by the Silesian pastor, Caspar Schwenckfeld. Schwenckfeld was influenced by Luther’s reform movement, but went on to formulate his own doctrine on the sacraments, causing his eventual exile and the condemnation of his teaching. In his letter to Sibilla Eisler, he uses the resurrection narrative to assert a memorial view of the Eucharist. He begins conventionally, by repeating the traditional comparison between the faith of the women who remained at the tomb and that of the male disciples.

Dear sister in Christ: There is not time today to write much, except to meditate upon the joyful resurrection of our dear Lord Christ and how he consoled and cheered his disconsolate disciples and the beloved women. The latter remained more faithful to the Lord Christ than the men, leaving him neither at the Cross nor at his burial... Oh how heart-warming to reflect on Mary Magdalene who loved the Lord so fervently and to whom he also appeared first.

In his praise of the saint’s loyalty, Schwenckfeld notes that her devotion was rewarded with the first appearance of the risen Christ, therefore distinguishing her among his followers. He then goes on to say that Mary Magdalene loved Christ so much that she reached out to touch him, but he refused. She could not touch the risen Lord except spiritually, and that becomes the pattern for all believers’ contact with the post-resurrection Jesus, hence, the faithful do not consume Christ bodily in the Eucharist.

Where medieval theologians—and Calvin—engaged the noli me tangere pericope to disparage women’s carnality, Schwenckfeld insists on a memorial Eucharistic theology, without attributing frailty of character to all women thereby. As we saw her in the late

60 The same interpretation of the scene can be observed in Reformed English poetry; see above, ch. 6.
medieval and early Lutheran preaching on the forgiveness of sins, Mary Magdalene is again functioning in the place of the prototypical saved sinner, revealing the touchstone of the particular theological formula on offer.

The diversity of interpretations within early Anabaptism illustrates the flexibility of the Magdalene tradition, supplying models for what were, at times, conflicting theological goals. Absolute commitment to a radically personal experience of the scriptures, concern for moral conduct among the faithful, and a reformed sacramental theology were all part of the Anabaptist movement from its beginnings. Mary Magdalene stands, Janus-like, at the Reformation nexus of Gospel and Law, sacred revelation and secular order. She is able at once to demonstrate a selfless, otherworldly attention to the incarnate Word and to help argue for the kind of self, and world, that should follow from that allegiance.

Quakers

Anabaptists’ engagement with the Magdalene tradition presents a conflicted and ambiguous picture, resonating with the themes of her various roles yet demonstrating a hesitance, on the part of early modern Anabaptist women, to identify themselves directly with the famous sinner-saint or to claim the title of preacher. This may be due, as I have argued, to the particular conditions of persecution faced by the Anabaptists, as well as to their concern with moral purity. Many traditions emerged from the Radical Reformation, including large free church bodies, small sects, individual teachings, and different martyrological interpretations. Within the limited scope of a single project, it is
impossible to assess every strand of this diverse movement. One well-known and influential free church community, the Quakers, makes a useful comparison to Anabaptists’ coded interpretation of the Magdalene because of the Quakers’ very explicit use of some of the same texts and images. Quakers adopted the Magdalene to argue boldly and openly for women’s religious leadership, though even there we can find evidence of tensions between different Magdalene interpretations.

The messages carried by the Magdalene tradition were enthusiastically taken up and propounded by the Quakers from the first years of their founding in the mid-seventeenth century. The Quakers shared many of the core concerns of radical reform with the Anabaptists, though they were not parallel movements and, indeed, they came into conflict with each other in the English context. Both groups had broken away from the magisterial reform communities—the Anabaptists from the early evangelical reform on the Continent, the Quakers from the Church of England—because they thought that those efforts did not take conversion to a biblical life seriously enough. Like the Anabaptists, the Quakers emphasized the individual’s direct experience of the Spirit, permitting biblical interpretation and charismatic liturgy. Also like the Anabaptists, for the Quakers the formation of a community of those who gave testimony of such a profound conversion led to concern with the shape of moral life: the gathered faithful should reflect the depth of their transformation through purity of conduct. Though both Anabaptists and Quakers were persecuted for this attempt to identify the community of the elect by departing from orthodox interpretations of baptismal and Eucharistic theology. But

---

where the Anabaptists had sought, after the trauma of Münster, to remove themselves from the wider society, Quakers worked within that society as activists. Anabaptist women had found ways of preaching indirectly or covertly, through a series of evangelical ministries and testimonies; Quaker women openly claimed the mantle of preacher in the name of the Magdalene.

Quakerism’s founder, George Fox, promoted a more equal role for women in the new church he envisioned with his treatise, *The Woman Learning in Silence* (1656), in which he addressed 1 Tim. 2 with the examples of Priscilla and Phoebe from the early church and Mary Magdalene from the Gospels. Another of the founders of the movement, and also Fox’s wife, Margaret Fell, discussed the saint in her own treatise arguing for women’s right to preach and teach publicly. *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures* (1667) rejects the prohibitions from 1 Cor. 14 and 1 Tim. 2, opposing them with counterexamples taken from the life of Christ, an approach we saw in the *querelle des femmes* tradition. The worthiness of women is attested by the love Christ showed for them, and received from them, as Fell writes.

Thus we see that Jesus owned the love and grace that appeared in women, and did not despise it, and by what is recorded in the Scriptures, he received as much love, kindness, compassion, and tender dealing towards him from women, as he did from any others, both in his life time, and also after they had exercised their cruelty upon him, for Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Joses, beheld where he was laid...

---

64 See above, ch. 1.
65 Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*, p. 182.
Here, the Magdalene’s compassion for Christ and intimate relationship with him are expressly representative of the character of all women. The quality of spirituality in view here is still, of course, a pattern for imitation for all believers, as it had been throughout the medieval church. At the dawning of the Pietist era, however, this kind of meditation on the Magdalene takes on a new rigor. Fell’s argument is less a delicate hymn to the feminine as present in all gentle and compassionate followers of Christ, and more clearly a legitimation of female, affective spirituality, in which the actions and experience of women speaks in bold opposition to academic—and traditionally male—theology. This exploration of women’s religious experience is remarkably similar in tone, albeit with very different practical implications, to the devotional writing of the Lutheran mystic, Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg, Fell’s contemporary.

Fell goes on to mark the crucial role played by the female witnesses of the resurrection in the spread of the Gospel and the life of the early church, but with a more openly confrontational tone than we have witnessed so far in this kind of exegesis.

It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women that were with them, which told these things to the Apostles, ‘And their words seemed unto them as idle tales, and they believed them not.’ Mark this, ye despisers of the weakness of women, and look upon yourselves to be so wise: but Christ Jesus doth not so, for he makes use of the weak… Mark this, you that despise and oppose the message of the Lord God that he sends by women, what had become of the redemption of the whole body of mankind if they had not believed the message that the Lord Jesus sent by these women, of and concerning his resurrection.


67 See above, ch. 3.

68 Irwin, Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, p. 184.
The message of Mary and the other women coming from the tomb was almost discounted, because of their gender. Fell’s interpretation draws on the same theological framework as Calvin’s: God has decided to make special use of the weakness of women in delivering the news of salvation to humanity. Her aim is different, however. The jarring effect produced by her reading of the disciples’ incredulity is not to goad men into taking their rightful place as the true preachers of the Gospel, but simply to make them ashamed at their reluctance to believe God’s appointed messenger, and to warn them against ignoring or silencing women’s speech in the future.

Finally, she joins the two parts of her treatment of the Magdalene together; both the tenderness and the testimony of women, when combined, are the necessary foundation of the church. The giving and receiving of love in intimate exchange has ultimately forged a stronger bond between Christ and his female followers than has the intellectual teaching and ecclesiastical debate conducted among the male disciples. Fell’s Quaker emphasis on the inner stirrings of heart and spirit is evident in this movement of women to the foreground of the church’s mission. The Gospel is not carried despite the weakness of its first vessel, but because of it; the Magdalene’s feminine character offers a paradoxical source of strength and insight to the church, from which men are called to learn.

