

FROM THE MARGINS 2



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FROM THE MARGINS 2

WOMEN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
AND THEIR AFTERLIVES

edited by
Christine E. Joynes
and
Christopher C. Rowland



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PREFACE

This volume has its origins in a project entitled ‘Biblical Women and their Afterlives’ conceived and developed by the Centre for Reception History of the Bible at the University of Oxford and organized together with colleagues from the Luce Program in Scripture and Literary Arts at Boston University, USA. Over the course of several years we arranged seminars and conferences on both sides of the Atlantic to explore the reception history of women from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. This has resulted not only in the present collection of essays but also its companion volume *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and their Afterlives*. We would like to express our thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding our research; to Trinity College, Oxford for hosting our gatherings; and to Cheryl Exum, David Clines and Ailsa Parkin at Sheffield Phoenix Press for their assistance in producing this volume.

We are grateful to the volume’s contributors for their participation in the project and for enabling us to bring this research to a wider audience through the publication of their work. In addition to formal papers, our project included memorable musical performances and dramatic readings, including the specially-commissioned poem ‘To Cast a Stone’ by the acclaimed Irish poet John F. Deane. The latter provides a fitting introduction to our volume, and a reminder that reception history of the Bible seeks to engage all the senses.

Special thanks are due to Elaine Joynes for her help in proof reading some of the volume; to Elizabeth and John Cairns, for tolerating editorial demands; and last but not least to Graham Cairns, whose encouragement and support enabled this book to be completed.

Christine E. Joynes and Christopher C. Rowland
Hilary term 2009

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	David Noel Freedman (ed.), <i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
ABRL	The Anchor Bible Reference Library
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>AH</i>	<i>Analecta hymnica medii aevi</i> (55 vols.; Leipzig: O. R. Reiland, 1886–1922)
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CCSL	Corpus christianorum: series latina. Turnhout, 1953–
CSCO	Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History</i>
<i>FC</i>	<i>Fathers of the Church</i>
FP	Florilegium patristicum
GR 1973	<i>Graduale romanum</i> (Tournai: Desclée, 1973).
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series</i>
<i>LCBI</i>	<i>Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PG</i>	J.-P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia cursus completa... Series graeca</i> (166 vols.; Paris: Petit-Montrouge, 1857–83)
<i>PL</i>	J.-P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologia cursus completus... Series prima</i> [latina] (221 vols.; Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1844–65)
SC	Sources chrétiennes

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

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Sarah Jane Boss is a Lecturer in Christian Theology, and Director of the Centre for Marian Studies, at the University of Wales, Lampeter. She is author of *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Cassell, 2000) and *Mary* (Continuum, 2004), and editor of *Mary: The Complete Resource* (Continuum/Oxford University Press, 2007).

John A. Darr is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies in the Department of Theology at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. His research has focused largely on audience criticism and its application to literary characters in the Gospels and Acts. He has served as chair of the Synoptic Gospels Section and co-chair of the Biblical Criticism and Literary Criticism Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. A recent project has taken him back to West Africa, his childhood home, to study the relationship between religious beliefs and environmental values.

John F. Deane was born on Achill Island in 1943. He founded Poetry Ireland and *The Poetry Ireland Review*. He has published several collections of his poetry, the latest being *A Little Book of Hours* (Carcanet, 2008). President of the European Academy of Poetry, he has won several international awards for his poetry and is a member of Aosdána, Ireland's Academy of Artists. His website is www.johnfdeane.com.

Ena Giurescu Heller is Executive Director, Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA), New York City. Dr Heller is editor of the volume *Reluctant Part-*

ners: *Art and Religion in Dialogue* (2004) and the exhibition catalogs *Icons or Portraits? Images of Jesus and Mary from the Collection of Michael Hall* (2001) and *Tobi Kahn: Sacred Spaces for the 21st Century* (forthcoming, 2009), and a contributor to *Women's Space: Patronage, Place, and Gender in the Medieval Church* (2005) and *The Art of Sandra Bowden* (2004). Her upcoming project is the edited volume *Vantage Points: Why the Medieval Matters* (2010).

Heidi J. Hornik, is Professor of Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art History at Baylor University in Texas. She received her degrees from Cornell University and The Pennsylvania State University. In addition to art historical publications in *Artibus et Historiae* and *Paragone*, Hornik's work has appeared in *Interpretation*, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, and *Review and Expositor*. Michele Tosini and the Ghirlandaio Workshop in Cinquecento Florence, the first monograph on the Renaissance artist, is forthcoming in 2009 from Sussex Academic Press. Hornik has co-authored three interdisciplinary volumes on art and theology, *Illuminating Luke*, and co-edited one book, *Interpreting Christian Art*, with Mikeal C. Parsons. Their current research project, *Acts of the Apostles through the Centuries*, will appear in the Blackwell Bible Commentaries.

Christine E. Joynes is Co-Director of the Centre for Reception History of the Bible at the University of Oxford. One of her current research interests is the reception history of Mark's Gospel and she is presently writing the Blackwell Bible Commentary, *Mark's Gospel through the Centuries*. She has written a number of articles exploring the impact of the Bible on art, music and literature and also edited the volume *Perspectives on the Passion: Encountering the Bible through the Arts* (Continuum, 2007).

Jennifer Wright Knust is an Assistant Professor at Boston University. An expert in New Testament and early Christian history, her forthcoming book on the woman taken in adultery studies the transmission and reception of Gospel stories from the late second century until the early medieval period. With interests in textual criticism, ancient rhetoric, and gender theory, her first book *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 2005) explores the role of sexualized invective in the writings of ancient Christians from the apostle Paul to Irenaeus of Lyons.

Louise J. Lawrence is currently Lecturer in New Testament Studies and SWMTC Research Fellow at the University of Exeter. She is author of *An Ethnography of the Gospel of Matthew* (Mohr Siebeck, 2003), *Reading with Anthropology: Exhibiting Aspects of New Testament Religion* (Paternoster,

2005), *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts* (SPCK, 2009) and co-editor with Mario Aguilar of *Anthropology and Biblical Studies: Avenues of Approach* (Deo, 2004).

Ann Loades is a Professorial Fellow of St Chad's College and Professor Emerita of Divinity, University of Durham, where she was the first woman to be given a personal chair. In 2001 she was made a CBE for 'services to theology', and was President of the Society for the Study of Theology for two years, 2005–2006. She has published over a wide range of theology, most recently concentrating on sacramental theology and spirituality. In 2008 she was honoured by a Festschrift edited by S. Burns and N. Watson entitled *Exchanges of Grace* (London: SCM Press).

Peter Loewen is Assistant Professor of musicology at Rice University. His research interests concern Western chant, vernacular song, religious drama, and the medieval Franciscans. His recent articles appear in *Speculum*, *Comparative Drama*, *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, and a book entitled *Speculum Sermonis: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Medieval Sermon*. He is currently working on two monographs, one on the role of music in the early missions and theology of the Franciscans; the other concerns the function of music in Franciscan preaching during the time of the Reformation.

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Rachel Nicholls holds a doctorate in New Testament Studies from the University of Cambridge. Her thesis is published under the title *Walking on the Water: Reading Mt. 14:22–33 in the light of its Wirkungsgeschichte* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008). She was originally a Congregational Minister and is now an Anglican priest in the Diocese of Ely.

Ela Nutu is Research Associate at the University of Sheffield, where she also teaches in the Department of Biblical Studies. Her research interests focus on postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation (poststructuralist, psychoanalytical, cultural) and, more recently, on the Bible in art,

music and literature. She is the author of *Incarnate Word, Inscribed Flesh: John's Prologue and the Postmodern* (2007) and a number of articles on the Bible, literary theory and film, and co-editor with J. Cheryl Exum of *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue* (2007). Ela is currently working on a monograph on 'violent' biblical women in the Bible and the arts.

Natasha O'Hear is College Lecturer and Junior Research Fellow in New Testament Studies at Worcester College, Oxford. She recently completed her doctoral thesis (also at Oxford) on visual representations of the Book of Revelation in the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods. She is currently working on turning this thesis into an Oxford Theological Monograph with Oxford University Press. Natasha is particularly interested in the concept of visual exegesis and in the role that this might play not only in the field of reception history but also in biblical studies more generally.

Christopher C. Rowland has been Dean Ireland Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture at the University of Oxford since 1991. Together with Christine Joynes he is Co-Director of the Centre for Reception History of the Bible in Oxford. His latest book, *The Mystery of God* (written with Christopher Morray-Jones), is on mystical interpretation of Ezekiel's merkabah chapter and its impact on the New Testament (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009). He is currently writing a book on Blake and the Bible for Yale University Press.

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INTRODUCTION

Christine E. Joynes and Christopher C. Rowland

Despite half a century of biblical interpretation which has sought to put women back on the agenda of ancient texts (written largely if not wholly by men), the dominant threads of narrative and doctrine have—with the notable exception of Mary the mother of Jesus—been focused on the lives and actions of men. Reception history tells a different story. It is not the case that there is a recovery of the lives of women hidden behind the pages of the New Testament, for our information remains as sparse and tantalizing as ever. Rather, the study of biblical women's 'afterlives' allows the imaginative engagement of artists and writers to broaden the horizon of interpretative expectations. Whether it is through historical imagination or the grasp of different portrayals of familiar biblical women (like Mary the mother of Jesus or Mary Magdalene), the creative genius of these interpreters, neglected by mainstream biblical textual scholars, only underlines the importance of the biblical women, viewed in the light of their afterlives.

Deane's poem, with which this volume begins, encapsulates some of the major themes of the book. It underlines not only the place of the poet as biblical exegete, but also the location of interpreters in a stream of tradition, which they can and do subvert. The poem's reference to 'the pillars of the Temple', alluded to in passing, loom large in the forbidding background of Rembrandt's portrayal of Jn 8.1-12 (*Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1644. National Gallery, London). In his well-known discussion of the same passage, in Homily 33 on the Gospel of John, Augustine writes of Jesus being left alone with the woman: 'There remained alone "misera et misericordia"'. It is a contrast which typically sets up a stark difference between the merciful one and the wretched sinner as the woman becomes an object of pity. In this, Augustine's telling of the story mirrors so much of the treatment of biblical women: they are only of interest or value as foils for the more important male agents. Deane's poem, along with other essays in this collection, shows reception history provides another perspective, in which not only the fleeting references to women in the New Testament become subjects of significant interest, but the way in which these women are treated opens up creative ways of engaging with the text that both comment upon and extend the usual hermeneutical approaches of biblical interpretation

down the centuries. For Rembrandt, as for Blake in his engagement with John 8, the contrast is less about the sublime divine and the wretched human but rather between rigidity in the face of human frailty and experience as a motor of human maturing, with both these themes picked up in our poem: 'Tenderness she will come to know, lives in the unspoken'. It is the wordless images of Blake and Pieter Brueghel, who portray a Jesus stooping before the woman and (using Blake's own words) implicitly demonstrating that 'The worship of God is. Honouring his gifts in other[s]' (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 22). Blake explores the woman's experience as one in which she comes to realize that the everlasting task of the world is love and that what she thought passed for it had not been so.

The important contribution of the poet as biblical interpreter is exemplified not only by Deane's poem, but elsewhere in the volume through further insights from William Blake (Rowland and Sklar), Seamus Heaney (Knust) and medieval poets such as William of Herebert (Loewen). Susanne Sklar highlights the influence of Revelation's Woman Clothed with the Sun, the Babylon Harlot, and the New Jerusalem on Blake's character Jerusalem, 'a heroine whose apocalypse reveals *apocatastasis*, the universal forgiveness from which no one is excluded'. Blake's poetry and pictures are brought into dialogue with Botticelli by Christopher Rowland, who suggests that both artists portray Mary Magdalene as witness of an apocalyptic event, experiencing revelatory insight.

Several contributions also alert the reader to the interconnections between music, theology and literature: this is illustrated by Peter Loewen in his analysis of composers and compilers of some medieval Easter dramas that portray Mary Magdalene as a *joculatrix Domini* (minstrel of the Lord), a term derived from Franciscan preaching; and also by Christine Joynes, who notes the significant connections between Mark 16, the musical origins of the *Quem quaeritis* trope, and its subsequent literary development (the 'germ of all European drama'). Sarah Jane Boss's analysis of black Madonnas reminds us that the visual and textual traditions are often closely intertwined; thus bringing the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux into dialogue with statues of black Madonnas can yield fruitful insights about the origins of the latter and remind us of the development and mutation over time and place of significant religious icons.

The place of the artist as biblical interpreter also receives significant attention in the volume. Ela Nutu analyses several different representations of Salome by Caravaggio, underlining the autobiographical input of the artist as interpreter, always a key factor in biblical interpretation but not always sufficiently recognized by its practitioners. Heidi Hornik adds the important dimension of patronage to the discussion, noting Michele Tosini's recasting of the Magdalene as both sensuous and elegant, and an intercessor for the faithful: 'She was a saint, a sinner, and a beautiful, stylish woman

whom he chose to paint in a way that appealed to his male patrons as well as their wives'. The ambiguous character of Mary Magdalene in particular reminds us of passages like Lk. 8.2 in which the radical Jesus movement has an uneasy relationship to convention and patronage. Ena Heller notes how the artistic tradition can often subvert textual priorities, as illustrated by the visual afterlife of Martha that distinguishes her much more clearly than the 'muddle of Marys' in which her sister is subsumed. Velazquez's famous portrait of the kitchen girl (National Gallery, London) underlines this in the way in which the pointed finger of the old woman questions the textual priority, which is itself framed as a background to the main scene of servitude and its demands. The subversive potential of the artistic tradition is a motif that also appears in Diane Apostolos-Cappadona's essay, where she highlights earlier alternative visualizations of Salome in contrast to the *femme fatale* version that developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Rachel Nicholls raises interesting questions about the relationship between text and image, refusing to prioritize one above the other, and bringing Dante Rossetti's drawing of *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee* into creative dialogue with his poem on the same subject, as well as with the Lukan text. That interplay between text and image is the cornerstone of William Blake's challenge to the prioritizing of the word in post-Reformation hermeneutics, in which his illuminated books challenge the reader to move beyond using images merely as illustrations of the all-powerful words.¹ Melanie Wright's discussion of the film genre argues that *The Last Temptation of Christ* reduces Mary Magdalene to her body, 'reflecting centuries of popular Christian imagination and the conventions of the film medium, in which representations of women are constructed for the satisfaction of male consumers'. Indeed, Wright's film analysis bears similarity to Rossetti's image, with its focus on the Magdalene's body in contrast to Jesus' head.

In addition to discussion of the role of the poet and the artist as biblical interpreters, many of the essays note the importance of context in any act of interpretation. Thus Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg and John Darr, in different areas, draw our attention to the way in which polemical interpretations of Mary the mother of Jesus are connected to the interpreters' contexts, and especially to the issue of Jewish-Christian relations. Christian self-identity down the centuries has been tied up with the hostile rejection of 'the other' (whether that be the Jew who did not accept the messiahship of Jesus or the heretic who departed from the true faith). It is an all too common feature of much Christian ecclesiastical debate. In contrast to the discussion of insults characterizing such debate, Ann Loades's analysis of Mary in contemporary ecumenical discussion notes a different trend in processes which are

1. See further W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

more eirenic, namely, how Mary has often been idealized to the detriment of other women, with an emphasis on holiness that inculcates subservience and therefore sociological subordination in church and society. Turning from Virgin to 'villains', Caroline Vander Stichele explores reasons for the frequent conflation of Salome with Herodias, using René Girard and Jean Delorme as her dialogue partners. Again she highlights the significance of cultural context, in this case twentieth-century France, for understanding the interpretative choices that these commentators make. Natasha O'Hear explores another New Testament 'villain', the Whore of Babylon (Revelation), and identifies a significant shift in visual interpretations, from devotional images of the Whore to images that visualized her 'through the lens of more general concerns ranging from the role of women in society to anti-Papal polemic'.

Alongside analysis of the interpreter (whether artist, poet, musician or textual critic), and his or her context, one also needs to remember the textual instability of the biblical text itself. One of the central aspects of reception history is the history of the biblical text. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the case of the New Testament, for which we are better served in terms of textual evidence than almost any other authoritative religious text. How 'Holy Scripture' moved from its fluid beginnings to relative stability is an important emphasis in several essays, notably those of Charlotte Methuen and Jennifer Wright Knust. Thus Methuen points out the variety of ways that Romans 16 has been translated (with Junia interpreted as both male and female); and similarly Jennifer Wright Knust highlights the crucial importance of evidence about textual transmission of Gospel texts, through her discussion of Jn 8.1-12 and its afterlives. Adopting a different approach, Margarita Stocker alerts us to this same theme through her focus on ways in which gaps in the biblical narrative concerning Salome have been filled.

The power of resistant readings is adeptly illustrated by Louise Lawrence, using examples from contemporary advocacy readings which 'bark back' at the text to show how the Canaanite Woman can empower women. Lawrence's conclusion concerning the *practical* impact of biblical interpretation is especially noteworthy, reminding us that biblical women and their afterlives 'are not limited to words on a page but ultimately are stimulants to human agency, for good and ill, within the world'. In sum, interpretation of biblical texts is never an innocent, passive activity, but one which gives an impetus to action.

Behind many interpretations of the biblical women whose afterlives in image and text feature in this book lies a suspicion about female sexuality. Indeed this is apparent in interpretations of both the Virgin Mary and villain Salome and reflects a problem which has always been part of the story of Christian orthodoxy as it has sought to come to terms with and control women's sexuality. Yet the interpretations of biblical women explored in

these pages are a reminder that frequently they resist comfortable accommodation into the confines of propriety and security. Nowhere is this better seen than in the sexual symbolism connected with the ways in which women and reproduction have played their part in depicting the understanding of salvation. As Harriet Sonne de Torrens's essay shows, the medieval 'Sheelana-gigs' are the latest in a development whose origins lie in the imagery of conception, gestation and birth, a key image for salvation in the New Testament itself. The resistance to conformity that these striking images evince may be found elsewhere in the accounts which are considered. From Salome to the woman taken in adultery there is no neat accommodation of the rebellious female into the ordered world of the dominant male.

Of course, as Melanie Wright notes, there are risks inherent in delineating 'biblical women' as a discrete topic of study:

Like the 'women' entry in a reference book it might seem to imply that women are 'other' or non-normative, and that their experience and representation is a 'minority'² preserve of interest and relevance 'only' to other women.

Instead, she suggests, there needs to be a discursive shift away from the emphasis on female difference and towards the consideration of male-female relationality. This is a timely warning. But what confronts us in the Bible is exactly that: women *are* 'other' or non-normative, and their experience and representation is a 'minority' preserve of interest. The essays in this book illustrate, however, the extraordinary variety in interpretative approach provoked by the interpretation of biblical women. They indicate ways in which the marginal female characters in the New Testament can elicit from later interpreters a creativity in understanding and a depth of insight which is testimony in itself to the enormous value of reception history and its long overdue contribution to biblical studies; and this hermeneutical ingenuity puts women's experience firmly on the map of the biblical story.

2. In a sociological sense, rather than a statistical one. See Hacker 1951.

TO CAST A STONE
(JN 8.1-12)

John F. Deane

Misera—wretch, her name; and His—*misericordia*

Pillars of the temple mount in righteousness,
marbled, veined, and touch on deepest darkness

high above; cries of lesser animals and doves, wretches
waiting for slaughter, disturb the roof-dust.

Here is the bleak capital of dogmatic faith, here
the male conclave. They stand, in the rectitude

of cultivated beards, of gathered robes that hide
callused skin, and sharp, protruding bones;

they have come in the equilibrium of arrogance
who have been willing to pronounce: We

have known God. She has been pushed forward
into light, who has been taken in adultery and held

for testing, through the dark night; she alone
kneeling in the midst, head bowed, and He

leaning deeper, writing words in the temple dust;
tenderness, she will come to know, lives

in the unspoken, and when light has overcome, at last,
the darkness, she wonders if the light was there, within the dark—

waiting; and was darkness there, within the light?
She has been disrobed before them but it is they

who need to bathe in dust; now it is the word
mercy that has puzzled her, does light

have mercy on the dark, dark on the light? After all
she will love again, more deeply, with excruciating

tenderness; she will live on, a scar livid upon other lives
not there before last night's embrace, or dawn's
remembering, before the accusing voices and the lips
thin with spittle, who have not known that the everlasting
task of the world is love. She turned, unaware
she has known God; and will step out into light while they
melt back to darkness, she, *misera, misericordia*, blessed.

JUST ANOTHER JEWISH MOTHER? MARY IN THE JEWISH IMAGINATION

Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg

Abstract

This paper examines and analyzes a host of Jewish literary depictions of the mother of Jesus. In ancient Jewish sources, questioning Mary's virtue is a way of demythologizing the Jesus narratives and thus undermining Christian doctrine. Yiddish American writings from the early twentieth-century conflate the Jewish demythologizing counter-narrative and narratives that uphold Mary as a model of devoted motherhood. Jewish American novelists of the early twenty-first century seem to turn to Mary out of genuine curiosity, not polemic, and try in a variety of ways to domesticate this figure who has no Jewish analogue. This means foregrounding Mary's Jewishness and her maternal qualities, either for historical or comical effect. The translation of Mary to Jewish mother—either as archetype or as stereotype—reflects an effort to identify with an otherwise entirely perplexing figure. To impose the stereotype of the Jewish mother onto the Virgin is to disidentify Mary, to manage and merge two identities that have been tainted in the Jewish public sphere. Disidentification allows the woman formerly known as the Virgin Mary to become just another Jewish mother, and the Jewish mother to become a little bit more of a saint.

———— * * * ————

To hear some Jewish theologians tell it, the life of the adult male Jew—which is, for some Jewish theologians, the only kind of Jew of interest—is defined by one particularly fraught relationship: his relationship to Jesus. To hear some psychotherapists (and a great many Jewish comedians and novelists) tell it, the life of the adult male Jew—which is, for many psychotherapists, comedians, and novelists, the only kind of Jew of interest—is defined by another particularly fraught relationship: his relationship to his mother.¹

1. Although the stereotype of the nurturing/overbearing Jewish mother is arguably a male construction, the characterization is obviously fraught for Jewish women. Feminist critics have become increasingly attentive to the creative and destructive powers of this type. See, for instance, Antler 2007; Baum, Hyman and Michel 1975; Fishman 1992; Pogrebin 1992; Ravits 2000.

Imagine, then, the ambivalent relationship the adult male Jew must have to Mary, Jesus' Jewish mother!

Not surprisingly, Jewish engagement with the Virgin Mary has generally been coincident with Jewish engagement with Jesus. In the Talmudic period, as we will see, the rabbis made veiled allusions to Jesus, which could often be decoded precisely because of the way they depicted his mother. In periods of religious persecution, Jews recorded few thoughts about Jesus—and likewise little about his mother. In the United States, ostensibly the new Promised Land for Jews and Christians, freedom of speech and religion have allowed for moments of sustained Jewish attention to Jesus and sometimes curious and unexpected imaginative play with the figure of Mary. The turn of the twentieth century marked a period of Jewish engagement with the Jesus question.² Rabbi Stephen Wise's 1925 declaration that 'Neither Christian protest nor Jewish lamentation can annul the fact that Jesus was a Jew, Hebrew of Hebrews' (Wise 1949: 281) represents a common refrain of the period. Moreover, many rabbis of the day touted Jesus as an exemplar of Jewish morality, if not as an embodiment of divinity. The other end of the twentieth century was marked by a renewed Jewish interest in Jesus, this time with scholarly and historical rather than ethical and assimilationist undercurrents. Books like Geza Vermes's *Jesus the Jew* (1973) and Paula Fredriksen's *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (1999) portray Jesus as an observant Jew who upheld the teachings of the Torah.

Twenty-first century American Jews seem also to be interested in the cultural and personal impacts of Jesus on America and American Jews. In 2007, the Jewish literary website nextbook.org sponsored 'What's He Doing Here?', a conference about Jesus. One panel, entitled 'The Mocking of Jesus: The Talmud to Larry David' brought speakers together for a 'discussion about Jews making fun of Jesus—then and now'. The premise of the panel was that 'The Jewish people has had a complicated, and not always happy, relationship with Jesus and those who have followed him over the centuries... Anger, resentment, and subversive wit have occasionally found their way into Jewish depictions of Jesus, from scurrilous medieval tales to modern Hebrew and Yiddish stories to contemporary popular culture' (www.nextbook.org).

In these scurrilous medieval tales, modern stories, and contemporary popular culture, attention to Jesus has often necessarily meant attention to Jesus' mother. This paper looks at a wide range of Jewish sources—Talmudic exchanges, Yiddish poems, contemporary American novels—that have reimagined Mary. These varied sources reveal both a range of ideas

2. See, for instance, Stephen Prothero's chapter 'Rabbi' (2003: 229-66).

about the mother of Jesus, and a diversity of attitudes toward the Jewish mother generally.

One of Mary's earliest and most significant roles in the Jewish imagination is as the key to unsettling the Christian message. If Mary's miraculous conception and Jesus' miraculous birth are refuted, Christianity loses a key tenet. Thus we see a recurring Jewish motif of Mary not as virgin or as mother, but as whore. References to Jesus sprinkled throughout the Talmud³ can be read together to reveal what Peter Schäfer describes as a counter-narrative to the Christian story: in these, 'Jesus was not born from a virgin, as his followers claimed, but out of wedlock, the son of a whore and her lover; therefore he could not be the Messiah of Davidic descent, let alone the Son of God' (Schäfer 2007: 10).

Schäfer, like others, understands references in the Babylonian Talmud to a Yeshu Ben Satra and Yeshu Ben Stada as pointing to Jesus: in tractate *Shabbat* 104b, the rabbis present contradictory ancestries for this man they all describe as a fool.⁴ The rabbinic discourse sets out to establish whether this Yeshu is the son of Stada or the son of Pandera. Rav Hisda, in asserting that the mother's husband was Stada, but her lover Pandera,⁵ casts aspersions on the character of the mother and on the legitimacy of the son. An anonymous rabbi counters that the epithet Stada referred to the mother. 'Stada', was said to come from the Hebrew *satah*—to go astray, to be unfaithful: Miriam (Mary) was a *sotah*, a loose woman. We know this because the Talmud tells us she grew her hair long.⁶ A rabbinic association of long, unfastened hair with indecent behavior⁷ meant that this Miriam's 'long and apparently unfastened hair was indicative of her indecent behavior' (Schäfer 2007: 18). A *sotah*, she was called 'Stada' because she was unfaithful: 'she turned away from (*satath da*) her husband' (*Shabbat* 104b). If Miriam was an adulterous woman, her son cannot be proven legitimate. Gone are Jesus' noble lineage and the Davidic descent: in the rabbinic imagination, the son is a *mamzer* (a bastard) because the mother is a whore.

3. As against a single reference in the Mishnah (*m. Yevamot* 4.13).

4. Schäfer (2007: 16) quotes as his source the Bavli, Ms. Munich 95 (Paris, 1342).

5. Alternately, Panthera, which Boyarin (1999: 154) reads as a play on *parthenos* (virgin), an example of 'the well-known rabbinic practice of mocking pagan or Christian holy names by changing them pejoratively'.

6. Ms. Munich has 'His mother was [Miriam], (the woman who) let (her) women's [hair] grow long (*megadla [se'ar] neshayya*)', which is also read 'But his mother was Miriam the hairdresser?' (Soncino Talmud, *Sab.* 104b) and 'Miriam who plaits women's [hair]' (Sokoloff, s.v. *gedal* #2).

7. Cf. *Gittin* 90a and *Eruvin* 100b.

The Jewish polemic⁸ *Sefer Toldot Yeshu*⁹ offers a damning depiction of Jesus, but is kinder to his mother: in this account, she is not the disloyal wife, but the wife unwittingly taken by another man. The *Sefer* asserts that Miriam, while betrothed to a Torah scholar and God-fearer named Yohanan, was seduced¹⁰ by another man. The implication, of course, is that Mary's not having had sex with the man to whom she was betrothed is hardly the same as Mary's not having had sex. The twelfth-century rabbi David Kimkhi, reflecting on this 'sign', asks:

Even if a virgin were to give birth, how would people believe that was a sign? Wouldn't people rather think that she had been seduced and the child was illegitimate? One cannot call something a miraculous sign if it arouses doubt in people, since we have seen many young girls ('*almot*') who were considered virgins (*betulot*) but we have incontrovertible evidence that they were not really virgins (Seidman 2006: 66-67).

Almost a millennium later, Yiddish writer I.B. Singer makes the same point, in a rather different way, in his short story 'Gimpel the Fool'. In the original Yiddish (1945), gullible Gimpel, the town fool of Frampol, is persuaded by the townspeople to marry Elka, who 'was no chaste maiden, but they told [him] she was virgin pure' (Seidman 2006: 257). When she bears a child quite soon after the marriage, Gimpel confronts his wife: 'How can he be mine? ... He was born seventeen weeks after the marriage'. The child was premature, Elka insists: the women of her family give birth early. The following day, Gimpel, still skeptical, speaks to the town schoolmaster who cites rabbinic legend, "'The very same thing happened to Adam and Eve. Two they went up to bed and four they descended". There isn't a woman in the world who is not the granddaughter of Eve'. In Saul Bellow's English translation, the passage closes with Gimpel's resigned acceptance: 'That was how it was; they argued me dumb. But then, who really knows how such things are!'

In the Yiddish, however, Gimpel adds, 'After all, they say that Yoyzl didn't have a father at all'. Yoyzl is the Yiddish nickname often given to

8. David Biale argues that the work is actually not 'a systematic negative inversion of the Gospels into a counter-history', but 'might better be read as a satirical folktale that works by substitutions rather than inversions' (Biale 1999: 132).

9. A possibly fifth- or sixth-century document, popularized in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. David Biale notes that 'Voltaire thought that it was from the first century and even predated the Gospels. He called it "the most ancient Jewish writing which has been transmitted to us against our religion. This is a life of Jesus Christ, completely contrary to our holy evangelists". Voltaire was perhaps the first to give the *Sefer toldot yeshu* this kind of counter-historical definition' (Biale 1999: 133).

10. More accurately, raped: Joseph Ben Pandera, 'attractive and like a warrior in appearance, having gazed lustfully upon Miriam, knocked upon the door of her room and betrayed her by pretending that he was... Yohanan. Even so, she was amazed at this improper conduct and submitted only against her will' (Goldstein 1950: 149).

Jesus, and Gimpel's additional thought seems at first merely to be a recognition of the Christian tradition of the Virgin birth. Naomi Seidman, however, argues that the omission of Gimpel's comparison in English translations intended for largely Christian audiences suggests that something more is happening in this passage. Whereas Gimpel understands the rabbinic reference to Adam and Eve as assurance that premature births do happen, a more sophisticated hearer will realize that the schoolmaster has likened Elka to Eve. The two mothers are both sexual sinners. When Gimpel draws his own parallel between Elka and Mary, we have to read this—as Singer's translators did—as 'evidence of the extremity of Gimpel's foolishness: he is such a fool, the omitted line implies, that he believes the one thing that no other Jew has ever swallowed—that Jesus's mother Mary (like his wife, Elka) was a virgin!' (Seidman 2006: 258).

Written in 1945 but published in English in *The Partisan Review* in 1952, 'Gimpel the Fool' is the story that put Singer on the American literary map. Despite its Christian Eastern European setting, Singer's story becomes an entirely Jewish story in translation: not only is Yoyzl, the diminutive name for Jesus expurgated, references to Elka looking like a *shiksa* and swearing like a *goy* are also omitted. In America, Singer had the freedom to treat Christian themes—in 'Gimpel', Seidman argues, he has written 'a Jewish retelling of the Gospels' (Seidman 2006: 260), but ironically this gets lost in translation.

The relative freedom of American Jews to write about what they want changes the shape of Jewish literature. Not facing the constraints felt by Jews in earlier generations and other lands, Jews expanded their literary reach. Lawrence Rosenwald sees it as significant that much Jewish American literature 'deals with non-Jewish themes: ...baseball, race relations, universities, national wars and politics, Mary the mother of Jesus, Henry James, the Kinsey Report, AIDS and Mormons and Roy Cohn' (Rosenwald 2003: 415). Certainly, Malamud's *The Natural* was about baseball and Belloc's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* about race relations; Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* is but one of many works by Jewish authors to treat universities, while Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is likely the only one to take on AIDS and Mormons and Roy Cohn. But what Jewish American work deals—and not, like 'Gimpel', obliquely—with Mary the mother of Jesus?

No doubt Rosenwald was thinking of Sholem Asch's 1949 novel *Mary*, the third installment in Asch's so-called Christological trilogy.¹¹ Asch's was certainly the most notorious Jewish engagement of New Testament figures but it was hardly the only one. Yiddish poets A. Léveles and Anna Margolin reimagined the Virgin in the first half of the century; novelists Stanley Elkin, Binnie Kirshenbaum, and Janice Eidus picked her up at the end of

11. *The Nazarene* (1939), *The Apostle* (1943), and *Mary* (1949).

the twentieth century and carried her forth into the twenty-first. Queer performance artists Alina Troyano and Uzi Parnes made her a *Yiddishe-mama*, while Hollywood has given us multiple cinematic performances of a Jewish Mary.¹² The other Jewish Madonna has done quite well for herself in America, it seems.