And if these women had not thus, out of their tenderness and bowels of love, who had received mercy, and grace, and forgiveness of sins, and virtue, and healing from him, which many men also had received the like, if their hearts had not been so united, and knit unto him in love, that they could not depart as the men did, but sat watching, and waiting, and weeping about the sepulcher until the time of his resurrection, and so were ready to carry his message, as is manifested, else how should his Disciples have known, who were not there?69

69 Irwin, Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, p. 184.
Fell’s readers are urged to reflect on the vital necessity of the women’s presence, attitude, and response, and then armed to take up the task of securing equal participation in the church’s life.

One important forum for women’s church activity was in the women’s meetings favored by Quakers. If Anabaptist women’s preaching must be excavated from a series of evangelical activities and interrogation records, Quaker women self-consciously came together and trained each other to preach and teach, and left a published history of instructions for doing so. George Fox’s letter from 1679, “To the Men and Women’s Meetings,” sent to Bedfordshire, Northhamptonshire, and Leicestershire, continues Fell’s embrace of the positive contributions of women’s nurturing character, working for the good of the church, especially as Quakerism matured and became a “family religion.”

He hoped that “Women would become like Sarah, Deborah, Miriam, Dorcas, Priscilla, and the repentant Mary Magdalene, ‘to give suck to nurse up the seed and heir of the promise.’” Another pamphlet encouraging the formation of women’s meetings in particular was published between 1675 and 1680, and sent from the Lancashire Meeting of Women Friends to other women’s meetings in Britain and North America. The text was likely written under the guidance of Sarah Fell, Margaret Fell’s daughter. The influence of this document on the development of Quakerism has been analysed by

---

Elisabeth Potts Brown and Susan Mosher Stuard, who note how “widely circulated” it was: “The consequence of this early circulated letter can hardly be overemphasized.”72

The letter explores several scriptural figures as examples of Christ’s relationships with women. The Canaanite woman and the Samaritan woman are discussed as objects of Christ’s mercy. Mary Magdalene is mentioned among the women Christ had healed, and who had “ministered to him of their substance.”73 The woman who anointed him with oil and washed his feet with her hair is included next, but seems to be understood as a separate woman from Mary Magdalene, though also an important one. Her proximate position to the figure named as the Magdalene represents a strong echo of the traditional conflation of identities. Caring for Christ’s body and nurturing his spiritual body, the church, are shown to be parallel activities, even if they are no longer supposed to have been performed by a single individual.

The letter’s central exegetical study celebrates the church’s debt to the women who went to the tomb on Easter Sunday; the treatment takes its pattern from Margaret Fell’s *Women’s Speaking Justified*:

And they remembered his words, and returned from the Sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest, It was Mary Magdalen, and Joanna, and Mary the Mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the Apostles, and their words seemed to them as Idle tales, and they believed them not, as you may see in Luke 24. and Mark 15.40.41. Math: 28.5. So these women were the first preachers of the Resurrection of Jesus… and Jesus himself spake with Mary… and Mary Magdalen came and told the disciples… Soe here the lord Jesus Christ sent his first message of his

---

resurrection by women unto his own disciples: And they were faithful unto him, and did his message, and yet they could hardly be believed.  

After establishing the crucial role of women in the early Christian community, the pamphlet then exhorts the women to meet monthly, just as the men do, to discern and follow God’s will for them, and to live upright lives. The Radical Reformation’s embrace of early church practices is here manifested as a desire to return to the conditions thought to have obtained for women before the institutionalization of the church.  

Quaker anticlericalism thus goes hand in hand with an egalitarian vision of religious community. The text’s vision of the early church is not idealized, however. The caution about the disciples’ initial unwillingness to listen to Mary Magdalene and her companions is intended to brace women against potential conflicts over their role in the present day church. The pamphlet spurs women’s meetings to go forward with a determination made resolute by a realistic understanding of the challenges faced by all female proclaimers of the Gospel, in order to claim the legacy of Christ’s own commissioning of the Magdalene and her companions. “And so here in the power and spirit, of the Lord God, women come to be coheires, and fellow labourers, in the Gospell, as it was in the Apostles dayes.”  

The early Quakers are well known for this brand of feminist polemic. A different element of the Magdalene tradition can be found in some less prominent seventeenth-century Quaker documents, in identifications of the ideal Quaker life with the

---

76 For a contemporary example of Quaker women’s attacks on the male clergy culture, see Gill, Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community, p. 95.
77 “A Seventeenth-Century Quaker Women’s Declaration,” p. 244.
contemplation of Mary of Bethany. Elizabeth Stirredge (1634-1706) wrote in 1692, describing the persecution she and her husband had faced over the course of a long lifetime of Quaker witness in Bristol, England. Stirredge evokes the experience of reading the Bible with a frustrating sense of the distance between herself and the original events, seeking comfort from the traditional Christian source of the scripture, yet unable to achieve the personal contact for which she longs.

Many hours have I been alone, reading and mourning, when no eye saw me, nor ear heard me, neither could I find comfort in reading, because it was a book sealed unto me. Then did I mourn, and say, ‘Oh! That I had been born in the days when our blessed saviour Jesus Christ was upon the earth; how would I have followed him, and sat at his feet, as Mary did.’

This reference allows the author to express the urgency that characterized radical reform: mere acquaintance with sacred texts and traditions is not enough to produce the desired spiritual connection with Christ as it had been felt by those who surrounded him intimately, such as the Magdalene. Only a direct experience, as she had of Christ’s presence, could satisfy those whom Luther had labeled the “Enthusiasts.” Though Stirredge expresses a Quaker sentiment, desiring an encounter with the divine more personal than that available through sacred texts, her language recalls the spiritual envy described by Teresa of Avila, in her own longing for intimacy with Christ. The Magdalene’s model of friendship with Christ evidently held enduring power for female authors across confessional boundaries, through the early modern period.

Alongside this self-identification among Quakers, expressing a wish for a more profound, unmediated relationship to Christ, we may also find descriptions of such

---

relationships in comparisons of Quaker mothers to Mary of Bethany, as preserved in remembrances by their daughters. This trope is part of the innovative adaptation of the Magdalene legacy to Protestant religious culture, given the medieval use of the Mary and Martha story in defense of the cloistered, celibate life. As we had observed in the case of the Reformed scholar Anna Maria van Schurman, Mary’s devotion could be reinterpreted as part of a faithful pursuit of vocation that includes new elements: the varied textures of a life incorporating secular study or, in this case, the demands of motherhood. In the spiritual counsel that Anabaptist martyrs offered to one another, the moral ambiguities of so deep a devotion were revealed, as parents encouraged each other in a faithfulness that would remove them from their children. The Quaker daughters’ spiritual biographies are not so conflicted. The Quaker daughters who pay tribute to their mothers using the model of Mary of Bethany do not cast doubt on the purity of their parents’ dedication to either God or family, but rather affirm that such powerful examples shaped the faith of their children, forming the vital core of their motherhood. Joan Wintrow recorded the dying words of her daughter, Susannah, in praise of her mother, in “These are the Dying Words of the Maid.” Susannah assures Joan that she has been the best sort of mother, precisely in showing her children how fiercely she sought communion with Christ: “Thou art Mary, thou art Mary; My Mother, thou hast chosen the good part.”79 Elizabeth Bols also makes the comparison in a remembrance of her mother, Mary Watson. The reference to female weakness, common in different Magdalene narratives, underscores the ardor of her piety. “My dear Mother, tho’ but weak of Body, yet formerly was much given to fasting on Religious Accounts, and spending much of her time in private Retirements,

fervent prayers, and praising the Lord, delighting much in Meditations and like Mary, that Christ said, *had chosen that better part.*” These published accounts both describe the orientation of individual and family piety, and helped to form a like-minded approach to Christian family life for their readers, creating an image of Quaker motherhood.

The encouragement of praise for a wholesome example was not the only way in which Mary of Bethany could be used, however. Toward the close of the seventeenth century, as Quakerism became a tolerated denomination, the radical ideology of its first decades gave way to an acceptance of conventional social patterns, as Phyllis Mack has shown in her analysis of Quaker women’s own writing across the period. In 1700, Susanna Blandford, a dissenting Quaker, in *A Small Treatise Writ by One of the True Christian Faith, Who Believes in God and in His Son Jesus Christ,* argued against women’s public preaching by saying that Mary “sat silently at Christ’s feet,” and therefore so should her opponent in a debate on the question!