That success could be linked to an early twentieth-century movement called 'Jewish imagism', which shares Anglo-American imagism's concern with the tensions between text and image, and also 'engages essential questions of individual and collective identity at a time of enormous social, political, and geographic upheaval' (Mann 2002: 502). What is particularly Jewish about Jewish imagism is its participation in 'modern Jewish culture's larger revolution regarding the Second Commandment taboo on graven images' (Mann 2002: 502). This entailed, in part, a widening of Jewish artistic and literary discourse to include 'what were considered idolatrous or pagan elements in European culture' (Mann 2002: 502). For a Yiddish poet like Anna Margolin, this meant exploring the iconic and idolatrous figure of the Virgin Mary. Seven of her poems are about a Mari, 'which seems to represent in part, at least, the persona of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, a Christian subject in a Yiddish prayer poem' (Hellerstein 2000: 197).

Sholem Asch, for his part, devoted an entire book to Mary. Asch, a Polish émigré, began writing in Hebrew but switched to Yiddish. A prolific writer of plays, short stories, and novels, Asch received critical acclaim throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1939, however, with Hitler in power and the war beginning, he published the book that would lose him his Jewish readership. The work was *The Nazarene*, a 700-page novel about Jesus' life, which he followed up with *The Apostle*, a life of Paul, and *Mary*, a life of the Virgin.¹³ As Ellen Umansky puts it, 'For Asch's devoted Yiddish-speaking readers, this literary move constituted nothing less than a betrayal'.¹⁴ Asch desired to move his writing beyond the *shtetl* (the Eastern European Jewish village) but this move away from Jewish parochialism ended in his being publicly pilloried by his Jewish readers.

In *Mary*, as in its prequels, Asch sought to explore the historical setting and Jewish roots of New Testament figures. He links his Mary (whom he calls Miriam) to Ruth and Rachel, giving her a place among the matriarchs

12. Jewish Marys include Bette Midler in Peter Alexander's *The Thorn* (1971); Verna Bloom in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988); and Maia Morgenstern in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

13. Asch's *Mary* is least concerned with the figure of Mary as Virgin: he is interested in her primarily as mother.

14. <http://www.nextbook.org/cultural/feature.html?id=117>. Accessed August 8, 2008.

of Israel (Morgentaler 1988: 238). Asch introduces her when Joseph, returning to Nazareth to seek a wife from the House of David, meets her and asks to marry her. Shortly thereafter, she is revealed to be the carrier of the Messiah: an old crone with ‘something of a Sibylline reputation among the women of Jerusalem’ (Asch 1949: 28) declares, ‘Mark her well, you women; she is a daughter of the House of David and from her womb shall Israel’s redeemer come’ (Asch 1949: 29). Mary’s assimilation of this knowledge and her efforts to convey it to Joseph render the divine promise into a domestic problem. Despite all challenges, however, Joseph stands by his determination to make Mary his wife, and sees himself as her protector and guardian during her pregnancy.

Once the child is born, Mary recounts, in wonder and astonishment, her giving birth among the shepherds, her son’s simple childhood, his beginning to learn the law and the prophets, his establishing a place for himself as the eldest and most cherished son in the family. His doting mother understands him to be ordinary and exceptional both:

Despite his six years, despite the oracular pronouncements which he delivered in inspired moments, Yeshua was in some ways the most childlike of her sons... [I]nvariably, the child of promise, with his provocative questions, his tenderness, and her sense of his destiny, absorbed more of her time and attention (Asch 1949: 171).

Asch’s story is fundamentally the story of a Jewish family, living a Jewish life, told in terms of the mother, who must balance her maternal love with the universally-significant sacrifice she must make.

The topic of Mary as devoted mother was well-suited for Asch, who ‘had a fascination with the theme of motherhood in general, and with the relationship between mothers and sons in particular’ (Morgentaler 1988: 237). Asch biographer Ben Siegel has argued that few writers have dealt with the figure of the Jewish mother ‘as extensively and as affectionately as did Asch’ (Siegel 1976: 84)—much of his writing focuses on the theme of maternal sacrifice and reflects the sentimental ideal of the *Yiddishe-mama* who protects and nurtures her brood (Antler 2007: 15-45). In *The Mother* (1930), ‘a paean to the Lower East Side immigrant matriarch’ (Antler 2007: 26), Asch sought ‘to reveal the familial and maternal instincts embodied in those gestures and terms deemed peculiarly Jewish’ (Siegel 1976: 84). Asch’s Virgin Mary is likewise identifiably Jewish and necessarily universal. Moreover, she is of a piece with his other female characters: once she begets a child, she—like Asch’s other women—‘is dominated by maternal instincts’ (Siegel 1976: 76). Siegel describes *Mary* as ‘a tender, frequently perceptive and intuitive portrait; his sympathy for her is unqualified, his attitude reverential. Not surprisingly, she emerges (the miraculous birth aside) a traditional Jewish mother obsessed with protecting her child’ (Siegel 1976: 181).

Mary is not always so easily domesticated by Jews. Three recent novels reflect the Jewish perception of her as forbidden—still as icon and idol. America has freed the Jews to write about whatever they like, but when it comes to Mary, most Jewish writers are not entirely sure what to say. Asch had ecumenical intentions: he sought to lay bare the Jewish roots of New Testament figures. His Mary as Jewish mother is a wholly positive identity. One needs only to have a passing acquaintance with Philip Roth and Woody Allen to know that the Jewish mother is not always cast so favorably. And so it is interesting to find that when toying with the figure of Mary, some Jewish writers make her Jewish and a mother, whilst others make her a Jewish mother. For those writers focused on the former, Mary is of interest not because she is a prototype or a counter-example of a familiar Jewish figure, but because she has no Jewish equivalent. She is iconic and thereby *treyf* (not kosher): her foreignness and forbiddenness make her compelling.

The protagonist of Stanley Elkin's *The Rabbi of Lud* (1987) is Jerry Goldkorn, the lone rabbi in a forsaken New Jersey town which he describes as 'funerary, sepulchral, thanatopsical' (Elkin 1987: 18). A rather hapless rabbi, Goldkorn's only business comes in conducting funerals and tending the town's Jewish cemeteries. The sole child in town is his fourteen-and-a-half-year-old daughter Connie, who has never had a friend her own age.

A bored teenager, Connie claims publicly that she has not only had visions of the Virgin Mary—she has spent evenings romping through the cemeteries of Lud with her. Holy Mother, as Connie knows her, had apparently come to New Jersey to harrow the cemeteries, rescuing 'the poor lost souls of righteous Jews' (Elkin 1987: 193). Evidently, Mary's particular task is to roust the Jews—a task she embraces despite it taking her away from Joseph. Mary erupts in a fit of giggles as she thinks about her dear husband. 'It's so hard for him, he's always been such a good sport about it.' 'About what?', Connie coaxes.

'He says he doesn't know what to call Him.'

'Who?'

'Jesus. God. Either one.' She was really laughing now... 'He calls Them, he calls Them—his mahuten! He calls Them his moketenestah!' And her nose was running too. From laughter (Elkin 1987: 199).

Here Holy Mother betrays her roots. Her husband, at a loss for what to call his divine father-in-law (also his divine son—one can understand Joseph's confusion) resorts to the Yiddish words for the father and mother of one's child's spouse. Joseph turns to his *mamaloshen*, his mother tongue,¹⁵ for a term that suggests at once the parent of your child's companion and the marrying into

15. The joke is entirely anachronistic, of course: Mary and Joseph would have spoken Aramaic, with Yiddish not emerging as the (stereotypical) language of the Jews for another 1500 years.

another family. The terms are utterly inappropriate: his child has no companion and Joseph himself is the one grafted into his own family.

Joseph's effort suggests how difficult it is for Jews to grasp Christian concepts that spring forth from Judaism. Christianity—and specifically his own family, no longer just another small-town Jewish family but now The Holy Family—presents Joseph with a problem his language cannot solve. The relationship between him and God, and for that matter, between Christianity and Judaism, are familial relationships for which Yiddish, a language known for its expressiveness, has no words. And so, Joseph seeks recourse in a familiar vocabulary and hopes that it will approximate to his own reality. He continues to be a Jew, operating within a Jewish system using a Jewish language, despite the fact that a whole new world and a whole new (theological) vocabulary has sprung forth specifically to make sense of his own family.

Mary, by contrast, seems to straddle Judaism and Christianity: she understands what is absurd about Joseph's failure to grasp his own theological puzzle, and yet she understands the language of his failed response. This Mary is yet another Yiddish Mary, a Jew who is as conversant with Judaism as Christianity. This too is the paradox of Connie Goldkorn, who at 14 has enough knowledge of Christianity to conjure up a believable Virgin, but is steeped enough in her own Judaism to have the Virgin speak in a Jewish vernacular.

When news of Connie's nocturnal harrowing appears in the local paper, Goldkorn loses his undertaker's position, but is quickly hired by a local realtor who capitalizes on his newfound notoriety. Goldkorn's wife Shelley, however, is less impressed and retaliates by refusing to sleep with her husband. (This is quite a blow for Goldkorn, who is madly in love with his wife.) She transplants Connie to Chicago where the teenager loses her virginity. In Elkin's novel, the categories of female, Jewish, and virginal are transitory. Holy Mother becomes sexualized: away from her husband Joseph, she longs for his touch. Following her visions of the Virgin, the rabbi's daughter has sex for the first time. And in the fall-out after her daughter's revelations about her visions, Goldkorn's formerly sexualized wife becomes virginal.

Elkin's shifting categories of Jewish, female, and virgin seem unstable in other Jewish literature as well. If we turn back briefly to Gimpel, we recall that the fool's Jewish wife Elka looked like a *shiksa*. This Elka was also a Mary figure: for the unwitting Gimpel, the similarity to Jesus' mother came in Elka's virginity and then in her bearing a child; for the reader of the story, familiar with a long tradition of Jewish stories casting aspersions on Mary's chastity, the similarity came in her clearly not being a virgin and her deceiving her husband into believing otherwise.

In Binnie Kirshenbaum's *An Almost Perfect Moment* (2004), we meet fifteen-year-old Valentine Kessler, a Jewish girl growing up in Canarsie,

Brooklyn during the 1970s. Timing aside, Valentine's biography looks a little like Jesus': she is the only child of a woman named Miriam, whose relationship to the father of her child was fleeting and complicated. Valentine's greater resemblance, however, is to Jesus' mother: she is the spitting image of 'those pastel cards and garden sculptures that depict the Blessed Virgin Mary' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 15). Like the young Mary (and unlike Gimpel's Elka), Valentine is a Jewish virgin. She listens patiently when her best friend Beth talks about *doing it* for the first time, which she hopes won't happen in a car. Valentine has her own ideas about sex: 'The first time I do it, I want everything to be white. In a white room, on white sheets, with white roses in a vase on the nightstand, and I want to be wearing a white nightgown' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 30).

Valentine's Jewish virginal identity is complicated by her attraction to Catholicism: she can't get the song 'Ave Maria' out of her head, she lurks around the Church of the Holy Family, and she has been reading *The Lives of the Saints*. As the narrator comments, 'Given that her name, Valentine, was a saint's name, coupled with the fact that she did look exactly like the Mary on the prayer card, it wouldn't have been very far-fetched for Valentine to wonder if maybe there'd been some kind of celestial mix-up, and maybe she was supposed to be a Catholic' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 39-40). But Valentine is acutely aware of the suffering of the Jews, her people, and does not wonder. That is, until her Catholic librarian lets slip the uncomfortable 'business of Jesus being born a Jew—a hot potato for the Catholics and the Jews alike' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 157). The revelation leads to another:

'Back then, everybody was Jewish', [librarian] Lucille Fiacco said. 'There was no choice', which wasn't exactly accurate, but so what?
 'And Mary?' Valentine asked.
 'Jewish', Lucille said. 'Joseph too. I just told you. Everybody was Jewish.'
 'Mary was Jewish?'
 'Yes. Mary was Jewish.'
 'The Blessed Virgin Mary was Jewish?'
 'Yes', Lucille snapped. 'Yes, the frigging Blessed Virgin Mary was Jewish. Are you satisfied?'
 Mary, Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary was Jewish! (Kirshenbaum 2005: 157)

Given the set-up, it is perhaps not surprising that Valentine becomes unaccountably pregnant. Or that Enzo's Pizzeria is transformed into a shrine to the Holy Mother because Valentine stopped there for two slices and a soda. But the reader knows a little more than the people who populate Valentine's world. The reader knows the virginal teenager is in love with her math teacher, John Wosileski, a man who 'looks like a pancake' and who has only recently moved out of his parents' house. The reader knows

that Mr Wosileski is infatuated with Valentine. And the reader knows that on Valentine's Day, our virgin had found herself in the apartment of our schoolteacher. Once there, she proved (apparently) that 'Mrs Sandler, [the mother of Valentine's best friend Beth] knew of what she spoke when she'd told the girls instinct would prevail' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 136).

But it is not as simple as all that. This is not exactly another Jewish story that engages the Christian narrative in order to undermine it. This is not just another Jewish version of Mary, whose virginity has long been lost and whose child is scarcely a miracle. The story is subtler than that. Shall we simply say that in his zeal, Mr Wosileski misfires, and so Valentine leaves his apartment 'still a virgin' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 137). But a pregnant virgin. As the local TV reporter says when she arrives to broadcast news of Canarsie's virgin birth, 'There are only two ways to look at life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is' (Kirshenbaum 2005: 306). *An Almost Perfect Moment* seeks to have it both ways: to uphold the Christian narrative of the virgin birth alongside its Jewish counter-narrative.

The 2007 novel *The War of the Rosens* by Janice Eidus plays with some similar themes as *The Rabbi of Lud*. Set in a Bronx housing project in 1965, the story centers around ten-year-old Emma Rosen, daughter of the mercurial Leo and the passive Annette, and sister to the slightly older, wholly dismissive May. Leo owns a candy store but imagines he could have done something more, had he not come from a tenement in Brooklyn and an abusive family. Often angry and spiteful, Leo is a dogmatic atheist—a socialist Jew who flaunts his rational and material views of the world before his observant Jewish neighbors and endeavors to drill his convictions into his daughters. Despite his incessant appeals to reason, he is given to terrible fury and beats his children as he himself had been beaten. Worse, he is largely indifferent to his eldest daughter, May, who has a gift for math and science. Having failed literary aspirations of his own, he projects his dreams and pretensions onto his beloved younger daughter Emma, whom he imagines will be a poet.

Emma at once cherishes the literary dimensions of her relationship with her father and dreads its didactic aspects. When her father pontificates, as he often does, 'We Rosens believe ... exclusively in the worth of human beings, not in a supernatural God', Emma thinks to herself, '*Blah blah blah. Shut up*'. He goes on, at the cash register in a crowded store, 'You'll never need any spiritual crutches', and she thinks, '*He's a child...* and immediately feels guilty' (Eidus 2007: 9).

Despite—or because of—their father's insistence that 'atheists are much stronger than those who believe in God, whether they're Jews, Catholics, Muslims, or Hindus' (Eidus 2007: 3), both Rosen daughters are drawn to religion. May, 'who usually preferred numbers to books', had herself been

‘utterly enthralled’ by a Bible she had found in a nearby playground. ‘The words of the Old Testament spoke to her in a way no other words ever had’ (Eidus 2007: 33). She aspires to marry the boy she has a crush on, to learn with him proper observance of *shabbos* and *kashrut*; she expects her aspirations to come to fruition because she knows that ‘the world, and that included the Bronx and the Gun Hill projects, was ruled by a righteous God, a God who recognized how righteous and fair May herself was’ (Eidus 2007: 33).

Emma’s religious rebellion is even more shocking than her sister’s. Since ‘the Rosens aren’t great Jews’ (as her father is fond of saying) Emma ‘figures she should learn a thing or two about Catholicism, which seems so wonderfully exotic, with its notions of original sin and sainthood and its beautiful depictions of nearly naked Christs nailed to the cross’ (Eidus 2007: 15). Her religious education comes in sneaking into the churchyard of the Immaculate Conception Church, where she finds a statue of the Virgin Mary, ‘who reigns there all alone, with no baby or adult Jesuses, no angels or cherubs to keep her company’ (Eidus 2007: 17). What little Emma knows about Mary came courtesy of a boy in the apartment elevator who explained, ‘When a man puts his thing inside a woman, a baby comes out. But virgins, like God’s mother, can have babies without the man’s thing’ (Eidus 2007: 17). Hearing this, ‘Emma decided that virgin-motherhood—certainly the most enviable poetic notion of all—was the state she wanted to achieve when she grew up’ (Eidus 2007: 17). Her realization can be understood not only as a rebuff to her atheist Jewish father, but to her passive, emotionally absent mother, Annette, who is everything the Virgin is not: corporeal, flawed, remote. It seems Emma is drawn to the Virgin because she is ethereal, perfect, present—precisely unlike her mother.