The Magdalene’s complex identity remained supple enough, even within a single tradition, to contain multiple meanings and to support conflicting or shifting theological positions. More than simply offering a diversity of options, though, Quaker theology and practice had made it possible for women to engage the Magdalene tradition in order to argue for a greater degree of public participation and leadership than they had in any other community that emerged from the era of Reformation. In a polity where the priesthood of all believers was in contention with no ordained priesthood, where there

81 Mack, *Visionary Women,* passim.
existed no theological separation between laity and clergy, the potential of the *apostola apostolorum* legacy could be realized as nowhere else.

**Conclusion**

The pastors and communities of the Radical Reformation, who were still more preoccupied with iconoclasm and the rejection of medieval hagiography than were the magisterial reformers, can nevertheless be seen adapting the Magdalene tradition to their advance their own goals. As a scriptural figure, she could not be ignored entirely; moreover, aspects of her identity proved extremely useful in addressing the concerns of radical reform, particularly in establishing models of lay and female preaching, and in considerations of how to achieve intimacy with Christ. Although Anabaptists and Quakers avoided the legendary elements of her cult, such as her preaching career in Marseille or accounts of her death, the conflation of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman of Luke 7 remained common in these movements through the seventeenth century, ensuring that her historical character would remain a factor in the spirituality of the free church traditions.

Different elements of Mary Magdalene’s character were put to use according to the various programs of the churches that emerged from the Radical Reformation. Where the encouragement of lay and female preaching was seen as both important and relatively safe, as it was for the Quakers, the focus was on the Magdalene’s role in the resurrection narrative and her delivery of the good news to the apostles.83 In communities facing

---

83 Quakers certainly underwent persecution for their beliefs, but attacks on Quakers in the British Isles were limited to public shaming, beating, and confiscation of property; see Thomas S. Freeman, “Introduction:
violent persecution, where public religious testimony was dangerous and possibly fatal, another face of the Magdalene comes to the fore. Mary of Bethany’s quiet yet absolute dedication to Jesus, standing in opposition to societal pressures, served as a more appropriate model for imprisoned Anabaptists under threat of torture and death.

Despite the restraint of the Anabaptists in publicly embracing the Magdalene’s female model of an evangelist, the emerging pattern among Protestant interpretations of Mary Magdalene is clear, and was so to contemporaries on both sides of the confessional divide in the era of Reformation. Whether her intimacy with Christ is emphasized, or the focus is on her preaching of the first news of the resurrection, Protestants found in her an accessible pattern for the spiritual life and activity of every Christian. Her sinfulness was that of every man and woman, and so, therefore, was her response: a profound union with Christ, expressed in the common vocation of all believers, a priesthood of the heart and mind and a ministry of the word.

Concepts of Martyrdom,” in Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, c. 1400-1700, Thomas S. Freedman and Thomas F. Mayer, eds. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), p. 28. That there were no executions of Quakers in England, I would argue, led to a different theological climate and a different attitude to public preaching from that of continental Anabaptists in the same period.
It might be plausible to explain the persistence of the Magdalene tradition in early modern Protestant circles as a lingering legacy of medieval piety, the addressing of which eventually grew less and less necessary with effective confessionalization. Perhaps the iconoclasm of the era of Reformation simply took several generations to establish itself, but the analysis of Jansen and Haskins about the Magdalene’s disappearance for Protestants would ultimately prove accurate. Assumptions about the fate of the saints in Protestant cultures draw on a larger narrative that has developed around the historical assessment of the Reformation: that the movement begun by Luther in 1517 marked the beginning of secularization in the west, stripping modernity of a sacred canopy, depopulating its pantheon of magical figures, making it ready for the Enlightenment’s mechanistic, impersonal universe. Such is the reading of western history that had been proposed by the sociologist of religion Peter Berger and has been taken up and expanded upon by adherents of the secularization narrative. ¹ According to Steve Bruce, the current champion of this interpretive doctrine, the Reformation’s disenchantment program prepared the way for a scientific worldview.

The idea that God could be manipulated through ritual, confession and penance undermined the tendency to regulate behaviour with a standardized and rational ethical code. No matter how awful one's life, redemption could be bought by funding the Church. However, this trend was reversed as the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries again demythologized the world, eliminated the ritual and sacramental manipulation of God, and restored the process of rationalization.²

David Martin identifies this reversal as a failure of Luther’s theology of the priesthood of all believers. Luther had attempted to translate the culture of monasticism, in which Mary Magdalene dwelt as the paradigmatic penitent and contemplative, into a lay piety that would celebrate the sacred in the duties of family and secular work. As Martin sees it, the quixotic folly of such a project only resulted in religion’s immediate impoverishment and eventual irrelevance. “Once Luther tried to take monasticism out of the monastery into the world he found the whole enterprise vitiated by a gap, by the break, between the language of the heavenly city and the inherent character of the City of Man.”

This gulf places modern persons on the secular side, forever separated from the total conversion represented by the Magdalene’s self-humiliation and legendary asceticism. Charles Taylor claims that the Reformation has made religious thinking impossible, linking it with irrationality and even insanity: “[Luther and Calvin’s] Reformation has helped to produce… today's secular world, where renunciation is not just viewed with suspicion… but is off the radar altogether, just a form of madness or self-mutilation.”

These theories about the character and effect of the Reformation are in many ways convincing. We have seen, in Calvin’s exegesis of the Johannine resurrection narrative for example, that an emotive spirituality like that of the famously maudlin saint could be condemned by Protestants as female superstition and hysteria. It is the job of the historian to look for evidence for and against the synthetic schemes of theoreticians, to ask, in the case of this study, whether the fate of the Magdalene serves the account of Reformation as secularization: was Protestant culture as unkind to this saint as scholars of

---

religion and of the Magdalene herself have claimed? We have explored whether she really did vanish—either all at once, or gradually—from Protestant spiritual life, whether she failed to help mold vocations for the laity, whether the radical commitment and call of the sinner turned preacher retained no currency in a materialistic modern world. Proof that Catholic piety remained largely a conservative reassertion of the medieval canon of interpretations would further support such a reading of history, in which Catholic culture tends to be seen as stubbornly loyal to the enchanted past. And yet, this survey of early modern Magdalenes has discovered that saint at the heart of Protestant theological formation and has revealed Catholic Magdalenes that shifted dramatically from medieval models, in response to Protestantism and to internal needs within Catholic communities. These Magdalene interpretations emerged partly through the work of male preachers and authors, but they are especially conspicuous in the work of early modern women. In the words of the epitaph for Mary Armine, both sides of the confessional divide saw an army of such ladies come forward to preach, encourage, challenge, and shape the church by following the example of Mary Magdalene. They supported the church with their means and testified to its truth. By way of epilogue for this inquiry, we might consider the discussions of the Magdalene that appear in the work of two women who argued for women’s right to preach and teach, more than three centuries after the beginning of the Reformation, in a very different political and cultural context from Europe at the close of the Middle Ages.

Maria Stewart was an African-American activist and lecturer working in Massachusetts and New York in the first half of the nineteenth century, mentored by the
radical Abolitionist David Walker. She was the first American woman to speak in public in front of an audience of both women and men. Though she would go on to a long career as a schoolteacher and hospital matron in Washington, D.C., her final public speech was delivered when she was only thirty, at the Belknap Street Church in Boston in 1833. At that point she withdrew from public speaking, having faced violent opposition and having suffered the deaths of both her mentor and her husband.

Her “Farewell Address” adopts a tactic familiar from the female writers of the Reformation: in asserting her right to speak in public she offers a list of scriptural women, including Mary Magdalene, establishing God’s endorsement of women’s leadership.