Emma eventually approaches the statue of Mary to seek guidance about the things that trouble her: her crush on Bobby Gaglione, her father’s abusiveness, her inability to do math, her sister’s abusiveness, but most pressingly, to answer a plea. ‘How can I learn to be a good Jew, when I don’t even know if God is real?’ (Eidus 2007: 18). Emma waits patiently for an answer and ultimately receives one. Mary assures Emma that Bobby likes her but doesn’t know how to show it; she tells her to stand up for herself with her father and her sister; and she directs her not to worry about math because she is ‘“*exceptionally literary*”’, which coincidentally is exactly what her father says’ (Eidus 2007: 19). And then she says, ‘Don’t worry now about how to be a good Jew. One day you’ll understand. And then, you will be what you wish to be’ (Eidus 2007: 19). Mary, the Christian icon, becomes the interpreter of Judaism.

We see in Eidus’s Mary a figure who has the capacity to speak directly to the heart of the Jew who chooses to take her seriously. We find a similar Mary in *Memories of the Revolution* (Act 2, Sc. 1), a performance piece

written by queer writers Alina Troyano and Uzi Parnes. In the piece, Carmelita Tropicana (Troyano's alter ego) is stranded on a boat with two other people. She is saved when the Virgin Mary appears to her and announces, 'Don't worry so much. I have a tie line to you-know-who and I promise you a happy ending... I'm Mary, the Virgin. You have been chosen by the Goddess herself to be the next hottest Latin superstar but you gotta wait a little' (Troyano 1999: 37). Mary acknowledges that there will be hardship on Carmelita's road to fame, including a revolution, which will be Carmelita's art. Her struggle will be 'to give dignity to Latin and Third World women' (Troyano 1999: 38). If she takes on the struggle, the Virgin promises Carmelita that she 'will be gifted with eternal youth' (Troyano 1999: 38)—a promise that comes with one provision. 'Never let a man touch you', the Virgin demands. 'You must remain pure, like me' (Troyano 1999: 38).

The appearance of the Virgin to a Latin American woman—even a lesbian one, for whom the restrictions Mary has laid out is 'never to be a problem' (Troyano 1999: 38)—might not seem all that strange. What is noteworthy, however, is the form the Virgin takes: she is a stereotypical *Yiddishe-mama*, played by actor Parnes in drag. She promises Carmelita, 'You will be reunited with that *geshtunke* brother of yours'; she assures her '*Your kunst is your waffen* [your art is your weapon]' (Román 1995: 88). While the depiction of this Mary 'draws on two toxic identities—caricatures of Jewish motherhood and Catholic veneration of the Virgin', the negative stereotypes are reworked through a process that cultural critic Juan Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification, in which 'a toxic identity is remade' (Dorson). This process is 'about the management of an identity that has been 'spoiled' in the majoritarian public sphere' (Muñoz 1999: 196).

Muñoz's notion of disidentification may be the key to understanding what is at work in all the contemporary Jewish depictions of Mary we have just seen. The toxicity of Mary for Jews is multi-faceted. She is a female who is somehow divine, a virgin who is mother; she is an icon and she is a saint. All of these constructions are anathema for Judaism, which upholds a single male god, embraces the body and human fertility, forbids graven images, and eschews religious intermediaries.

In the antique Jewish sources about Mary, maintaining and perpetuating Mary's toxic identity is necessary as a way of simultaneously upholding Jewish belief and undermining Christian doctrine. In 'Gimpel the Fool', we see vestiges of the Jewish demythologizing counter-narrative. In the works of our American writers after Gimpel, we see something rather different at work. Jewish writers seem to turn to Mary out of genuine curiosity, not polemic, and try in a variety of ways to domesticate this figure who has no Jewish analogue. For all our writers, this means foregrounding Mary's Jewishness. Sholem Asch did this for historical effect; most of our other writers do so for comic effect. But the joke seems not to be on Christians as much

as on Jews who continue to be stymied by the figure of the Virgin Mary. This is why the translation of Mary to Jewish mother—either as archetype or as stereotype—almost makes sense: it reflects an effort to identify with an otherwise entirely perplexing figure. To impose the toxic type of the Jewish mother onto the toxic type of the Virgin is to disidentify Mary, to manage and merge two identities that have been spoiled in the majoritarian public sphere. Disidentification allows the woman formerly known as the Virgin Mary to become just another Jewish mother, and the Jewish mother to become a little bit more of a saint.

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BELITTling MARY: INSULT, HUMILIATION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN MARIOLOGY

John A. Darr

Abstract

Jane Schaberg's extraordinarily controversial book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (1987), initiated a new chapter in critical biblical studies of Mary. Although Schaberg's unflinching questioning of the historical Mary's sexuality and pregnancy predictably elicited mostly negative responses from traditional critics, it also emboldened some scholars to pursue further the issues she raised. Could Mary have been raped? Did she initiate pre-marital sexual relations? And who might have been her partner? Lacking in this flurry of research, however, has been an assessment of how a critical understanding of insult and its functions in ancient cultures might affect our evaluation of both textual information in Matthew and Luke and the historical situations behind such literary data. I argue that sexual slander and response to it (exchanged primarily between Jewish and Jewish-Christian groups in the process of estrangement) served as catalysts in the development of certain aspects of Mariology in the first two centuries, and that awareness of this phenomenon should call into question the validity of speculating about the real Mary's sexual experience.

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Introduction

Few controversies in biblical scholarship have proven as incendiary as recent disputes over Mary's conception of Jesus in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke. I mean that literally. A car owned by Jane Schaberg, a key participant in the ongoing debate about Mary's virginity and Jesus' legitimacy, was set afire by irate opponents of her views. The controversy began to smolder with the publication in 1977 of Raymond Brown's magisterial tome, *The Birth of the Messiah*, which questioned the historicity of much of the Infancy Narratives and highlighted the theological dynamics within the early church that led to assertions about a virginal conception. Traditional believers and conservative critics were not amused by Brown's efforts.

A decade later, the smoldering dispute was fanned into flames with the appearance of Schaberg's *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, which argued that the historical Mary's pregnancy was probably the result of seduction, or even rape. Both Matthew and Luke were aware of a tradition to that effect, but they sought to cover it up in different ways. Brown, Schaberg's mentor, disagreed vociferously with her arguments; and scholars began lining up on both sides of the issue. In the 1993 edition of his book, Brown responded to Schaberg and other critics; the new edition of Schaberg's book appeared in 2006 and contained articles surveying and assessing the ongoing debate.¹

This conflagration shows no signs of abating. Why should it? It has all the ingredients of an old-fashioned barn-burner: illicit sex; possible violence; shocking challenges to Marian devotion and piety; a clash between pupil and professor; the question of where and how the Magisterium should impinge on Roman Catholic biblical scholarship; feminist ideologies; and—from the conservative Protestant side—the issue of biblical inerrancy.

One consequence of my work here might be to throw fuel on this fiery controversy by suggesting that explicating Mary's conception of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is even more complicated and delicate than heretofore realized. As one raised within a preliterate African society, I am acutely aware that scholarly inquiry on our topic has largely overlooked, ignored, or severely downplayed an obvious framework for interpreting these ancient stories, namely, the ubiquitous give and take of invective among competing groups in oral cultures.² In what follows, I argue that

1. In two extensive bibliographic essays (1986a; 1986b), Brown tracked research on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke in the decade following his magisterial contribution to the field, focusing to a great extent on how critics had responded to his own arguments. Brown's assessment of scholarship on the topic after 1986, including that of Schaberg, can be pieced together with reference to his *ABD* article (1992) and the appendices to the second edition of *Birth of the Messiah* (1993). Frank Reilly (2005) provides a helpful review of the specific points of controversy between Brown and Schaberg. On some feminist voices in the debate, see Schaberg (1997).

2. My parents were missionaries among the Bambara people of West Africa. Proverbs, parables, metaphors, allegories, and invective (especially kinship-oriented slander) are common in everyday discourse among the Bambara, as they are in many African groups. In such settings, even seemingly minor incidents, such as a disagreement over how best to draw water from a well, can elicit an exchange of graphic—and often quite humorous—insults, frequently of a scatological or sexual nature and usually directed at opponents' totems or ancestors. New Testament scholarship has not been completely unaware of the importance of insult in first- and second-century discourse among Jews and Christians. On the ubiquity of what he calls 'the conventional rhetoric of slander in the Hellenistic world', see Luke T. Johnson (1989). On early anti-Christian slander by Jews, see John Dominic Crossan (2005). Edwin D. Freed rightly laments the lack of critical attention 'to the view that Matthew included the names of women [in his genealogy] to counter the Jewish accusation that Jesus was the

insult and response to insult, largely between Jewish and Christian-Jewish groups in the process of estrangement, were likely catalysts for aspects of depictions of Mary in the canonical Infancy Narratives, and continuing factors in the evolution of Mariology into the second century and perhaps beyond.

If correct, this thesis has important implications for the current debate. First, it suggests that an *external* stimulus affected the formulation of early Christian understandings of Mary. True, such understandings of Mary are largely by-products of Christological developments. It is misleading, however, to imagine that Christologies and their corollaries evolved strictly organically, that is, in isolation and solely through internal logic or impulses within Christian communities. Rather, they were, in part, apologetic responses to inimical pressures from outside the Christian movement. Second, if conventional strategies of insult and response were essential elements in the genesis and evolution of Mariology, then this dynamic should give pause for thought to those who speculate about the real Mary's actual sexual experiences. Insults are notoriously poor indicators of historical veracities.³ Third, this approach requires us to entertain sensitive topics: an adversarial relationship between early Christians and Jews (and its after-effects in Christian anti-Judaism), and the very real possibility that some Christian doctrines were not forged in rarified venues of worship and devotion, but rather in the crucible of Jewish-Christian internecine invective. These points might well explain why interpreters have largely steered clear of the dynamics of insult in the Infancy Narratives.

Setting the Stage: Historical Situation and Method

Before examining the depiction of Mary in the canonical Infancy Narratives, we must reconstruct the broader context within which these writings were composed. Both Matthew and Luke wrote fifteen to twenty-five years after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE—a time of acute tensions between nascent Christian groups and other Jews, when both sides struggled to coalesce and define themselves over and against each other and the larger Roman culture. Every New Testament writer contends with Christianity's relationship to Judaism. Were Jesus' followers *intra muros* or *extra muros*, within

illegitimate son of Mary' (1987: 3). However, Freed's overall argument takes a very different tack from mine.

3. Insults directed toward opponents' ancestry invariably consist of stereotyped polemic, the historical veracity of which is virtually nil. The rhetorical import of conventional slander 'is connotative rather than denotative. The polemic signifies simply that these are opponents and such things should be said about them' (Johnson 1989: 441). Attempts to reconstruct ancient realities on the basis of insult and response to insult are thus futile.

or outside the boundaries of 'normative' or 'common' Judaism?⁴ And who decided the issue, the Christians themselves or other Jews?

From the non-Christian Jewish side, boundary disputes with Jewish followers of Jesus revolved largely around two issues: Christology, and the inclusion of Gentiles within Christian communities. The first issue concerns us most directly since Mariology was a corollary to Christology. But the second issue—the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God—also impinges on our discussion. Although we should not imagine Christology developing in a strictly rectilinear fashion among all early Christians, it is clear that Christology tended to rise with the passage of time. Brown's reconstruction of this process is conventional within biblical scholarship, though it seems to have shocked some non-scholarly readers of his work. By Paul's time, Christians were already making two central claims about Jesus (Brown: 1992: 412; 1993: 29-32, 133-38, 310-16). He was 'descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (Rom. 1.3-4).

In early Christian thought, the rise in Christology can be tracked roughly in tandem with the regressive movement of the messianic moment, the point at which Jesus is designated Son of God. As Christology rose, the messianic moment was pushed back in time from the resurrection in Paul, to the baptism in Mark, to the conception of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, and finally, trumping them all, to 'the beginning' (pre-creation) in John (Brown 1993: 29-32). As Christology escalated and the messianic moment regressed, stories about Jesus had to be adjusted repeatedly to accommodate an 'upgraded' protagonist with higher status, greater powers, fuller wisdom, and a broader historical purview.

Some evidence exists that, at points, non-Christian Jews protested against these Christological developments; and Christian and non-Christian Jews exchanged insults. A prime example of this dynamic appears in Mt. 27.62–28.15, the story of the guards at Jesus' tomb. The understanding of Jesus' resurrection developed along with other aspects of Christology. To simplify greatly, the earliest resurrection accounts told of 'appearances of the Lord' to specific people, mostly apostles and special friends of Jesus. In these accounts, Jesus' tomb is not mentioned. Only later did Christians speculate about and tell stories of an empty tomb and the physicality of the resurrection, drawing insults and denials from other Jews. In Matthew the story expands to include Pharisees and chief priests setting guards at the tomb and, after the resurrection, paying those guards to say that Jesus' disciples had stolen his body. The narrator then adds, '[the guards] took the money

4. The scholarly debate is especially contentious with regard to Matthew's 'community' and its relationship to other Jews; for voluminous bibliography, see Frederick J. Murphy (2004) and Anders Runesson (2008).

and did as they were directed; and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day' (28.15). The story has little historical value for Jesus' day but great historical value with reference to Matthew's time. It shows that Christian and non-Christian Jews engaged in strong invective over specific aspects of the ever-evolving stories about Jesus.

According to sociolinguists, exchange of insults is common in boundary disputes among competing social groups. In his recent Harvard dissertation on insults in the Hebrew Bible, Walter Kim writes, 'Insults occur when an accepted boundary, either explicit or implicit, is crossed' (2007: 253). At the nexus of social structures, values, and language, insults function as a means of boundary maintenance and social control by manipulating powerful values of honor and shame, assuming, expressing, and reinforcing some notion of 'us' versus 'them'. 'Boundaries', Kim observes, 'are asserted or maintained through the creation of an abstract, prototypical "good insider" in contradistinction to an abstract, prototypical "bad outsider"'. Insults translate the sociological processes into actual oral or written performances' (2007: 117). One of Kim's conclusions is especially relevant for our study: insults in the Bible serve as

a means of socio-theological control. Through the speech act of the insult, a speaker seeks to exercise power, and therefore, control over an addressee. The efficacy of insults as a means of control is predicated upon the social value placed on public standing and the avoidance of shame. In this way, insults help to prevent the desire to deviate, even as they foster the desire to conform. They seek to ridicule and shame dysfunctional members of the group into more appropriate behavior, and if the members prove too intransigent, then to marginalize them (2007: 258).

Viewed through these sociolinguistic lenses, insults to Mary appear as attempts at 'socio-theological control', manipulating honor and humiliation in order to reinforce boundaries between Christian and non-Christian Jews.

The vitriolic, intra-Jewish boundary disputes reflected in the New Testament are hardly surprising given the ubiquity of insult in the Hebrew Bible. From the story of Lot's daughters, to David mocking Goliath, to Elijah ridiculing the prophets of Baal, and beyond, readers encounter derision, taunts, jeers, and revilement, much of which focuses on illicit female sexuality. One primary means of reinforcing boundaries between Israelite 'insiders' and Canaanite 'outsiders' was the charge of Canaanite cultic prostitution, an accusation that most contemporary scholars deem groundless. The 'other' was defined as sexually polluted, in contrast to those of 'us' (the insider group) who must be sexually pure.

'Socio-theological control', to borrow Kim's term, was asserted through sexual insults, especially of women. Female sexual deviancy served as a metaphorical vehicle for Israel's covenant infidelity. Israel's prophets, for example, sometimes depicted Samaria and Jerusalem, capitals of the

northern and southern kingdoms respectively, as adulteresses or whores. An entire kinship group within Israel could be castigated by insulting its primary ancestor. Mothers and ancestresses were favored targets of insult when one wished to degrade or humiliate a family (Kim 2007: 97). (The phenomenon of insulting mothers is noticeable today in parts of African-American subculture, where 'Yo' Mama' insults and counter-insults have become a recognized genre, indeed, an art form.) Such insults are not really directed against the mother, of course, but at current addressees in conflict situations.

In her book, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (2006), Jennifer Knust demonstrates that the tendency to use sexual slander, especially against women, was by no means confined to the Hebrew Bible. Sexual invective was a conventional weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of the early church fathers and, indeed, of the entire Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition from Demosthenes in fourth-century BCE Athens (who famously once attacked an opponent by claiming that his mother engaged in wanton sex in a public latrine) to Cicero in first-century CE Rome. The ancients were not reticent about using *ad hominem* charges against opponents, and such charges were often made in the form of sexual insults against women who represented the opposition. The ubiquity of this practice leads one to believe that insulting the females of one's rivals had achieved conventional status as a rhetorical *topos* by the time of Jesus.⁵

Awareness of the social relationship between Christians and the rest of Judaism at the end of the first century helps us define more clearly the nature of their polemical interactions. Christians were a minority group in the process of traumatic estrangement from, and persecution by, their parent group. Drawing on Lewis Coser's social conflict theory, Graham Stanton has shown how the close relationship between Matthew's Christian-Jewish community and its broader Jewish environment bred intense conflict. In fact, Stanton observes, 'the closer the relationship, the more intense the conflict' (1992: 98).

Though the ties between Luke's intended audience and Judaism are somewhat looser, the basic dynamic Stanton identifies between Matthew's ecclesia and local synagogues remains applicable to the settings of both evangelists. The range of Luke's purposes may indeed have been broader

5. The pervasiveness of this insult culture is understandable in an environment where honor and shame are linked strongly to gender. One of the most widely established findings of social-scientific biblical criticism has been the concept that, in Mediterranean culture, a male preserved his honor by defending the modesty and virginity of his family's females (Chance 1994: 142). It follows that the most direct and immediate way to disparage another male's honor was to question the sexual behavior of his female relatives.

than Matthew's, but, without doubt, one of Luke's main concerns was to explain the disagreements, rivalries, and tensions between Judaism and Christianity in an overall 'plan of God' that featured both groups as divinely sanctioned. To establish legitimacy, a minority breakaway group like the Christians must mount a complicated apologetics stressing both continuity and discontinuity with the parent group. In Stanton's words, 'Legitimation includes the use of polemic to denounce the parent group and to differentiate the new group... Legitimation also includes for the internal consumption of the new group responses to the hostile allegations of the parent group' (1992: 105). Thus, insult and counter-insult were a primary means of socio-theological control and boundary-drawing for both Christians and Jews in the painful process of separation and differentiation from each other.

To summarize: Given (1) widespread early Christian claims about the *sonship* of Jesus (Son of David and Son of God); (2) rising Christology and a concomitant shift of attention toward Jesus' conception and birth; (3) evidence of a lively and vitriolic exchange of accusation and insult between Christians and their rivals; (4) the standard practice of attacking opponents by questioning the sexuality of their representative females; and (5) the vitriolic polemic that characterizes the separation of minor groups from their parent groups, it would be surprising indeed were Mary *not* the object of insulting polemic in the latter part of the first century.

The Rhetoric of Virginity in the Infancy Narratives

Evidence of Sexual Polemic in the Infancy Narratives

Our reconstruction of the early Christians' context leads us strongly to suspect that Mary was the object of sexual slander by the time Matthew and Luke composed their Infancy Narratives. Does textual evidence indicate that this was indeed the case? Neither evangelist explicitly states that charges or insults were lodged against Mary (unlike in the tomb-raiding calumny discussed above).⁶ However, both Matthew and Luke provide strong indirect evidence of sexual scandal surrounding Mary and her conception of Jesus.

As noted earlier, Raymond Brown and the majority of Gospel scholars who follow his lead are probably correct in identifying various internal factors (Brown calls them 'non-historical catalysts') that led to the production

6. Amy-Jill Levine (1988: 66-68) argues that the lack of explicit Gospel references to Jews slandering Mary is evidence that such slander did not occur, at least not until after the evangelists wrote. Levine's argument from silence is not convincing given that rhetorical aspects of both canonical Infancy Narratives are almost certainly designed to counter sexual insinuation about Mary, and that this apologetic draws specifically on Jewish tradition for its rhetorical force (see my arguments in what follows).

of the Infancy Narratives: rising Christology, midrashic reflection on salient Scriptures, accounts of angelic annunciations from prior tradition, and so forth. Brown fails to convince entirely, however, in his discussion of external factors ('historical catalysts'), most of which he discounts or suppresses. Brown allows that 'pre-gospel shaping' of the virginal conception accounts 'may reflect Christian pastoral needs in face of Jewish polemics' (1992: 412), but because he does not see these pressures affecting Luke and Matthew directly, he does not pursue the issue of how such polemics might have affected their shaping of the Infancy Narratives.⁷

Jane Schaberg rightly presses her case against Brown in this area, though she ultimately over-reads the evidence and so draws unsupportable inferences from it. Schaberg detects indicators of sexual disgrace pertaining to Mary primarily (but not solely) in Matthew's reference to four sexually problematic women in Jesus' genealogy (2006: 32-44), and in Mary's reference to her 'humiliation' (*tapeinōsis*) in the Magnificat (2006: 92-96), her hymn of praise to God in Luke. It is difficult to deny that readers would detect a whiff of sexual scandal around Mary in these stories. At the very least, both narratives allude to potential sexual problems with regard to Jesus' conception.

So far, so good—or bad if you will. At this point, however, Schaberg takes a severe, and I believe unwarranted, turn toward historicity, claiming that evidence in Matthew and Luke indicates that (the historical) Mary's conception of Jesus was probably the result of an illicit sexual union outside of marriage, and perhaps even of rape (2006: 135-36). How did the Gospel writers learn of the report that Jesus was illegitimately conceived? It began as a family tradition that was passed along within certain Palestinian Jewish Christian circles (especially among disenfranchised women who could best identify with it) until Matthew and Luke came across it at the end of the first century. Prior to reaching the evangelists' ears, however, the secret had been 'leaked' to a wider audience, thus eliciting rumors and concomitant attempts to squelch rumors, which, in turn, coalesced into the illegitimacy traditions encountered by Matthew and Luke in the late first century (2009: 136-38). But why would Jesus' family and other early Christians preserve and pass on shameful information of this sort? And why would the evangelists choose to expose such a tradition—even indirectly—to a much broader audience? This entire, speculative reconstruction of events seems highly improbable.⁸

7. The only possible 'historical catalyst' that Brown seems willing to entertain is the report that Jesus was born unusually early (1993: 526-27). The fact both Matthew and Luke include the notion of an early birth (though Luke only implies it) lends some support to the argument that a report about Mary giving birth to Jesus before her expected time circulated prior to the evangelists. More specificity on the origin, timing, significance, and potential historical veracity of such a report is not possible.

8. On the implausibility of Mary, Jesus' family, Palestinian Christian circles, or

Closer to hand is the explanation that allusions to sexual scandal in the canonical Infancy Narratives were responses to late first-century insults—nominally directed at Mary and Jesus, to be sure, but actually intended to affect adversely the burgeoning Christian movement by undermining its escalating Christological claims.⁹ Put differently, at the level of discourse, this rhetoric of invective is directed not at the real Mary, but at Christians living towards the end of the first century. Because such invective between rival groups was both ubiquitous and generic, it would be unwise to follow Schaberg in speculating about the historical Mary's sexual experiences. In short, in contrast to Brown, I argue that Matthew and Luke shaped their accounts in part to counter *current* sexual innuendo and scandal surrounding Mary's conception of Jesus.¹⁰ Against Schaberg, I argue that the sexual slander to which the evangelists responded is not reliable grounds for reconstructing the historical Mary's circumstances and experiences. In their stories about Jesus' birth, Matthew and Luke responded to sexual slander leveled at Mary towards the end of the first century; back beyond this point the historian cannot venture with any degree of surety.

Rhetorical Strategies of Matthew and Luke

How then did Matthew and Luke respond to the external pressures of sexual insults against Mary? Perhaps drawing on a slightly earlier Christian strategy, they reversed the original scenario of Jesus' genesis. Whereas before he had been understood as *Son of David* according to the flesh (that is, by normal human conception through Joseph) and *Son of God* by adoption through the Holy Spirit (at a designated 'messianic moment' either during his life or in the future), now Jesus is held to be Son of God through Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit, and Son of David only through adoption by Joseph! Mary is not identified as Davidic in either account. Viewed through the lens of the polemics of legitimation, this dramatic shift in Christology allows the Christian minority both to claim continuity with tradition (the Davidic line) and to claim superiority to it (a direct link to God the Holy

hostile Jews harboring and later passing on early information concerning the actual circumstances of Jesus' birth, see Meier 1991: 210-30.

9. The fact that allusions to Mary's sexuality do not appear before the late first century poses a real difficulty for Schaberg. To account for the lateness of this phenomenon, Schaberg falls back on the problematic hypothesis that Jesus' family and (later) Palestinian Christian circles both preserved and maintained the secrecy of damaging information until (inevitably) a leak occurred.

10. Accusations about Mary's sexuality were obviously made before Matthew and Luke wrote, though the precise dating of such accusations is difficult to determine. That both evangelists found it necessary to counter such slander indicates that the legitimacy of Jesus' conception was a contemporary issue for them. In other words, the evangelists are not just repeating bygone controversies embedded in old traditions.

Spirit), all the while defending Mary's sexual purity. To use Stanton's terms, this strategy responds to hostile accusations by the parent group, legitimates the new group's claims on the tradition, and differentiates and exalts the minority over and against the majority (1992: 105).

Matthew's most explicit rejoinder to those who would insult Mary's sexuality appears in the lengthy genealogy that begins his Gospel. The genealogy runs patrilineally from Abraham, the touchstone of Jewish identity, to Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus. But Matthew also includes obvious anomalies, because he mentions four—and only four—women in the entire lineage. From the perspective of Matthew's Christian–Jewish audience, with its sensitivity to Jewish identity issues and purity laws, two telling characteristics connect all four women and, perhaps, provide clues about their inclusion.¹¹

What seems to connect these women most consistently is the sexual scandal apparent in each of their stories: Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law; Rahab was a prostitute; an unwed Ruth slept with Boaz on a threshing floor. At the nadir of the group lies David's illicit consort, whom the narrator cannot bear to name—Bathsheba. At the very beginning of the Davidic line, an adulterous liaison resulted in the murder of an innocent and honorable husband. Sexual scandals unite these women in the reader's mind. Moreover, two of these sexually questionable women were not even Israelites: Rahab was a Canaanite and Ruth was from Moab. Thus, the discourse of the genealogy is this: if we—Matthew's group and its adversaries—are to argue about Jewish identity (Abraham) and messianic legitimacy (David), then we must acknowledge at the outset that sexual scandal and Gentiles are deeply embedded in the tradition.

Insult begets insult, and Matthew can give as well as he gets. To his adversaries' 'Yo' mama' with reference to Mary, he retorts, 'No, Yo' mamas'. The shameful genealogy functions as a means of socio-theological control: by returning shame for shame, Matthew seeks to stanch the flow of invective about Mary emanating from the parent group. This is a potentially dangerous ploy, because his audience could surmise that Jesus' mother is to be seen as yet another in the list of scandalous women in the Davidic line. However, Matthew utilizes every source of authority available to him—his narrator, the angel, and Scripture (1.18–23)—to persuade the reader sharply to differentiate Mary's sexual experience from that of the Davidic ancestresses in his genealogy (Weren 1997: 295).

Matthew's genealogical ploy also functions as a fall-back strategy. If opponents are not shamed into ending their sexual disparagement of Mary,

11. Readers, including Matthew's intended audience, attempt to build consistency among disparate elements of a text. On consistency building as an important aspect of the reading process, see Darr 1992: 30–31.

they still must contend with the fact that God worked through, or in spite of, scandalous ancestresses to preserve the Davidic line. Even if Mary were sexually illicit, she would not thereby be disqualified as mother of the Messiah. Similarly, insults directed at the Matthean community due to its inclusion of non-Jews are blunted by Matthew's scriptural reminder that two mothers in the Davidic line (Ruth and Rahab) were Gentiles.

A second apologetic strategy in Matthew's account involves using Joseph as a model for the Matthean community facing false accusations about Mary's conception of Jesus. Confronted with possible loss of honor due to Mary's pregnancy outside the bounds of their marriage, Joseph determines to 'divorce her quietly' (1.19). When he learns from an angel of the Lord that Mary has conceived of the Holy Spirit, however, he obeys the angel and takes Mary as his wife. One problem with the narrative logic of Matthew's story is that the reader is never told how, or when, or even if Mary was told how she became pregnant! But this lacuna simply shows that the episode with Joseph is meant to function at the discursive level. As an example story, it accomplishes two things: it reassures Matthew's community that insults about Mary's sexuality are groundless; and it promotes the value of obedience, a top priority in the rest of the narrative.

Luke's most explicit response to attacks on Mary's sexuality and the legitimacy of Jesus appears in Mary's reference in the Magnificat to her humiliation, her *tapeinōsis*: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, because he has regarded with care the *tapeinōsin* of his servant. For behold, from now on, all generations will call me blessed' (1.46b-48). This statement confirms what Elizabeth has just said to her in the preceding paragraph: 'Blessed are you among women' (1.42). Later in her song of praise, Mary speaks of those who are *tapeinous* (humiliated or lowly) being exalted by God, in contrast to the mighty who are brought low (1.52). Finally, she speaks of God helping Israel, implying thereby a correlation between her situation, the estate of other *tapeinous* individuals, and Israel, all of whom have been rescued from lowly status through the Lord's gracious intervention. Running throughout the passage is the issue of honor and shame and how, surprisingly, the two can, and have been, reversed. The humiliated and shamed are praised and honored, the lowly exalted.

How might all this work in response to insults about Mary's sexuality and the concomitant issue of the legitimacy of Christianity in relation to its parent religion? I suggest that Luke's strategy here was to accept and absorb the insults of the majority, but to defuse their shaming capacity by leading his reader to redefine their meanings. By 'owning' and re-construing the label *tapeinos* ('low, humiliated'), Luke deprived the opposition of a potent weapon of dishonor in the ongoing struggle over the tradition and the question of who is in, and who is outside of, the people of God.

The word *tapeinōsis* primarily connoted social disgrace, that is, humiliation. However, the word's semantic range included: (1) humility; and (2) low social status (Bauer 1958: 805), neither of which was intrinsically shameful. Indeed, humility was (and is) widely viewed as a virtue to be contrasted with hubris. Luke took what was intended as an insult to Mary—the idea that she was humiliated and shamed due to illicit sexual activity—and transformed it into a positive. She was humble and so, in contrast to the prideful, had an open heart that was able to perceive and accept the Lord's miraculous work in her life. She was of lowly estate, which, in the Lukan worldview, means that she benefited from the great reversal God effected with the coming of Jesus (York 1991: 44-55). Under Luke's pen, Mary thus becomes the initial paradigm for the consistent upending of expectations and of the status of characters in the ensuing narrative. Her poverty and ignominious social status prepare readers to accept a Jesus who comes not for the high and mighty, but to 'preach good news to the poor' (Lk. 4.18) and marginalized. By linking Mary—the humble and lowly one who is raised up by God—with Israel, Luke's Magnificat inexorably directs readers' attention to the conflict over Jewish identity and tradition. To use Stanton's terminology of group conflict, the new group, humble and of lowly status though it be, is 'the legitimate heir to the shared traditions which are now reinterpreted in the light of new convictions' (1992: 105). In the situation envisioned by Luke, being *tapeinous* does not indicate outsider status, but, on the contrary, constitutes the very condition for being an insider.

The idea that a minority group like the early Christians would adopt, adapt, and internalize some insults hurled their way by a majority group bent on persecuting and ostracizing them should hardly surprise us, for examples of this syndrome occur in our own cultures. Some African-Americans have taken the derogatory term nigger and made it their own. It now functions as a badge of solidarity and as a code for a certain set of values and attitudes within a subset of (mostly younger male) American Blacks, while being forbidden vocabulary for Whites. Homosexuals have largely embraced the derogatory epithet queer, and now throw it back at their harassers in the familiar chant, 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it'. Queer culture has even achieved a certain cachet within the larger population. Terms that were once insulting and degrading have thus been embraced and transformed into terms of honor and empowerment. The notion that they were of low estate or humble (*tapeinous*) seems to have functioned in a similar manner for some early Christians.

In conclusion, both Matthew and Luke responded to invective about Mary's sexuality and Jesus' legitimacy, though they did so in very different ways. Matthew's strategy was to confront and respond in kind; Luke's was to absorb, deflect, and defuse.

Mary's Afterlife in the Second Century

There are many gaps in our knowledge of Christianity in the second century. One thing is clear, however: the struggle between Christians and Jews over the heritage of Israel continued and intensified during this formative period. And the figure of Mary remained a nexus of contention between the groups. Trajectories from the first-century debate developed and grew in vitriol in the second century. Claim and counter claim about Mary escalated; and, on the Christian side, the ongoing conflict helped to produce what later were considered fundamental elements of Mariology.