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?... Did Saint Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations, I presume he would make no objection to our pleading in public for our rights... What if such women as are here described should rise among our sable race?6

Like Marie Dentière and Margaret Fell before her, Stewart uses what David Martin called “the language of the heavenly city” to rebuke the injustices of modern society. Far from accepting the chasm between divine truth and human reality, however, Stewart invokes the record of the biblical era as proof and promise of God’s will for the sinful world. Despite the parallel strategy, her argument differs from the work of early moderns like Dentière and Fell, both in her aim and in the authorities to which she appeals. Although

she uses religious language and evidence in her speech, Stewart seeks a public voice for women beyond religious leadership, in political participation. She affirms openly that her goal is “our rights,” drawing on the rhetoric of the Enlightenment revolutions as well as the (as yet unrealized) legal terms of the American Constitution. Not only does she use the sacred past to speak prophetically to the present, as had the women of the Reformation, but Stewart’s nineteenth-century conception of justice corrects the past, with the sufferings of modern women and slaves broadening St. Paul’s limited vision, in her own grappling with the proscriptions on women’s speech in 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy. Human experience is thus used to inform and adjust the interpretation of sacred texts in a way that would not have been possible before the influence of John Locke and the First Great Awakening.7

Near the close of the nineteenth century, the African-American Baptist scholar Mary V. Cook chronicled the experiences and contributions of women to the church as she argued for greater credit for their accomplishments and scope for their leadership. Born just months before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, Cook’s life and opportunities were very different from those that had been available to Maria Stewart. Cook was able to attend school and university, becoming a professor of Latin in the Normal School of the State University of Kentucky. Cook opens her 1890 essay, “The Work for Baptist Women,” with a discussion of Luke 8:1-3, in which Mary Magdalene is described as one among Jesus’ female followers, who supported him and his ministry from their means.

When Christ came into the world to redeem man from the curse of the Law, he found among his followers faithful women ready to do him service… He did not spurn their devotion, as his disciples often suggested, but acknowledged their love and good deeds, and commanded that wherever the gospel should be preached throughout the world that mention should be made of the woman who anointed his head, as a memorial of her.8

The actions of these women, and Christ’s acknowledgement of them, is to serve as the pattern for the modern church’s valuing of women’s work. Cook spends the remainder of her essay listing the women’s groups, missionary societies, teaching ministries, fundraising programs, and activism that demonstrate how contemporary women are continuing to answer Christ’s call faithfully, albeit without adequate recognition from the church. By this point in the century, Cook would have been influenced not only by democratic and Abolitionist rhetoric but also by the arguments of the emerging feminist movement. She brings those tools to her aid, using the vocabulary of modernity as well as heaven’s language, just as Maria Stewart had. The memorial that Christ had commanded, of celebrating women’s devoted service following the Magdalene’s example, was being neglected and the activist women of the nineteenth-century African American Baptist church were stepping forward to right that wrong.

*Intimacy with Christ*

The work of Maria Stewart and Mary V. Cook can be said to display continuity with the Magdalene tradition as it had developed through the Middle Ages in the sense

---

that, for both of them, her authority—and that of other women, by connection—came from her intimacy with Christ. The medieval Magdalene, as lover of Christ, had given mystical experience the vocabulary of romantic desire. We have observed the intimate character of that relationship being explored, praised, envied, and imitated across the confessional boundaries of the early modern period. Perhaps the clearest parallel to this feature of medieval Magdalene hagiography is the funeral oration delivered by Katharina Schütz Zell, in which she justified eulogizing her husband, and his passage to eternal life, by citing the Magdalene’s joyful proclamation of her beloved Christ, risen from the dead.

The ways in which Protestants described the intimacy between Christ and the Magdalene reflect their theological commitments and social contexts. Luther lingered over the Magdalene’s grief at Christ’s death, calling her profound attachment to and desire for him a model for all Christians, and especially for preachers. The Calvinist preacher Theodore Beza, though he condemned her lack of confidence in the promised resurrection, could not help but praise her closeness to Christ, claiming that Christ appeared in his risen form before her because of it. Protestant women, from Argula von Grumbach at the very beginning of the Reformation, through Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg in the persecuted context of seventeenth-century Lutheranism in Bohemia, dwelt on different elements of the friendship between the Magdalene and Christ. Grumbach pointed to Christ’s conversation with the Magdalene and other women as permitting women’s entry into the theological debates over reform. After those debates had hardened into persecution, Greiffenberg as a Lutheran in Catholic Bohemia noted the potential cost of such devotion, which women might have to place above their family
duties, at least from time to time. That was also the chief theme of Anabaptist references to the Magdalene, who encouraged each other to take up Mary of Bethany’s “better part” no matter what punishments or temptations they might face. Even Calvin, who scorned the kind of emotive piety represented by the Magdalene, had to address so obvious a fact as the dedication of one who would visit a tomb of an executed outlaw, seeking to anoint the body within. That he deals with this feature of the biblical narrative by deriding her, seeing her popular appeal as something to be corrected, indicates the enduring power and attraction of this intimate relationship for Christians.

The affection between the Magdalene and Christ was an equally compelling subject for early modern Catholics, both male and female. Charles Vialart, like the Reformed Beza, identified her love for Christ as that which Christ rewarded in appearing first to her after the resurrection. Vialart’s devotional work was aimed at an audience of religious women. As it had been during the Middle Ages, nuns’ spirituality continued to be dominated by the metaphor of the bride of Christ. The Carmelite nun and reformer Teresa of Avila was so jealous of Christ’s favor that she openly expressed her longing for a relationship to him that would be as close as, or closer than, his intimacy with Mary Magdalene. Catholic artists fostered a personal devotion to the crucified Christ by depicting the Magdalene embracing him in his suffering and death. In Mathieu le Nain’s *Crucifixion*, for example, her compassion for Christ is so complete that she unwittingly imitates his physical torment; her body is posed at the foot of the cross, aligned with its beam, her arms outstretched, as if she, too, were nailed there.
For both Protestants and Catholics, the intimacy shared by Christ and Mary Magdalene was an important source of her spiritual authority. The extent to which that authority would or could find expression in public ministry varied widely between the confessions and according to different local circumstances. An intimate friendship with Christ remained a goal of piety across confessional boundaries, however, as the promise of the character of Christian life for all believers.

The medieval church had gone beyond the intimacy recorded between Christ and the Magdalene in the New Testament. Unable to resist elaborating on the story of this prominent yet enigmatic woman, medieval exegetes had developed a complex system of associations and images to explain her place in the narrative of salvation. Each of the three principal roles we had observed in medieval Magdalene hagiography—ideal of penitence, figure of the church, and witness of the Gospel—would be adapted to advance the theological programs of the era of Reformation. As David Mycoff notes, in the Middle Ages the Magdalene’s “story became a primary source of images and archetypal patterns for reflection on the church’s understanding of two fundamental matters: the right relations between the active and contemplative lives and the process by which penitent sinners are reconciled to God and thereby freed for growth in the spiritual life.”

These were the fundamental questions of the era of Reformation, as well: how are we saved, and how are we to live in the world, in right relation to God and our neighbor? What better story, then, to reframe for evangelical theology, as it touches on the nature and work of justification, and on the validity of the clergy/lay hierarchy, understandings of vocation, and the priesthood of all believers? And what better story for post-Tridentine

---

Catholics to revisit in their turn, to ensure an orthodox piety for the church’s favorite penitent?

*Penitent and contemplative*

Protestant and Catholic reformers interpreted Mary Magdalene’s role as the ideal penitent in ways that demonstrate their theological divergence. The story of the sinful woman of Luke 7 had been crucial to the establishment and teaching of medieval doctrines for the Sacrament of Penance. Preachers had focused on her contrition and her acts of humble service as that which merited Christ’s pronouncement of absolution, encouraging contemporary penitents to see themselves entering into that same narrative with their own confessors. Rather than discarding this text as antithetical to evangelical theology, as happened with the Epistle of James, Luther and his colleagues reinterpreted it as a confirmation of justification by grace alone. They emphasized Christ’s gracious action in granting forgiveness, an action that should offer hope to all sinners. Her faith lay not in the work of washing Christ’s feet, but in her trust that she would be forgiven. Her works are the fruit that naturally follows faith, the proper expression of gratitude for what she has received.

Catholic readings continued to affirm the Magdalene’s contrition and works as exemplary, albeit potentially daunting in their perfection. In contrast to the evangelical, egalitarian reading of hope for everyone who seeks forgiveness, Teresa of Avila and François de Sales both find the saint’s conversion miraculously quick and complete, counseling their readers to attempt something more gradual in their own lives. Indeed,
François de Sales finds her penitence so perfect that what Christ pronounces for her is less an absolution than an acknowledgement of the state of grace she has already achieved. Through such opposing interpretations, the Luke 7 text became a central locus of debate over the different programs of salvation proposed by different confessions.