In the second century, invective about Mary, invariably attributed by Christians to Jews even when it was voiced by pagans, seems to have grown much more pointed and specific. As reported by Origen, the pagan Celsus, writing around 180 CE, depicted a debate between Jesus and a Jew in which the latter accuses Jesus of inventing the story of his birth by a virgin to cover the fact that he was actually the issue of an adulterous liaison between Mary and a certain soldier named Panthera. In this retelling of the birth narrative, Mary is expelled from her house by her carpenter husband and wanders to Egypt with her illegitimate son. Origen considered this account of Jesus' birth 'the vilest and most disgraceful of all' (*Cels.* 28, 32). Talmudic references to a reviled Yeshu ben Pandera or ben Panthera, almost certainly an epithet for Jesus of Nazareth, would seem to confirm that insults to both Mary and Jesus escalated within some Jewish groups in the second century.¹² Panthera came to be identified as a Roman soldier, which, of course, was meant to make the insult even more degrading: Jesus was now not simply the product of an illicit sexual union, but also the son of a Gentile, and one of the hated occupying soldiers at that. This escalation of invective about Jesus' conception and birth was merely a continuation of the utilization of insult as a means of socio-theological control, that is, as an attempt by the parent group to delegitimize and exclude the new group by accusing it of being polluted from its very origins and thus thoroughly 'other'.

The second-century Christian response to this ramped-up invective was equally inflated. In the creative re-imaginings of Christian raconteurs, Mary becomes sexually purer and purer with regard to Jewish law, even as the insults against her become more and more prurient. The clearest example of this dynamic appears in the *Protevangelium of James*, which dates to the second half of the second century. In this pious tale, Mary herself is the product of a miraculous conception. At the age of three, she is given back to the Lord by her parents, Joachim and Anna, who leave her with the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem, where she remains in the Holy of Holies, and is

12. Marcel Borret (1967: 163 n. 4) believes the Panthera insults may have originated in the late first century, though he does not give his reasons for this early dating.

‘nurtured like a dove and receives food from the hand of an angel’ (*Prot. Jas.* 8.1) Her only playmates are carefully selected Israelite virgins. When Mary reaches the age of puberty, the Jewish high priest himself assigns Joseph as her special guardian. At the age of sixteen, Mary is found to be pregnant; and the high priest forces both her and Joseph to drink ‘the water of the conviction of the Lord’ (15.2), a potion that will determine whether they have sinned. When both pass the ordeal with flying colors, the high priest refuses to condemn them. At Jesus’ birth, a Hebrew midwife named Salome confirms that Mary is indeed a virgin. And so on. Every possible insult to Mary’s sexuality from the perspective of Jewish purity laws is thus anticipated and dispelled by the tale’s discourse (Gaventa 1995: 100-25; Foskett 2005). With this story, we are well on the way to the ecclesial doctrines of the immaculate conception and of the *perpetual* virginity of Mary.

Conclusion

Pious Christians like to think that cherished church doctrines are the result of verifiable historical facts, or direct revelation, or pious reflection on sacred texts and tradition, or reasoned arguments by devout philosophers. Sometimes, however, doctrines are by-products of nasty inter-religious strife. From early on, Mary was caught in the cross-fire of insult and response to insult as Judaism and nascent Christianity fought over issues of identity and legitimation. Within this escalating conflict, many of the seeds of what came to be called Mariology are to be found.

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‘BLACK BUT BEAUTIFUL’:
THE BLACK MADONNAS OF WESTERN EUROPE AND THE
BIBLICAL COMMENTARIES OF ST BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Sarah Jane Boss

Abstract

The origin and meaning of European black Madonnas has been a subject of controversy for the past century. A relatively large group of these images is comprised of Romanesque statues of the Virgin in Majesty, or Seat of Wisdom, and scholars have sometimes contended that these were not originally coloured black. The present paper argues, by reference to St Bernard’s commentaries on the Song of Songs, that it is indeed possible that the statues were painted black when they were carved in the twelfth century, and that the blackness has a specific spiritual meaning which makes them, in effect, a visual commentary on the Song of Songs 1.4-5 (Vulgate).

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Introduction

In her magisterial work, *The Throne of Wisdom*, Ilene Forsyth contends:

Romanesque Madonnas were not intended to be ‘Black Virgins’ despite the tenacity with which that view is held. Many of these so-called *Vierges noires* do indeed have dark faces today (e.g. Madonnas at Avioth, Chastreix, Cusset, Dorres, Moulins, Marsat, etc.), and the general assumption is that they must have been conceived that way. Curious explanations have been advanced to account for the blackness. Most commonly, the poetry of the Song of Songs has been adduced: ‘I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me’ (Song of Solomon 1.5-6). It would be difficult to understand why the Christ child should also have been blackened if this passage were of significant inspiration for the idea (Forsyth 1972: 20).

The present paper argues, to the contrary, that textual evidence from homilies by a twelfth-century author, St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), suggests that some Romanesque majesty statues may indeed have been

originally black, and that these black images may be understood as visual exegeses of the Song of Songs 1.4 (using Vulgate numbering).¹

The Seat of Wisdom

In the village of Marsat, on the outskirts of the city of Riom (Puy de Dôme), the parish church houses a shrine to the Virgin Mary which is of considerable local importance. Gregory of Tours, in the sixth century, reported that the church of Marsat housed relics of the Virgin, and reported a miracle that he himself had witnessed there.² A women's monastery was founded close by, possibly in the seventh century, and the nuns had care of the shrine. The statue that now stands in Marsat, however, is thought to date from the twelfth century, and is commonly referred to as a 'black Virgin' (Fig. 1).

The statue of Our Lady of Marsat is made of walnut wood, and is 80 cm in height. This type of figure was sometimes known in the Middle Ages as a 'Maiestas Sanctae Mariae',³ usually rendered in English as 'Virgin in Majesty'. It shows Christ as a relatively mature figure, originally holding a sceptre, but nonetheless as a child on his mother's lap. He also has bare feet. His mature proportions and features, the adult Roman dress which he wears, his dignified bearing, and the sceptre in his hand, all point to Christ's lordship: he is the ruler of the universe, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Yet the fact that he is only a child on his mother's lap, and perhaps also the fact that he has bare feet, indicate that he is at the same time fully human.⁴ The Word of God was born of a human mother, and thus united himself to human flesh in order to redeem fleshly humanity. So the statue presents Christ as God incarnate. Correspondingly, his mother Mary is presented as the Mother of God, and, because of her unique role in giving God his human flesh, is enthroned as Queen of Heaven and Earth.⁵

Now, images of this kind are commonly associated with the figure of holy Wisdom. In Old Testament texts, such as Proverbs 8 and Ecclesiasticus 24, divine Wisdom is personified as a female figure who not only gives

1. In the Hebrew, Septuagint, and RSV, this verse is number 5; but in the Vulgate, which treats the first line of the book as a title, rather than as the first verse of the poem itself, the verse in question is number 4. Since this paper's primary concern is with a commentator who was using the Vulgate translation, I shall use Vulgate numbering in my own discussion of the verse and the commentary.

2. Gregory of Tours, *De gloria martyrum*, ch. 8. (ET van Dam 1988: 29).

3. Forsyth 1972: 1-2 n. 1.

4. Patristic references to Christ's feet as signifiers of his humanity can be found in Steinberg 1983: 143-44.

5. For a general account of the theology encoded in Seat of Wisdom statues, see Boss 2004: 105-18.



Fig. 1. Our Lady of Marsat. Wood. 12th century (?) Church of Marsat (Puy-de-Dôme). From C. Pourreyron, *Le Culte de Notre-Dame au Diocèse de Clermont en Auvergne* (Nancy: Editions F. Bost, 1936). Photo credit: F. Bost.

perfect guidance as to how to live a righteous and contented life, but also has a cosmic aspect, as one who was present with God from before the foundations of the world, and who joined with God in the work of creation. In the New Testament, these cosmic attributes are associated with Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1, for example, Paul says that 'Christ is our Wisdom', and in 1 Cor. 8.6, that the world was made 'through him'. In similar vein, the prologue to John's Gospel runs, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and without him was not anything made that was made... And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. Thus the Word, who is Christ, is attributed with a role in the

world's creation—a role which elsewhere is explicitly attributed to Wisdom. In ancient and medieval Christianity, consequently, Wisdom was frequently identified with Christ.

This identification is found in the term 'Seat of Wisdom', or 'Throne of Wisdom'—translations of the Latin *Sedes Sapientiae*—which is used by art historians to designate Romanesque Virgin in Majesty statues. The point of this designation is that Christ is the Wisdom of God, and his mother Mary, because she carried him in her womb, is the throne where Wisdom resides. Although the term *Sedes Sapientiae* is found in medieval writing, and Mary is quite frequently referred to as Christ's throne, Forsyth points out that medieval texts provide no consistent term to designate the Majesty statues.⁶ Nonetheless, some examples of this type of iconography include texts which state plainly that Christ is the Wisdom of God. For example, a relief carving at Santa Maria della Pieve, in Arezzo, shows the Adoration of the Magi, in which the Virgin's throne bears the following inscription: 'In gremio matris Sapientia Patris', that is, 'The Wisdom of the Father in the lap of the mother'.⁷ Thus, the Wise Men do homage to that Wisdom from whom all wisdom comes; and, as it says in Matthew's Gospel (2.11), they find him with Mary his mother, that is, with the woman whose humanity makes the Epiphany possible. The same 'In gremio' legend is inscribed beneath a relief sculpture of the Virgin in Majesty at Beaucaire (Gard).⁸

Black Virgins

Let us return, then, to Our Lady of Marsat. Perhaps her most immediately striking attribute is her colour, for her face and hands are black, as are the face, hands, and feet of her son; and, as has been observed above, she is one of the figures who are generally classed as 'black Madonnas', or 'black Virgins'. What, then, is a black Virgin?⁹

The first use of the term 'black Virgin' seems to have occurred in France during the nineteenth century. It referred to those statues of the Virgin Mary that were painted black, even though the local populations—who were predominantly French—were white. And indeed, *an image of the Virgin Mary that is coloured black or dark brown, in a place where the local population is white*, makes quite a good initial definition of a black Virgin. It is true that there are some 'black Virgins' in places where the native population is dark-skinned, but these usually have some connection to Europe. For example, the famous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, who has the

6. Forsyth 1972: 1-2 n. 1.

7. Forsyth 1972: Pl. 1.

8. Forsyth 1972: Pl. 2.

9. The following three paragraphs are taken from Boss 2007: 588-89.

features of the local Indian population, is named after the black Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, Spain.

Our definition has to be qualified, however, by the puzzling fact that there are a few images commonly called 'black Virgins' that are painted in the flesh tones of the local white inhabitants. Our Lady of Orcival, in the diocese of Clermont in the French province of Auvergne, is one such example (Fig. 2). It is as though the word 'black' has some metaphorical meaning that is not bound to the colour of the actual image. So the safest definition of a black Virgin is probably *an image of the Virgin Mary whose devotees commonly refer to her as 'black'*.

Black Virgins are found in many places—the icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland, for example, is usually thought of as 'the Black Madonna',



Fig. 2. Our Lady of Orcival. Wood. 12th century (?) Church of Orcival (Puy-de-Dôme). Photo credit: © Editions Gaud.

and the statue of Nossa Senhora Aparecida, the patroness of Brazil, is also a black Madonna. France is particularly rich in black Virgin statues, and much of the literature on the subject of black Madonnas maintains that France is the single nation with the largest number, if not an absolute majority, of the world's black Virgins. However, we need to be a little sceptical of this claim. The French have provided most of the scholarship on this subject, and naturally, French scholars have tended to focus predominantly on the images in their own country. Yet Spain and Italy are certainly not lacking in black Virgins. However, there seem to be no specialist studies of black Madonnas in those countries,¹⁰ let alone any thorough international study of the phenomenon.¹¹

Discovering when statues of the Virgin Mary were first coloured black is a task which remains to be done. A small number of black Madonnas are modern, for example Notre-Dame de Bonne Délivrance, the Black Virgin of Paris, which was carved in the seventeenth century; or Our Lady of Einsiedeln, which dates from the sixteenth century. In both these cases, however, the statue replaces an earlier one whose colour is not known.¹² Indeed, most of the Western European black Virgins are Seat of Wisdom statues whose original colour has not been determined. Our Lady of Marsat was restored and painted black in the nineteenth century, and the previous history of her colouring is not known. A fifteenth-century copy of the statue is white, but this is not conclusive evidence that the statue was white at that period, since the criteria for what counts as a copy have varied at different periods of history. A Book of Hours (daily prayer used by lay people) from the end of the fifteenth century contains an illumination depicting Our Lady of Le Puy. She is represented as black, and this illustration may indeed be the earliest surviving representation of a black Virgin.¹³

With regard to the small number of statues that have been scientifically examined (usually during the course of restoration), the evidence suggests that they were originally white, although the quantity of this evidence is not sufficient for us to generalize from it. For example, during recent restoration of the statue of Our Lady of Montserrat (Fig. 3), the patroness of Catalonia, radiological analysis was carried out, and it was found that 'on the Romanesque statue, the Virgin's flesh appears on the radiographic plates to

10. For Italian examples, see Birnbaum 1993.

11. A very important study that takes account of a certain number of figures from outside France is Durand-Lefebvre 1937.

12. For historical information about the Black Virgin of Paris and her cult, see de Bascher 1979.

13. Vilatte 1997: 13. Mary Elizabeth Perry (1990: 116) claims that Mary is sometimes represented as black in Spanish illuminated manuscripts from the eighth century onwards, citing evidence from Federico Delclaux, *Imágenes de la Virgen en los códices medievales de España* (Madrid: Patronato Nacional de Museos, 1973).

be coloured white...and that through having an element, lead, of high atomic weight, it contrasts greatly with the plates of X-rays'.¹⁴ Large quantities of lead are characteristically found in white paint, suggesting that this was the statue's original colour. The history of the depiction of Our Lady of Montserrat in manuscript and painting—subject to the caveat mentioned above—also suggests that the black colouring may be recent, not appearing in illustrations until the seventeenth century.¹⁵



Fig. 3. Our Lady of Montserrat. Wood. 12th century (?) (with later alterations). Monastery of Montserrat (Catalonia). Photo credit: Lluís Casals.

14. Xarrié i Rovira and Porta i Ferré 2003: 182 [my translation].

15. This is illustrated in the exhibition of images of Our Lady of Montserrat in the Museum at Montserrat. Some of these are reproduced in the catalogue, *Nigra sum: Iconografia de Santa Maria de Montserrat* 1995.

The scientific and manuscript evidence thus indicates that black Virgin statues were originally white; and the evidence is consistent, but too meagre to allow any generalization to be made on the subject.

The question which usually engages the enquirer's interest in the statues' blackness, however, is not so much the colour's original date as its meaning. It is not the 'when' so much as the 'why' which gives rise to the greatest speculation, although the two questions are necessarily connected to one another. And certainly, there are questions to be answered here. For in the Christian tradition of Western Europe, blackness and darkness (which are often conflated) are almost always presumed to be associated with that which is bad—in Latin, *malum*. Any kind of defect is an instance of *malum*, whether it be a moral failing, a serious crime, a physical illness or disability, or the imperfection of a damaged object. The notion that blackness and darkness are undesirable is reflected in such English vocabulary as 'fair', meaning either light-coloured or beautiful, and 'denigrate', from the Latin *nigrum*, meaning black. Hence, when a medieval author wants to make the point that something black or dark is also good, they have to make a special effort to point that out. So the fact that images of the Virgin Mary, who is the purest of the saints and the Queen of Heaven, may be coloured black is certainly curious.

Scholarly accounts tend to focus on the origins, rather than the meaning, of black Madonnas.¹⁶ Thus, for example, Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet contends that the Virgins' black colouring retains a folk memory of certain pagan goddesses—such as Isis, or Artemis of the Ephesians—who were sometimes depicted as black, and some of whose shrines were supplanted by shrines of the Virgin Mary where she too is represented as black.¹⁷ In general, the suggestions as to the origin and meaning of the dark colouring of black Madonnas are too numerous to recount in the present paper, varying, as they do, from the pragmatic assertion that the images were 'blackened by candle smoke' to Jungian theories about the 'dark feminine'. This paper will pursue the more modest task of drawing attention to twelfth-century evidence which suggests that we ought perhaps to take seriously the possibility that at least some Seat of Wisdom statues were originally black—evidence which simultaneously tells us what meaning a medieval viewer might have attributed to a black statue of this kind.

16. A notable exception to this rule is the unsurpassed work of Emile Saillens (1945), who considers both origins and meanings.

17. Cassagnes-Brouquet 1990. Cassagnes-Brouquet bases her argument on the work of Saillens 1945.

St Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs

The twelfth-century evidence that I shall adduce for comparison with the statues themselves is taken from St Bernard of Clairvaux's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, and in particular, his commentary on chapter 1, verse 4.

The Song itself claims to have been written by King Solomon, and tradition maintains that it concerns his relationship with the Queen of Sheba. Consisting of a series of love poems spoken by a male and female protagonist, respectively, the book has commonly been interpreted by Christian commentators as an allegorical love song between Christ, who is the bridegroom, and his bride, who may be understood to be either the Christian soul or the Church. However, the bride can also be understood as the Virgin Mary—an interpretation which became popular in the twelfth century.¹⁸ Mary was viewed as a type of the Church from early Christian times; and Mary's virginity and her motherhood of Christ were seen implicitly as the archetype of that spiritual state to which the Christian soul should aspire. In twelfth-century commentaries, the bride may be read as any one of these three: the Church, the righteous soul, or the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thus, John of Ford's commentary speaks of the radiance that belongs to 'anyone who is a bride of Christ and a mother of Jesus', implying that to be a 'mother of Jesus' is the state of the soul when united to God. The bride, who is the radiant soul, thus has a distinctly Marian character.

In the light of the bride's identification with these figures of consummate goodness, and of the association of blackness with *malum*, the interpretation of the bride's claim that she is 'black but beautiful' (*nigra sum sed formosa*) requires a certain degree of imagination on the part of the commentators. Alan of Lille, for example, gives a Marian reading to the whole text, making the following comment on the bride's words in 1.4: '*I am black*, that is, I am pregnant, and so it appears as if I have not kept my virginity intact; but *I am beautiful*, for I am a virgin in wholeness of mind and body'.¹⁹

It is St Bernard, however, who provides a commentary that is of particular significance for the interpretation of the black features of Christ and his mother in Seat of Wisdom statues, most especially in Sermon 25 on the Song of Songs.²⁰ In this homily, Bernard deals at length with the bride's blackness, and understands the bride to be a figure for the righteous soul. He quotes the words, '*Nigra sum, sed formosa*', and asks, 'Is this

18. A careful analysis of twelfth-century commentaries on the Song can be found in Fulton 2003.

19. '*Nigra sum, id est gravida, et ita videor virginitate non esse integra, sed tamen sum formosa, quia virgo mentis et corporis integritate*' (PL 210: 57B; ET Denys Turner, unpublished).

20. PL 183: 899B-903B (ET Bernard 1983: 50-57).

not a contradiction in terms?'²¹ After observing that black objects may be beautiful because of their setting (for example, black gems in ornaments, or the pupil of an eye),²² Bernard considers briefly the possibility that the bride's blackness signifies her state 'in her place of pilgrimage', whilst her beauty signifies the state that she will be in 'when the Bridegroom in his glory will take her to himself "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing"' (Eph. 5.27).²³ This is evidently an ecclesiological interpretation of the verse in question, with 'blackness' being read as a reference to the condition of the Church Militant, and 'beauty' to that of the Church Triumphant. But Bernard does not favour this interpretation, because the scriptural text refers to both the blackness and the beauty in the present tense, and not as sequential.²⁴ It is not that the bride is now black but will one day be beautiful: she is both black and beautiful now. Bernard therefore seeks an understanding that will do justice to the bride being simultaneously 'black' and 'beautiful'; and, as it turns out, his exegesis of the Song of Songs 1.4 could equally well be a spiritual commentary on a black Virgin in Majesty.

Bernard starts by pointing out that the outward appearance of the saints is lowly, abject, and neglected. But inwardly, 'with face unveiled, reflecting the glory of God, they are transformed ever more clearly into that image, as if by the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3.18). Such a person, says Bernard, is black but beautiful—'black' because of their outward appearance, but 'beautiful' because of their inward radiance. Bernard states that St Paul was like this: 'His letters are weighty, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is feeble' (2 Cor. 10.10). Hunger, thirst, cold, labour and beatings (2 Cor. 11.23, 27) are what denigrate (*denigrant* = blacken) Paul. But his soul is most beautiful. To human eyes, he may be black; but to God and the angels, he is beautiful.²⁵ 'Happy the blackness which brings forth (*parit* = bears, gives birth to) radiance of mind, the light of knowledge, purity of conscience'.²⁶ Furthermore, Bernard characterizes this inner radiance in a quite particular way: 'Clearly, this outward blackness in the saints is not to be condemned; the outward blackness brings about an inward radiance, and accordingly prepares a seat of wisdom'.²⁷ Thus, the saint's outward 'blackness' forms an inner 'seat of wisdom' (*sedes sapientiae*). Bernard goes on to say that 'brightness befits the soul in whom Wisdom chooses her seat', and

21. 'Nullane in his verbis repugnantia est?' (PL 183: 900A; Bernard 1983: 51).

22. Bernard 1983: 51.

23. PL 183: 900B; Bernard 1983: 52.

24. PL 183: 900C; Bernard 1983: 52.

25. PL 183: 900D-901B; Bernard 1983: 53 (translations amended).

26. PL 183: 901B; Bernard 1983: 54.

27. 'Non plane contemnenda in sanctis ista nigredo extera, quae condorem operatur internum, et sedem proinde praeiparat sapientiae' (PL 183: 901C).

returns to St Paul as his example. For Wisdom dwelt in Paul's soul, that he might speak of Wisdom among the *perfecti*; and this Wisdom was hidden in mystery, and was unknown to any ruler of this world.²⁸

Bernard then explains that the saints glory not only in their inward radiance, but also in their outward blackness.²⁹ And here we have the response to Ilene Forsyth's assertion that 'it is difficult to understand why the Christ child should have been blackened' if this verse from the Song of Songs were a significant inspiration for the black colouring of statues of the Seat of Wisdom. The bride, Bernard says, is not ashamed of her blackness, 'for her Bridegroom endured it before her, and what greater glory than to be made like him?' Hence, she welcomes the ignominy of the Cross: 'The ignominy of the Cross is welcome to him who is not ungrateful to the Crucified one. It is blackness, but it is the form and likeness of the Lord'.³⁰ Christ is black because of his suffering for sin, and we must be willing to follow the pattern of his beauty.³¹

Bernard thus explains the blackness of the Bride as a figure for the neglected appearance of the saint, who lives a life of hardship, whilst the Bride's beauty refers to the inward radiance of such a holy person—a radiance which makes the saint a 'seat of Wisdom'. The bride's blackness, moreover, is an imitation of the suffering of Christ, the Bridegroom. This sermon alone might make us think that Seat of Wisdom statues could indeed have been coloured black in the twelfth century, and, in effect, have been visual commentaries on the Song of Songs 1.4, with the Virgin as the archetypal representative of the righteous soul. However, there is another of Bernard's sermons in which he relates the Bride's blackness explicitly to the Virgin Mary.

Sermon 28 on the Song of Songs begins by addressing verses 4-5, where the bride says she is 'black...as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon'.³² Bernard begins by pointing out that works of compassion cause an outward 'blackening' of those who carry them out, apparently meaning that such works entail sharing in the suffering of those whom they assist.³³ This is like the suffering of Christ himself, who died in order that he might have the Church as a beautiful bride. Bernard compares the appearance of Christ in his suffering to that of 'shaggy-haired Esau', but says that Solomon's curtains signify only an outward blackness, which covers the inner brightness of divine life. 'I recognize here the image of our sin-darkened

28. PL 183: 901C-D; Bernard 1983: 54.

29. PL 183: 902A; Bernard 1983: 55.

30. PL 183: 902C; Bernard 1983: 56 [translation amended].

31. PL 183: 902D-903A; Bernard 1983: 57.

32. Bernard 1983: 88-101.

33. Bernard 1983: 88.

nature; I recognize the garments of skins that clothed our first sinning parents. He even brought this blackness on himself by assuming the condition of slave, and becoming as men are, he was seen as a man.'³⁴ Bernard then resumes the motif of Esau's hairy skin as having the same significance as blackness. In a passage which emphasizes the unity of Christ's humanity with that of other men and women, he asks:

How then this shaggy-haired likeness to Esau? Who owns this ravaged and wrinkled face? Whose are these hairs? They are mine. These hairy hands are the sign of my likeness to sinful men. These hairs are my very own: and in my hairy skin I shall see God my Savior. But it was not Rebekah who clothed him in this fashion, it was Mary; he received so much richer a blessing as he was born of a holy mother. And how rightly he is clothed in my likeness, because the blessing is being claimed, the inheritance requested, for me.³⁵

The blackness which marks the human condition is thus taken by Christ from his mother Mary. And, by that token, ordinary human beings may in turn receive the blessing of God the Saviour.

The evidence of Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs 1.4-5 thus suggests strongly that we should not discount the possibility that black Madonna statues, which are roughly contemporary with Bernard, could have been originally black. At the same time, the evidence indicates that the statues' blackness may have a specifically Christian origin, and that this may be a more important source for the blackness than apparent prototypes from earlier, pagan practice.

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MARY: BONE OF CONTENTION

Ann Loades

Abstract

It is matter for concern that as yet so little attention is given in formal ecclesial statements to the insights of feminist theologians, even when the traditions associated with Mary the mother of Jesus are being re-evaluated. The Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission document is inevitably cautious in seeking convergence in what is said about Mary. Even so, there is no argument presented for continuing to emphasize Mary as a model of obedience rather than of courage, for instance, let alone as inspiration for the tough pursuit of justice, as her song of praise to God might suggest. Further, there are implications for a renewed understanding of 'church', of human relationships within it, of sacrament, preaching and ministry, as well as of the significance of women's bodily presence within the celebration of redemption which could be implications of reconsidering the traditions associated with Mary.

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The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) 'agreed statement' on 'Mary' (2005) is self-acknowledged as 'an ecclesial and ecumenical reading' (para. 7, p. 9) and is at one level commendable in its endeavour to draw upon what is referred to as 'the whole tradition of the Church' (para. 7, p. 8). Reference is then made to the unity and consistency of divine revelation and thus the way in which events and images may be understood, with specific reference to Christ; to emphases on the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture and the centrality of the Gospel message; to those approaches which attempt to discern the meaning intended by the biblical authors and to account for texts' origins; and to the range of possible readings of a text. The members of the Commission recognize that no reading is neutral, but that each is shaped by the context and interest of its readers, and with that recognition they 'seek to integrate what is valuable' from the various approaches in the interest of 'communion' (para. 8, pp. 8-9). It will become clear in the course of this essay that there is at least one major approach which is completely ignored by the Commission, presumably because it is not yet deemed to be part of the 'tradition'. 'Unity and

consistency of revelation' can be selectively exclusive as well as inclusive. That apart, not every point made in the ARCIC document can be attended to here—my comments are necessarily selective.¹

The interest of the ARCIC group in 'communion' informs the text in the sense that paragraphs 52-57 (pp. 49-55) are distinctly 'Pauline' in their reliance on the scriptural pattern of predestination, calling, justification and glorification in such texts as Rom. 8.30. A Pauline perspective on 'Mary' is unusual but helpful it would appear, so that the Commission worked with an eschatological perspective, focused on Christ's own Ascension and the destiny of the Church and of its members (para. 53, p. 50). This enables a fresh reading of the 'economy of grace' from its fulfillment retrospectively, and enables the members of ARCIC to negotiate one of the 'bones of contention' between some Protestants on the one hand, and both Roman Catholics and the Orthodox communion on the other, with regard to Mary's Dormition or Assumption—by no means quite identical in meaning.² It is worth noting that in an earlier paragraph (para. 6, p. 8) 'the whole sweep of salvation history' includes 'creation, election, the Incarnation, passion and resurrection of Christ, the gift of the Spirit in the Church, and the final vision of eternal life for all God's people in the new creation'. In other words, at that point the text reveals the familiar neglect of the significance of Christ's Ascension in doctrinal theology, with unacknowledged implications for the understanding and reconfiguration of both 'sacrament' and the 'sacramental'. The document nowhere attends to the profound ambiguities of 'communio sanctorum' in the Latin of the Apostles' creed. Whilst the authors have much to say about the 'communion of saints'—communion of sanctified persons, they do not explore the other sense of the phrase—communion in sanctified or consecrated things.

For the moment, however, it is important to attend to note 10 (p. 55) where the authors say of the dogma of Mary's Assumption that she was 'assumed body and soul' and this can be seen to have 'Christological and

1. The ARCIC statement is referred to by paragraph number and page number in the text above. The statement with study guide is to be found in Bolen and Cameron 2006. For discussion see the Church of England Faith and Order Advisory Group 2006; Chapman 2007. As Chapman points out in his first footnote (2007: 15) the historical-critical method does not provide the doctrinal norm for all Lutheran biblical interpretation, and the Lutheran position is not 'dismissive of any doctrinal role of Mary'—a point unresolved and probably unresolvable in the Church of England. Excellent essays relevant to the discussion may be found in Boss 2007.

2. The 'Dormition' or 'falling asleep' of Mary is celebrated in Orthodox churches on 15th August, as is the 'Assumption' of Mary, defined by the then Pope in 1950 as a dogma which Roman Catholics are bound to believe. The dogma makes a theological claim which is 'infallibly' defined, and both definition and 'infallibility' remain matters of contention between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

ecclesiological implications. Mary as “God bearer” is intimately, indeed bodily, related to Christ: his own bodily glorification now embraces hers. And since Mary bore his body of flesh, she is intimately related to the Church, Christ’s body’.³ A bolder ‘Marian’ perspective could well yield a different emphasis here, in teasing out Christological implications. For since Christ became and remains through God’s recreative grace incarnate ‘from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary’ (Loades 2001: 374) his Ascension is a crucial symbol of divine redemptive presence continually available to us in transformative Spirit and sacrament. It is necessary not to lose sight of the meaning of Mary as ‘Theotokos’ (‘God-bearer’) in respect of the Ascension. His humanity is that through which our own salvation is mediated, and that humanity is ‘hers’ uniquely. Thus we might say that theologically she remains central and not peripheral to human hope for continued blessing and transformation of human life. It is insufficient to lose sight of her importance for ecclesiology, though as this essay will suggest in due course, not in the way indicated in the document presently under discussion with the ‘genderization’ of the Church as ‘she’, which seems to result from Jesus’ dying words in St John’s Gospel giving Mary ‘a motherly role in the Church’ with encouragement of the community of disciples to embrace her ‘as a spiritual mother’, these disciples then being called ‘to care for the Church as mother’ (paras. 26, 27, p. 25). The document continues with Mary post-Vatican II as ‘a figure of the Church, her arms uplifted in prayer and praise, her hands open in receptivity and availability to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit’ (p. x). Towards the end of the document we find an entirely proper reminder that nothing must obscure the mediation of Christ alone between God and humankind, in the course of recovering and re-emphasizing the point of asking others to pray for

3. August 15 (traditionally the Feast of the Assumption) has recently been restored to the Calendar of the Church of England simply as a feast for ‘The Blessed Virgin Mary’. It had survived in the Calendar of Oxford University, and had in any case (sometimes as the ‘Dormition’) appeared long since in the Prayer Books of many Anglican churches world-wide. It is a pity, however, that the ‘epistle of the Old Testament’ once associated with the feast, from Ecclesiasticus 24 has not been restored as a reading (see Loades 2001 on Anglican tradition). In the ARCIC document itself, although the covenant between God and Israel is several times described as a ‘love affair’ and ‘nuptial imagery’ is also used in the New Testament to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church (para. 9, pp. 10-11) there is no reference to the Song of Songs and all the imagery associated with it, both verbal and visual. As Martin Warner has pointed out (Warner 2005), this is arguably a significant lack in the ARCIC document, and, we may add, most certainly in the current authorized Church of England liturgy for August 15. Only at para. 13, p. 14, is there explicit reference to ‘the Christian imagination’ though the document depends upon it as it veers from considering Mary as an historical figure to considering her as a symbolic figure. See the classic discussion of the differences in Johnson 1985.

us, as 'a means by which, in and through the Spirit, its power may be displayed' (para. 68, p. 68). The same paragraph maintains that 'all ministries of the Church, especially those of Word and sacrament, mediate the grace of God through human beings'. We need to comment: true, up to a point, but 'human beings' is not a humanly inclusive phrase, and cannot be in a document agreed by any group which includes those who cannot see the argument from Incarnation for a fully humanly inclusive ministry, a matter to which we shall return. Who then are 'we' who are 'at one with Mary'? Men performing 'maternal' roles?