The Magdalene’s penitence had been directly linked in her medieval legend with her future as an ascetic contemplative. Following her conversion she demonstrated the absolute devotion to the word that was praised by Christ in his comparison of Mary and Martha, leading to her role as a patroness of the contemplative life. Both Protestants and Catholics in the era of reform offer interpretations of this role, as well. For Catholics her association with the cloistered religious life continued and developed according to new circumstances and needs. In response to Protestant attacks on Catholic immorality, the church expanded its program of Magdalene houses for reformed prostitutes. Such was the strength of the Magdalene’s identification with the cloister that those who sought more active vocations either looked for other models, such as the Virgin Mary, or reinterpreted the relation between Mary and Martha as one of complementarity, rather than opposition, following the reading of Teresa of Avila. Protestants also gave attention to Christ’s praise of Mary’s contemplation, adapting it to support the priesthood of all believers. All were thereby to be encouraged to devotion to the Word as the constituent of true faith. Martha was not neglected, however, but was given her due as a reliable worker, obedient to her divinely-appointed secular vocation. Like Teresa, Protestant interpreters were more eager to advise a combined pursuit of the paths of both Mary and Martha in the life of each individual, than to suggest a perpetuation of the hierarchical separation of work and
prayer. Teresa reconciled the two vocations as a means of bringing humility and pragmatism into the contemplative life, making each nun into a maid for the good of her soul and of the convent’s floors! Protestants, meanwhile, elevated each layperson to the status of priest, claiming that the prosaic duties of mothers and fathers held the sacred poetry of pastoral offices and insisting that all Christians needed the fortification of spiritual practices—scripture reading and worship—in order to exercise their priesthood.

*Symbol of the Church*

Just as theologically fraught as the nature of penitence and of contemplation was the identification of the Magdalene as a symbol of the church, another enduring theme from the medieval hagiographic tradition. Both Protestants and Catholics engaged this trope in the course of advancing different theological and ecclesiastical goals. The collective nature of the image made it appealing to both groups. As Ingrid Maisch has observed in her analysis the use of this trope by the Jesuit poet Friedrich Spee, “Mary Magdalene is, in this context, the human being as such. She represents every person who seeks life in Jesus.” Spee interpreted the medieval tradition, drawing on the Song of Songs’ imagery of the Magdalene as the bride of Christ, the church. This imagery remained popular in the spiritual direction offered to women in Catholic religious orders, as can be seen in the letters of Federigo Borromeo, Cardinal of Milan, to the nuns of his city.

---

10 Maisch, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 86.
11 See above, ch. 5.
The spousal language for the relationship between Christ and the church was also a feature of Protestant piety, despite the medieval connection between that imagery and the cloister. Protestant discussions of the marital bond between Christ and his church tended to assert the authority of new churches by declaring them to be Christ’s true bride. This constituted a communal version of the way in which self-identifications with the Magdalene allowed female Protestant authors to justify their public speech. Katharina Schütz Zell had comforted the widows of an evangelical uprising by comparing them to the bride in the Song of Songs.\textsuperscript{12} Women of the English Reformation often invoked that text’s vocabulary of mystical marriage to testify to the strength of their connection to God, and to propose a spiritual equality that they longed for in their contemporary church.\textsuperscript{13} The Anabaptist martyrs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, concerned to separate themselves from the wider society and to establish a sanctified, apostolic community, in turn used the language of the Song of Songs to identify themselves as the true church.\textsuperscript{14}

Other aspects of the Magdalene’s composite identity were also adopted to proclaim authority for the churches emerging from the Reformation. The Reformed churchman Theodore Beza wandered outside of the purely scriptural identity approved for the Magdalene by Calvin, discussing her anointing of Christ before his death as the founding act of the church—and that in the context of his sermons on the Song of Songs. Beza used the Magdalene and the other women, those unlikely witnesses of the resurrection, as an example of the ideal character of the church, always reforming itself

\textsuperscript{12} See above, ch. 3.\textsuperscript{13} See above, ch. 3.\textsuperscript{14} See above, ch. 7.
by exposing corrupt human institutions.\textsuperscript{15} The defense and maintenance of a reformed church is claimed for Elizabeth I, in George Ashe’s late seventeenth-century sermon commemorating her patronage of Trinity College, Dublin, when he describes her nurture of the church by comparing it to Mary of Bethany’s anointing of Christ.\textsuperscript{16} The Magdalene as reformed prostitute enacts the role of a purified church, purged of sinful theologies and practices, in Lewis Wager’s Reformed morality play \textit{The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene}.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Counter-Reformation portrayals of the Magdalene tend not to compare the Magdalene, in her identity as a prostitute, to a church in need of reform and purification. The Catholic use of the Magdalene as a symbol for the church did not emerge untouched by the conflicts of the era of Reformation, however. In an age of confessional strife, the Magdalene’s images of identification with the church could be reinterpreted to convey more ambivalent experiences of the church’s life. Catholics could adopt the grieving Magdalene at the empty tomb as an image of the church in a persecuted context, as Robert Southwell’s poem, \textit{Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares}, does for English Catholicism under the Elizabethan settlement.\textsuperscript{17} Or the marriage metaphor of the Song of Songs could express the sacrifices and challenges faced by an author accused of unorthodox beliefs, as in the case of Jeanne Guyon, for whom Christ was “a bridegroom of blood.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} See above, ch. 6.  
\textsuperscript{16} See above, ch. 3.  
\textsuperscript{17} See above, ch. 4.  
\textsuperscript{18} See above, ch. 5.
Witness of the Resurrection

The Gospels are unequivocal in their testimony that the Magdalene and her female companions had been the first witnesses to Christ’s resurrection. This role had preoccupied medieval exegetes and theologians to such an extent that they had created the Magdalene’s complex legend, identifying her with two other New Testament figures, in order to explain her presence and activity at that crucial moment in humanity’s salvation history. The centrality of that role was not lost to the theologians of Protestant and Catholic reform, though they adapted its character in order to express different understandings of the vocation of Christian life.

What was the character of being a “witness” to the resurrection for Protestants and for Catholics? The difference is a somewhat paradoxical one, given the importance ordinarily given to passivity in Protestant theology, and to activity in cooperation with divine grace, for Catholics. Though Luther emphasized the believer’s passive receipt of grace in justification, his interpretation of the Magdalene at the resurrection celebrates her activity as a model for Christians, preachers and laity alike. After the work of salvation is accomplished by Christ, the Christian is called to labor in the vineyard, offering service to the neighbor. Perhaps the most important kind of service any Christian could give to another was to deliver the good news of her forgiveness in Christ. That role was given equally to men and women at the individual level—as opposed to the level of community leadership—as Luther affirms in his discussions of the Magdalene as preacher and disciple. The conditions of religious persecution intensified this vocation of bearing witness to an existential commitment. A commonality across Protestant communities is
the encouragement of their members to bear witness to Christ in public confessions of faith, persisting in their faithful testimony even to the point of death, with the Magdalene serving as exemplar. The English martyr Anne Askew’s courage was praised by John Bale and John Foxe in terms that recalled the devotion of Mary of Bethany.\textsuperscript{19} Anabaptist martyrs encouraged their wives to remain as loyal to the word as Mary of Bethany had, resisting attempts to urge them to their family duty.\textsuperscript{20}

In contrast to this model of witness as active testimony, Catholic interpretations of the appropriate response to the resurrection describe a more internal sense of awe and a need to overcome Christ’s absence through the spiritual and sacramental program of the church. For some, necessitated a negotiation over the imperative of witness in the Counter Reformation. Teresa of Avila explicitly discusses the frustration she felt at not being able to give public testimony to her faith as part of confronting the Protestant threat and evangelizing in the mission field. She calls her nuns to turn away from what she decides is a misdirected sense of vocation and instead to devote themselves to prayer and service within their communities, among their nearest neighbors.\textsuperscript{21} This inward turn exactly fulfilled the vocation to which other women felt called. Louise de la Vallière embraced the model of silent witness offered by the Magdalene as a penitent, demonstrating in herself the mercy of God toward sinners.\textsuperscript{22}

The contrast between the two confessions’ interpretations of the resurrection narrative can perhaps be exemplified by two different parts of the story. Protestant

\textsuperscript{19} See above, ch. 3.
\textsuperscript{20} See above, ch. 7.
\textsuperscript{21} See above, ch. 5.
\textsuperscript{22} See above, ch. 5.
exegetes and artists, such as Nicolaus Herman in his hymns for Mary Magdalene, typically explored the dialogue the Magdalene has with Christ in the road, in which he instructs her to give his message to the apostles. Catholic interest, especially in poetry and the visual arts, was often preoccupied with the *noli me tangere* scene, which forecasts the believer’s need to approach Christ in a new way, through the mediation of the church. Catholic nun Maria de San José Salazar, in advocating that she and her fellow Carmelites be allowed to continue a practice of communal discussion, was careful to maintain that they would be refraining from speculative theology, the direct spiritual and intellectual touching prohibited by Christ’s refusal of the Magdalene’s gesture. The dichotomy is one of emphasis between two conflicting experiences of the spiritual life: permission and encouragement or refusal and frustration. Of course, permission and encouragement can prove confusing and infuriating when real opportunities for women in public ministry are closed. And an open engagement with refusal and frustration as an inherent part of the believer’s encounter with God can foster creativity in answering the divine call amid the world’s challenges. The contrast is not a simple one between being commanded to preach or being warned against touching God in his majesty, but it does inform the orientations of the two strands of reform, from which different promises and solutions would develop, affecting the shape of life in the churches of the modern world.

On the question of the Magdalene’s role as preacher of the Gospel as a precedent for how preaching will be done in the church, there are both overt debates and telling silences. Luther and his followers who authored postil sermons on the resurrection

---

23 See above, ch. 2.  
24 See above, ch. 5.
narrative addressed the possibility of women’s preaching after the Magdalene’s example. Although they reject women’s leadership as incommensurate with the order of the church, they do maintain that women may preach in case of need.

The influence of these discussions was far-reaching, as can be seen from the trial records of the English Protestant martyr John Lambert (d. 1538), as published in John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*. Lambert had been part of the evangelical community in Antwerp, and also of the reform-minded group that met at the White Horse Tavern in Cambridge, associating with William Tyndale and Robert Barnes.25 Questioned as to the right of lay men and women to preach and administer the sacraments, Lambert affirms the position outlined by Luther and elaborated by his colleagues. Lambert invokes the same scriptural examples Luther had used, as well as introducing the Virgin Mary as a model of preaching.

In time of great necessity lay people may preach, & that of both kindes both men & women, as you may see in the pistle to the Corinthians, wheras he saith: þt it is a shame for a womā to speke in a multitude or congregation, yet in an other place he saith: that euery woman praying or prophesying, hauing any thing vpō her hed, doth dishonest her hed. To this accordeth the prophecy of loel resited Act. ii. wherin the parson of god is thus said, I shal pour out of my sprite vpon al flesh, & both your sōnes & your doughters shal prophecy. Thus did Anna þe prophetes daughter of Phanuel geue praise vnto Christ in the temple, & speake of him to al men of Ierusalem that loked after the redemptiō of Israel. This also doth yet speake vnto vs in scripture oure Lady by the song which she made that is daily resited in the church called Magnificat.26

This opening was seized by early modern evangelical women, such as Argula von Grumbach, Katharina Schütz Zell, and Marie Dentière, who argued for their own right to engage in public religious debate and in preaching, supporting their claims with the Magdalene’s divinely granted preaching role. This exegetical move was perceived as dangerous presumption, as is evident from the careful discussions by evangelical pastors, as well as from the polemics raised on the Catholic side in response. François Le Picart, “the most famous Catholic preacher in Paris from 1530 until his death in 1556,” openly scorned “Lutherans” who were claiming women’s right to preach based on scriptural examples.

Even more striking than such an explicit conflict, in the long term, was the relative disappearance of the preaching Magdalene from Counter-Reformation religious culture, at least as it was produced by male authors and artists. The medieval apostola apostolorum, so inspiring to Dominican preachers, was not taken up as a parallel model for Jesuit preachers and teachers as they confronted and checked the spread of evangelical theology. With the Reformation’s introduction of the concept of the priesthood of all believers, including preaching, teaching, and even administration of the sacraments at need by the laity, the Magdalene too closely suggested divine sanction for such subversion of the clerical hierarchy.

Roughly speaking, the Magdalene’s preaching was most minimized in those traditions with the highest clerical authority, and it was most embraced in emerging reform traditions with lesser regard for the distinction between clergy and laity. The implications of the Magdalene’s biblical preaching, carefully considered and tentatively

27 Taylor, Heresy and Orthodoxy in Sixteenth-Century Paris, x.
advanced by evangelicals of the magisterial Reformation, were much more fully exploited by the Quaker activists of the seventeenth century. The founders of Quakerism, George Fox and Margaret Fell, both cited the Magdalene of the resurrection narrative among their justifications for women’s public preaching. The Society of Friends established women’s leadership with this theoretical basis, but also through a structure of women’s meetings for worship, Bible Study, and organized charitable ministry and political activism. The example of Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb was given in the letter of instruction that was meant to inspire and guide women as they formed Quaker communities of faith and action.

The Anabaptist tradition represents an interestingly isolated case, within this narrative of Protestant, preaching Magdalenes. Though Anabaptist martyrs certainly made use of her identities as Mary of Bethany and as the Song of Songs’ bride of Christ, there are no comparisons of Anabaptist women to the Magdalene as preacher. This may be explained in part by their strategies of silence and prevarication under interrogation, designed to protect other members of the community and the movement as a whole. There may also have been a wariness, among a group so concerned with identifying the true church by purity of conduct, about connecting themselves with the image of the notorious sinner-saint. Nevertheless, Anabaptism owed its survival to the unofficial “preaching” of women, through proselytizing, prophetic utterance, biblical interpretation, and the eloquent testimony of female martyrs. They were encouraged in these activities by their male companions in the faith, and praised for them after death.
Discontinuities

The principal elements of the Magdalene tradition established in the patristic era and the Middle Ages endured into the early modern period, through their adaptation by different reform movements to serve both internal and polemical goals. There are, however, important discontinuities to observe in our survey of the Magdalene in the age of Reformation. Chief among them is the beginning of the separation of the three figures long associated with the saint, identifying Mary Magdalene as only the woman mentioned by name, who supported Jesus’ ministry and witnessed his death and resurrection.

The motivations that activated Lefèvre d’Étaples and his circle included, according to his own description, a concern for the purity of woman to whom the risen Christ first appeared. Moral questions were among those that fomented the Reformation, and some of the communities that emerged within it gave morality a special prominence in their theological orientation. Humanists and Reformed Protestants, as well as Anabaptists, were especially interested in the ethical life as an aim of their reform efforts or as a proof of the individual’s state of grace. That God would have given so central a role to a woman who had been a prostitute, the idea on which medieval hagiography had embroidered to such an extent, was ridiculed as a distortion of the true pattern; it was incommensurate with God’s glory for such an incongruous choice to have been made, therefore, it had not happened.

There are both positive and negative ways to read the implications of the shift away from a composite Magdalene. On the one hand, the association with prostitution
had tainted the reputation of one of Christ’s most trusted followers, perhaps preventing a full acknowledgement of her leadership in the early church, and of the religious leadership of all women as such. On the other hand, the redemption of so notorious a sinner had offered comfort, throughout Christian history, to sinners desperate for the hope of redemption. Luther and his followers pointed to this as one of the greatest benefits of the story of the Magdalene, and it is precisely this possibility of universal hope that made her such a compelling example for evangelical theology.

In weighing the implications of a composite or a purely scriptural Magdalene on the different traditions’ attitudes toward women, it is difficult to select one interpretation as having resulted in clear advances for women, with the other as tending to be uniquely oppressive. The presence of a disciple with a complex sexual history may allow more of the story of women’s lives to be told than is included in a tradition determined to keep such unsavory characters off the list of true disciples. If given too much attention, though, the Magdalene’s exciting past becomes the focus of prurient fascination, distracting from her conversion and apostolic vocation.

The Magdalene’s composite identity addressed women’s sexuality as part of discipleship for better or worse, while the limitation of the Magdalene to her scriptural role of supporter and witness effectively separated female sexuality from discipleship in those strands of the Christian tradition that adopted Lefèvre’s reform, in theory creating a more neutral ground for spiritual life and leadership. Yet generalizations about which organizational structures and ideologies might best foster women’s spirituality in its fullness can be misleading. Celibate nuns such as Maddalena de’ Pazzi and Teresa of
Avila were fluent in a vocabulary of desire for Christ as the beloved spouse; the silences of the cloister were enlivened by practical discussions of how that spouse needed good meals and a well-run household, just as much as adoration! A tradition known for radical activism and individualistic spiritual expression, Quakerism, incorporated a vision of motherhood as courageous mentoring in the faith, demonstrating the importance of physical and familial bonds and models in a supposedly idiosyncratic piety. The preaching of Reformed Geneva could echo, contrary to all assumptions, with the praise of a woman’s devoted tears, which Christ was said to honor with his divine approval.

The discontinuities between early modern Magdalenes and the medieval tradition go beyond treatments of her sexuality. This study began as an investigation into changes in how her preaching role was interpreted among the different confessions that emerged from the era of Reformation. Magdalene scholarship has demonstrated the importance of the apostola apostolorum title as an inspiration for medieval preachers. With the Reformation’s emphasis on the responsibilities of the laity in confessing the faith came a new focus on the Magdalene’s role in the resurrection narrative. Exegetes either exploited this example of a lay person and woman being commanded to preach, or worked to explain why this scene did not establish such a precedent. Our survey of Protestant Magdalene interpretation has clearly shown that the preaching Magdalene was a live issue in the debates of the early years of the Reformation, about the priesthood of all believers and especially about how the duties of that vocation applied to women. In those early years and beyond, through the era of confessionalization and into the modern period, Protestant women identified themselves with Mary Magdalene as being
empowered to preach and teach the Gospel. This kind of direct self-identification with the preaching Magdalene did not take place in the same way in early modern Catholicism; allegations of women’s preaching and inappropriate study of scripture were among the polemical attacks launched at Protestants as the culture of the Counter Reformation was defined in opposition to perceived threats and heresies.

The early modern period thus saw the Magdalene tradition lose some of the flexibility it had had in medieval piety. Though Protestants embraced her a universal image of a redeemed sinner who could be useful to God, some—although not all—of the particularity of her female experience of the encounter with the divine was neglected or rejected. Catholic piety, by contrast, continued to draw on the Magdalene tradition as a model for female spirituality, even expanding on her compassion with Christ’s suffering through her intimate connection with him. The essentially female nature of her early modern Catholic character, especially as it was proposed by male authors—fundamental carnality replaced with radical asceticism, her devotion arising from the same source as romantic and sexual attachments—reduced the likelihood that she would be a model for public preaching for male clergy.

The separation between lay and religious life was not what it had been in the medieval period, however; this marks one of the signal shifts of the era of Reformation as a social and cultural transition. The medieval church had developed a hierarchy of social roles, in which different orders prayed, fought, and worked. Each order was dependent on the others, and was rewarded for performing functions that were understood to bring tangible, necessary benefits to those in the other groups. Beginning in the twelfth century,
with the gradual commercialization and urbanization of European society, this structure was complicated and undermined in various ways until it ultimately succumbed to the tensions of an emerging modernity. When the medieval separation between those who work and those who pray became obsolete, reform-minded Christians began to explore new understandings of the shape of Christian life. The contemplation of Mary and the worldly work of Martha could no longer be divided among different groups, but had to be integrated by each believer in a life lived authentically before God. Authors male and female, Protestant and Catholic, discussed the terms of this reconciliation, attempting to understand secular work as a vocation, the fruit and expression of contemplation. What have often been taken to be the distinct preoccupations of the different confessions are revealed to have shared a common dialogue. Early modern nuns reflected on the meaning of ascetic withdrawal in an age of mission, and Protestant pastors and their wives strove to find the sacredness of diaper changes and household budgets, and both groups resorted to the relationship between Mary and Martha to make sense of what they were doing.

The figure of the Magdalene, in the multiplicity of her composite tradition, was at the center of both the practical and the theoretical debates of the era of Reformation. Just as the problem of the nature of Christian life preoccupied reformers, and the character of the priesthood of all believers and the vocation of religious orders was worked out in the terms of reconciling the roles of Mary and Martha, so Protestant and Catholic conceptions of salvation were developed using the narrative of the sinful woman in Luke 7. The interpretation of the story allowed theologians on both sides of the confessional divide to pronounce on the identity of the definitive action, either the woman’s work of
penance or the gracious absolution offered by Christ. So crucial was this pericope to establishing Protestant theology as distinct from Catholic teaching that Beza could not resist including it in a sermon on the Magdalene of the resurrection, even as he admits that it is a false custom that has associated the two women. And, finally, the role of the Magdalene on Easter morning was one through which all Christians discerned their relation to their church’s mission. If the modern world may be said to have begun in large measure through encounters with difference, confessional and cultural, in religious upheaval and the beginning of colonialism, then the Magdalene’s example as the first evangelist was surely formative for early modern individuals and churches as they sought to proclaim their faith and inspire conversion.

Looking together at the Magdalene’s three identities and their interpretations in the traditions that emerged from the era of Reformation, we can find a common concern, one that is only underscored by the diversity of its expressions. Early modern Christians were preoccupied with the question of vocation: the call to testify to the nature of salvation and to live a sanctified life in the world. The Magdalenes of the age gave shape to new understandings of the self before God and before others. Through her image, previous conceptions of the obligations of Christian life were variously rejected or refined, argued with and adapted. The modernity of that project can be seen in the gradual shift away from a compartmentalized society, in which some stand before God or serve others on behalf of the whole community, toward a model in which each person discerns her own obligations to God and her participation in communities of her own
choice. Whether that is necessarily a secularizing movement remains, I would argue, an open question.

Conclusion

The secularization narrative is not confined to scholars of modernity, looking to explain the roots of the contemporary context. Even some scholars of the Reformation have acceded to an aspect of the secularization thesis: that the Reformation did not represent a positive affirmation of theological commitment, but was in fact the first, fatal subordination of the church’s authority, which ultimately led to the crumbling of religion itself.28 Those elements of real religion that remained in the Reformation era were pieties and traditions that endured from the medieval world, not the creative innovations of a living faith. This is suggested in Eamon Duffy’s interpretation of the English Reformation, when he argues that overt “compliance [with reform decrees] should not be taken to imply agreement… with Protestant theology,” while continuities from medieval practice were “vigorous, adaptable, widely understood, and popular,” concluding that this leaves the establishment of the Reformation as a religious movement rather than political and social expediency, unresolved.29 Steve Bruce maintains that the secularizing taint of Protestantism eventually corrupted Catholicism, too.

Catholics [in the late twentieth century] became more selective in their attention to church teaching. As Scots Cardinal Thomas Winning said to me in 1998, “We have to accept that we can no longer command. We no longer have a ‘people’

29 Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars, p. 5.
who will obey us. Catholics are becoming more and more like the Protestants. They pick and choose."\(^{30}\)

Such generalizations deny the role of commitment and reform throughout the church’s life. As if the discernment of images and stories that challenge, correct, sustain, and renew faith had not been the contested practice of the church over its entire history. As if prophetic voices within the church had not always come forward to call its teaching, liturgy, and institutions into greater faithfulness to its Gospel mission. The Magdalene tradition witnesses to the rich legacy of testimony, dissent, negotiation, and vision that has shaped the different confessions of the Christian tradition—from its margins and sometimes, surprisingly, at its very heart. Was the church, most of its men and all of its women, a silently conforming laity mutely obedient to a monolithic orthodoxy, in the early modern period or ever? One might as well ask, with Margaret Fell, “If these women had not thus [been] ready to carry his message… how should his Disciples have known, who were not there?”\(^{31}\) Neglecting those voices means the suppression of their words, protecting human institutions from change by declaring that the Gospel has never used unexpected messengers. An army of eloquent Magdalenes stands ready to tell us that it was not so.


\(^{31}\) Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism*, p. 184.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Bale, John. *The first examinacyon of Anne Askewe, lately martyred at Smythfelde, by the Romysh popes upholders, with the Elucydacyon of John Bale*. Wesel, 1546.


Bugenhagen, Johann. *Postillatio in evangelia usui temporum et Sanctoru(m) totius anni servientia, ad preces Georgij Spalatini scripta*. Wittenberg, 1524.


Plusieurs sermons de Iehan Calvin ... n.p.: Conrad Badius, 1558.


________. *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. in 85. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–.


__________. *Conciones quadragesimales ad sacros evangeliorum sensus pro feriis quadragesimae mystice et moraliter explicandos*. Antwerp: Guillelmus Lesteenius and Englebertus Gymnicus, 1656.


Secondary Sources


Eis, Gerhard. *Beiträge zur mittelhochdeutschen legende und mystik, untersuchungen und texte*. Berlin, Dr. E. Ebering, 1935.


Gmehling, Magdalena S. *Die Sünderin: eine Studie über die Hl. Maria Magdalena.* Lauerz, Switzerland: Theresia-Verlag, 1996.


Hoffmann, Maria Norberta. *Die Magdalenszenen im geistlichen Spiel des deutschen Mittelalters ...* Würzburg, K. Triltsch, 1933.


Margaret L. Arnold
18 Pitcher Street
Marion, MA 02738
maggiea@bu.edu

Home: 508.202.4379
Cell: 774.283.0764

Education
Ph. D. Candidate, ABD, Division of Religious and Theological Studies, Boston University
   Exam fields:
      Christian-Jewish Encounter in the Middle Ages, Prof. Deanna Klepper, DRTS
      Women and Religion in the Early Modern Period, Prof. Barbara Diefendorf, History Dept.
      Religion in Britain and America, 1700-1900, Prof. Jon Roberts, History Dept.
   Dissertation: “Mary Magdalene in the Era of Reformation”
Master of Divinity, summa cum laude, specialization in Church History
   Boston University School of Theology, 2008
Master of Fine Art, Book Arts/Printmaking,
   The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 1997
Bachelor of Fine Art, minor in Art History
   NSCAD University, Halifax, NS, 1995
Queen's University Summer Program in Medieval and Renaissance Art History
   Venice, Italy, 1993

Languages
   French, German, Latin

Employment
Graduate Writing Fellow, “Tracing Mary Magdalene” (WR 100, 150)
   College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program, Boston University
   Fall 2013-Spring 2014
Teaching Assistant, “Reading the World: History, Theology, Contexts” (TF 701, TF 702)
   Boston University School of Theology
   Fall 2011 to Spring 2012
Writing Works Center Tutor, Boston University School of Theology
   Fall 2011 to Spring 2013
   Fall 2007 to 2014
Research Assistant, Steven Ozment, The Serpent and the Lamb: How a Painter and a Monk Changed the World (Yale University Press, 2011)
   Summer 2009 to Summer 2011
Art and Computer Science Teacher, Summit Montessori School, Framingham, MA
   1998-2001
Teaching Assistant, Printmaking Department, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
1995-97

**Awards & Grants**
Boston University Center for the Humanities Student Award, 2012-13
William and Ana Lowstuter Alumni Fellowship, Boston University School of Theology, 2011-12
Hester Ann Beebe Alumi Fellowship, Boston University School of Theology, 2010-12
Scholarship for Merit, Boston University School of Theology, 2005-08
Book Arts Award, The University of the Arts, 1997
Graduate Fellowship, The University of the Arts, 1995-97
Endowment Fund Scholarship, NSCAD University, 1994
Alexandra Society Scholarship, The University of King's College, Halifax, NS, 1991-92

**Publications**


Translations:
Martin Luther, Sermon on the Resurrection of the Dead, 1 Cor. 15:39–44, May 25, 1544, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 58, Christopher Boyd Brown, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010).
Martin Luther, Preface and Afterword to *A Blessed Account of Herr Leonhard Kaiser of Bavaria, Burned for the Sake of the Gospel* (1528) [with Benjamin T. G. Mayes], in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 59.
Martin Luther, *The Circular Disputation on the Wedding Garment*, for *Luther’s Works* (1537), vol. 73 (in progress).

Introductory essays for *Luther’s Works*, vol. 60, Christopher Boyd Brown, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011):
Luther’s Preface to Antonius Corvinus, *How Far Erasmus’ Recently Published Plan for “Mending the Peace of the Church” Should Be Followed while a Council Is Being Organized* [with Robert Rosin]
Luther’s Preface to Georg Major, *Lives of the Fathers* (1544)
Luther’s Preface to Georg Spalatin, *Marvelously Comforting Examples and Sayings from the Lives and Sufferings of the Saints and Other Great Men* (1544)

Introductory essays for *Luther’s Works*, vol. 59, Christopher Boyd Brown, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011):
Luther’s Preface and Afterword to *A Blessed Account of Herr Leonhard Kaiser of Bavaria, Burned for the Sake of the Gospel* (1528)
Luther’s Preface to Hermann Rab, *Specimen of Papist Theology and Doctrine* (1531) [with Christopher Boyd Brown]

Book review:

**Conference Papers**
“Mary and Martha in Counter Reformation Carmelite Spirituality”
   Sixteenth Century Society Conference, New Orleans, 2014
“Evangelical Magdalenes: The Lady Doth Protest”
   Ways of Knowing: Graduate Conference on Religion at Harvard Divinity School, 2013
“Luther’s Preaching on Mary Magdalene”
   International Luther Congress, Helsinki, 2012
"To Sweeten the Bitter Dance: The Virgin Martyrs in the Lutheran Reformation"
   Sixteenth Century Society Conference, Montréal, 2010

**Memberships**
American Society of Church History
Sixteenth Century Society
Theta Alpha Kappa, honors society in religious studies and theology
Massachusetts Episcopal Clergy Association

**Church Experience**
Assistant Rector, Grace Episcopal Church, Medford, MA, 2014
Sabbatical replacement for the Rector, St. Gabriel’s Episcopal Church, Marion, MA, 2014
Curate, St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, Duxbury, MA, 2009-2011
Chaplain, Barbara C. Harris Camp, Diocese of Massachusetts, July 2009
Parish Intern, St. John's Episcopal Church, Sandwich, MA, 2008-09
Clinical Pastoral Education, Rhode Island Hospital, Providence, RI, 2007
Seminarian & Intern, Lutheran Episcopal Ministry at MIT, Cambridge, MA, 2006-08
Junior Warden, Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham, MA, 2003-2005
Junior Warden, St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Lowell, MA, 1999-2001

**Invited Lectures & Sermons**
“Luther and the Spread of the Reformation”
   Guest lecturer in the Reformations, Boston University School of Theology, 2014
“Visual Art in the Medieval Church”
   Guest lecturer in The Medieval Church, Boston University School of Theology, 2011
“On Friendship”  
Marsh Chapel, Boston University, 2007
“Called to Be Reckless: The Parable of the Unjust Steward”  
St. George's Anglican Church, Halifax, NS, 2005
“The History of Christian Art”  
Anglican Church Women's event, All Saints' Cathedral, Halifax, NS, 1995

Exhibitions
Margaret Arnold & Anna Galloway Highsmith: New Work  
Three Columns Gallery, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2005
Recent Work
Marion Art Center, Marion, MA, 2003
Overtures: A Collection of Prints  
New Frontiers in Book Art: Artists Books in New England  
Cambridge Art Association, Cambridge, MA, 1998
New Members
Cambridge Art Association, 1998
ARCHitextURE: Experiencing Books as Buildings  
Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, PA, 1997
Graduating Students Exhibition
Arronson Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, 1997
Fugue: MFA Thesis Exhibition  
Laurie Wagman Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, 1997
Book Arts/Printmaking at The University of the Arts (co-curator and exhibited artist)  
Haverford School Library, Haverford, PA, 1997
7 in Wagman  
Laurie Wagman Gallery, 1996
AIDS Benefit Art Auction  
The Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, PA, 1996
Collage
Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, NS, 1995
Juried Student Drawing  
Anna Leonowens Gallery, 1994
Works in Progress  
Anna Leonowens Gallery, 1993

Workshops
“Lord of All Hopefulness: Discerning Our Spiritual Gifts”  
ECUSA Province 1 College Students’ Retreat, Greensboro, NH, 2007
“Papermaking in the Spring”  
Summit Montessori School, 1999
“Paper-craft”
Summit Montessori School, 1998
“Introduction to Bookmaking”
Summit Montessori School, 1998
“Japanese Book-binding”
Marcus Harrington Elementary School, Philadelphia, PA, 1997
“Folded Book Structures”
Haverford Middle School, Haverford, PA, 1997
“Intaglio Printmaking”
Halifax Grammar School, Halifax, NS, 1995