If we are at one with Mary, however, we are encouraged not only to praise God for what he has done in and through her, but praise God with her in singing the *Magnificat* and 'in the Eucharist, they pray with her as they do with all God's people, integrating their prayers in the great communion of saints', recognizing her place in the prayer of all the saints 'uttered before the throne of God in the heavenly liturgy (Rev. 8.3-4)' (para. 68, pp. 65-66). We may juxtapose this with the words of the recent papal 'Exhortation on the Eucharist' (Benedict XVI 2007). Paragraph 96 begins, 'May Mary Most Holy, the Immaculate Virgin, ark of the new and eternal covenant, accompany us on our way to meet the Lord who comes. In her we find realized most perfectly the essence of the Church'. The claim is then made that the Church sees in Mary ('Woman of the Eucharist') her finest icon, 'and she contemplates Mary as a singular model of the Eucharistic life'. The Pope reminds his readers that the priest honours Mary as he 'prepares to receive on the altar the *verum Corpus natum de Maria Virgine*', Mother of the Church, for she 'is the *tota pulchra*, the all-beautiful, for in her the radiance of God's glory shines forth'.⁴ It is not of course clear that the Anglican members of ARCIC would necessarily subscribe to this particular eucharistic 'reading' of Mary. And other, fully humanly inclusive readings of sacramental theology and ecclesiology are possible and arguably necessary implications of reflection on 'Mary', as we shall see. In any case there is a serious question to be asked about the tendency in present-day theology to implode the meaning of 'sacrament' into 'eucharist' which does not self-evidently follow from reflection on Mary, unless her life is given a narrowly Christological reading.

To return to the contentious matter of definitions concerned with Mary, it is interesting to notice that ARCIC tackles the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary after discussion of her Assumption, and this is

4. It is worth attending to the cover picture of the CTS edition, with the Pope administering the Eucharist to a woman religious. Cf. Schillebeeckx 1964: 220: 'It is clear that she must be a creature of matchless wonder, this *Immaculata* and *Assumpta*, with whom even the most physically and spiritually beautiful woman in the world cannot in any way be compared'. See Loades 1990 and 1997 for discussion of some other recent generous papal statements.

important, indicating that the latter does not depend on the former. It is at least arguable that here again 'the eschatological perspective illuminates our understanding of Mary's person and calling' (para. 59, p. 57), with divine grace filling her life from its beginning. We cannot at this juncture discuss the matter of how or whether this particular dogma could be received or 're-received' by Roman Catholics themselves, by members of the Church of England or the Anglican Communion, or in this particular case, by the Orthodox.⁵ More constructive is attention to an essay by Rowan Williams (1999), published when he was Bishop of Monmouth, which may ease matters somewhat. For Williams it is Mary's relation to the complete humanity of Jesus which is of particular importance here. Rightly he claims that what Jesus, 'humanly speaking', grew up into was made possible by his closest human contacts, that is, by those who first nurtured him. If he is indeed able to live in such a way that 'all his dealings are, without obstacle, open to God' this is enabled by what is given to him by the first human other he encounters. 'And that first human other is Mary.' His relations with both of his parents are at the foundation of his humanity, but 'more particularly, with Mary; hers is the first human face he will in any real sense be aware of. What he sees there is crucial to how he sees God' (Williams 1999: 19). Without endorsing the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception, Williams finds the instinct behind the doctrine to be intelligible enough: 'Mary so lives in relation to God and others—including her son—that she makes her son uniquely free for God and for others' (1999: 19-20). Her role is not only 'free consent' at the Annunciation, but it is 'all the diverse ways in which her freedom makes room for God throughout her life, in such a way that this freedom makes possible the humanity of her son' (1999: 20). She enables in him 'a humanity in which there is no obstacle for the divine to be active and self-expressive' (1999: 21). She receives 'the creative act of the Word before her work begins' of the formation of Jesus' human identity over time (1999: 22). There is an emphasis too on 'the utter darkness' of her faith, 'so complete is her will to say yes to nothing but God' (1999: 27).

We may recall at this point and juxtapose with Williams's reflections Cornelius Ernst's comment that 'Grace is not faceless' (Ernst 1979: 124), which we may bear in mind for further reflections; but important too is Williams's understanding of the inter-dependence of human persons on one another, as well as his emphasis on Mary's free consent, her freedom. Whilst we may appreciate the determination of some theologians to dislodge all traces of pride and self-assertion from our understanding of Mary's assent (Lochmann 1984: 112-13) we have no need, if we are even to begin to understand her son, to turn her into some kind of doormat. To take the point about her free consent first, the ARCIC document does indeed refer to her 'free

5. See the proposals for Protestants in Lindbeck 1984: 96-98.

and unqualified consent in utter self-giving and trust' (para. 11, p. 13)—which we can illuminate by Williams's comment on 'the utter darkness of her faith'—but right from the introduction there is consistent reference to her as 'an exemplar of faithful obedience', paraphrased as 'the grace-filled response each of us is called to make to God, both personally and communally as the Church' (p. x). We learn also that her response was not made 'without profound questioning', and that it issued 'in a life of joy intermingled with sorrow' (para. 5, p. 7). Obedience is consistently mentioned, as in for example the description of Mary as 'a model of holiness, obedience, and faith for all Christians' (para. 2, p. 3); and virginity is understood not only as physical integrity but as 'an interior disposition of openness, obedience, and single-hearted fidelity' (para. 37, p. 34). Mary, we are informed, 'receives the angel's message and responds in humble obedience', one who represents 'the inwardness of faith and suffering' (para. 14, p. 15). No chance here of considering the possibility of Mary's response to God being one of delight, courage and generosity, which might produce an understanding of 'fruits of the Spirit' other than those being commended in the document. Nor, may we add, has obedience ever been identified as either a cardinal or theological virtue. And so far as understanding her son is concerned, it was C.S. Lewis, no less, who wrote that 'There is a fierceness, even a touch of Deborah, mixed with the sweetness in the *Magnificat* to which most painted Madonnas do little justice; matching the frequent severity of His own sayings', adding that one might suspect, 'on proper occasions, a certain astringency' (Lewis 1961: 13). Nor, within the scope of the verbal portrait of Mary emerging in the ARCIC document, is there room for interpretation of some of the struggles between mother and son which arguably are reflected in the New Testament texts (Macquarrie 2001: 35-40), with mother and family understandably fearing that Jesus' behaviour will have disastrous consequences for the whole group of his kin, and Mary in particular for a time being 'a living, critical, angry unadapted mother' (Moltmann-Wendel 1986: 193-95). Further, it would be too much to expect that the 'third quest' for the 'historical' Jesus would have much of an impact on the ARCIC document on Mary, though there is a reference to her as 'this Jewish woman of humble status, this daughter of Israel living in hope of justice for the poor' (para. 30, p. 28) which could be extended on the lines suggested by Jacob Neusner—Mary is akin to Rachel, whose relationship to God is such that her intervention may succeed when others fail (Neusner 1991: 127). With theologians of liberation, however, we need not simply 'tenderness and compassion' (para. 71, p. 71) but the defiant energy to refuse evil and work for a transformed world (Gebara and Bingemer 1989). Whether it is the mothers and grandmothers of Argentina still seeking for their 'disappeared' ones, the abysmal maternal and infant mortality rates in so-called 'developing' countries, or the harrowing recollections of massacre (Arslan

2008) joy joined with justice and peace (para. 74, p. 74) needs clearly to be 'angry and unadapted' and tough enough to refuse the perpetration of such horrors.

One major theologian who has indeed attempted to attend to new knowledge about what it would be like to be a first-century Jewish woman is Elizabeth Johnson, a major ecumenist and systematic theologian, and it is important that her work on Mary is part and parcel of a wider theological agenda (Johnson 1992). She has the singular advantage of following on from the pioneering work of, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly in their different relationship to the Roman Catholic tradition on 'Mary' (Loades 1990). She is appropriately sensitive as a theologian who is a 'religious' not only to language which arguably contributes to the devaluation of women as co-procreators and co-nurturers of human life, but to the living of celibacy as fulfilment, lively aspiration and appropriate 'self-responsibility' in freedom—elements of the significance of 'virginity' lacking in the ARCIC document even when it refers to 'radical commitment to God' (para. 74, p. 74). She has argued eloquently that theologians must overcome the deep unease in the theology we have inherited about the association of the female and the feminine with the godlike such that divine transcendence is somehow compromised by such association, which in turn 'genderizes' ways of thinking, experiencing and expressing divine presence and immanence, sacramental or otherwise.

So one of her rules of thumb, as it were, follows from the principle that God transcends both sex and gender and from the principle that 'the unassumed is the unhealed', that is, that women are fully and completely human persons who are embraced by divine redemption. The theological rule of thumb with which we must then work is that the female-and-feminine can of and by itself image God in as full and in as limited a way as God is imaged by the male-and-masculine. Almost needless to add, remarkably little critical attention has been given in theology to what range of reference is included in the latter pair of terms (Roberts 2000). As we have already seen in the ARCIC document on 'Mary', there are inbuilt and uncriticized assumptions about what is appropriate to the female/feminine well in evidence, though no doubt the defence would be offered that this is meant to be humanly inclusive—a defence which will not stand much critical examination if one attends to theological gender-constructions. One question that inevitably arises from Johnson's work is whether attention to the theological symbolization of 'Mary' inevitably detracts from attention to the humanly inclusive ways in which we do or do not 'image' God, and more particularly, whether such symbolization has to do with the alleged failure of western Christianity to overcome a defective doctrine of the Holy Spirit. There is a serious question here as to whether a great deal said of 'Mary' should more properly be referred to the Divine Spirit, with possibly significant

consequences for the gender-constructions associated with some forms of ecclesiology.

Beyond some of the issues raised by the publication of *She Who Is* (1992), another of Professor Johnson's major publications has been *Friends of God and Prophets* (1998), remarkable for its ecumenical sensitivity, given that its author draws on a variety of insights from non-Roman Catholic traditions. The latter book is important for *Truly Our Sister* (2003: 305-25), quite apart from being germane to some of the issues raised in the ARCIC document and offering scope for discussion of the eschatological horizon of the last part of the Apostles' Creed. In *Truly Our Sister* Professor Johnson suggests that she is proposing just one fruitful approach to the theology of Mary, seeking 'to understand her meaning as a particular person with her own life to compose' (pp. xiii-xiv). Whilst Professor Johnson acknowledges the ambiguity of traditions about Mary in affirming women's dignity, she wants to make a case for saying that 'the living remembrance of this woman can function positively to inspire the struggle for God's compassionate and liberating justice' (p. xiv). Living in what she calls the 'postindustrial mainstream' (p. xv) she wants to sound the challenge of discipleship afresh, but finds all too many features of the marian tradition inhibiting that challenge, damaging the church's mission and the very possibility of transformative action. For her, the legacy of the marian tradition can be dire, idealizing Mary to the detriment of other women, commending her holiness in such a way as to inculcate their subservience, and thereby their sociological subordination in both church and society. The ARCIC document merely says that the witness of Mary's 'obedience and acceptance of God's will has sometimes been used to encourage passivity and impose servitude on women' (para. 74, p. 74) and prefers therefore 'radical commitment to God', which is true as far as it goes, but hardly represents the problem of the legacy of the marian tradition for both women and men. For men may and do come to revere Mary whilst ignoring or dominating the women around them, whilst women find difficulty in claiming significant involvement in non-domestic life, and access to the resources they and their families need in order not merely to survive but to flourish. However, since churches as compared with other organisations are the least likely to be open to the authoritative participation of women, much the same phenomena can be observed and experienced in ecclesial groups devoid of marian tradition. Habitable ecclesial abodes with or without Mary may not be readily available, even if one follows the path recommended by Professor Johnson here. For she identifies paths to be avoided, including dead-ends, searches for earlier precedents, and then ventures her own proposals. These involve picturing the world which the historical Mary inhabited. This results in seeing her as a tough peasant woman, and in the light of this historical realism Johnson puts together a mosaic from thirteen passages of Scripture which situate

Mary among the 'cloud of witnesses'. In other words, Mary is taken off the pedestal on which she has been immobilized, and rejoined with the community of grace and struggle in history. No longer separated from the rest of the 'splendid nobodies' who make up the majority of the communion of saints, or hopelessly idealized, or given a life story in which she is submissive, desexualized and fixated on the mothering of one male child, much can be said by drawing on what we now know of the context in which she lived and died, from archaeology, historical-critical and literary study of texts, social sciences and comparative anthropology.

Picturing her world reconstrues Mary at the centre of a large brood of children, one of whom was Jesus, central with her husband to an economic group for whom the production of food and clothing was an unalterable priority. Mary's religious life would flower in village assemblies, oral communication of Torah to everyone, the practice of daily prayer, the weekly Sabbath and the round of festivals. The portrait that emerges is refreshing and stimulating, with Mary tethered into a world of historical specificity, a woman who has a 'bodily, psychological, social relationship to the Messiah' (Johnson 2003: 314), and a sometimes agonizing life, if we compare her historical reality as a person who received the news back in her own village of the death of this son by state execution (Johnson 2003: 293-97) with the exegesis of John 19 in which she appears as paradigmatic disciple and witness, linking the significance of Jesus' death with the gift of the Spirit and the foundation of a new community (McHugh 1997; ARCIC paras. 22-27, pp. 21-26). On Professor Johnson's reading, remembrance here means a memory of grief to galvanize non-violent action to stop violence and intimidation, rather than a narrative symbolization of divine triumph which removes her from the lives of those who experience real horror (cf. 2 Maccabees 7 and the mother of the Maccabean martyrs). Beyond John 19, however, lie the possibilities implicit in Acts 2.17-18, given the presence of women there and then, and hence at the scene at Pentecost, Acts 1.14, with Mary explicitly mentioned (ARCIC para. 21, p. 21), Mary among women at this Spirit-giving foundation of the church (Johnson 2003: 297-304; cf. also Tambasco 1984: 73-83). From the earliest representations of Pentecost in the Rabbula Gospels (586 AD, from the monastery of St John of Zagba in Syria) Mary has been rightly placed at the heart of the group of the disciples, whilst it has been difficult, to put it mildly, to think that Mary's discipleship could have included the active proclamation of divine defeat of evil, in a mission comparable to those surrounding her at Pentecost (for example, Cross 2007: 44 n. 68). If Mary is indeed to be continually relevant through the 'dynamic of prayer', as Professor Johnson proposes, however, it might well be that she could and indeed must be recoverable as the Spirit-graced, re-created Mary of the Assumption as one mediation of divine presence, with implications for the ministry of women

and therefore of men in the church, and a renewed theology of sacrament and sacramentality, including that of 'Word', even though at present the stripping of one element of the theological scene is necessary. It would not be for the first time that to remedy one nest of problems, something possibly indispensable has to be left to one side for the time being until a moment for its recovery is ripe. If the overriding priority is the association of the female-and-feminine with the mystery of God, however, the symbolization of 'Mary' may block all routes to envisaging the divine in gender-inclusive ways, and if so, dismantling the 'sentimentalized Arianism' (my phrase, not Professor Johnson's) of that symbolization is essential, whilst the active recollection of Mary as an historical person must be recovered and remain.

Professor Johnson's proposals and conclusions were available in outline before the work was done which produced the ARCIC document, but they fall into the category of proposals actually generated from within the Christian tradition yet deemed not to be part of the tradition to which the drafters must seriously attend. It is obvious that Christian theological feminism simply has not yet been taken into the theological bloodstream of those likely to produce an acceptably ecumenical statement, although this ignores substantial and responsible criticism of the Christian tradition by feminist theologians, men as well as women, for over half a century.

If *Truly Our Sister* contains contentious proposals by prioritizing historicity rather than symbolization, Professor Tina Beattie's *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate* is even more so, in attending to symbolization. Her overall contention has to do with the place of female 'bodiliness' in the Christian story of salvation. She wants to avoid the fragmentation of the symbolization associated with Mary on the one hand, whilst arguing for its modification rather than its ossification on the other, by exposing the strategies which obliterate, conceal, displace or repress the significance of women's sexual difference from men and their distinctive identity. So whereas the church's earliest theologians used the insights of their own times and places to clarify and criticize their theological convictions, Professor Beattie deploys contemporary intellectual tools as she seeks change in theology of our own times, juxtaposing the old and new, the familiar and novel to achieve those changes. And she is right to stress that it is in liturgical performance that bodily expression is given to the language of faith, and that a major problem with the marian tradition is that it requires only one such bodily expression, that of Mary as virginal mother, integrally connected as this is to the representation of the church as both bridal and maternal. Whereas both 'bride' and 'mother' are collective symbols, as 'holiness' was in the past in the sense that 'masculinity' was metaphor for spiritual progress for both sexes, the female-and-feminine is actually made redundant in the church's liturgical and bodily expression of redemption.

It is not possible here to do justice to the complexities of her position, but a central element in Professor Beattie's case could be used constructively and to correct the all too familiar Eve-Mary typology evident in the ARCIC document. In the document Mary is referred to as 'Eve's counterpart' (para. 35, p. 33), with reference to the contrast between Eve's disobedience resulting in death, but Mary's obedience opening the way to salvation (para. 36, pp. 33-34). Professor Beattie picks up a phrase of Irenaeus in referring to Mary as Eve's advocate (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.19.1), so for her it becomes Mary as it were 'voicing' Eve in the Magnificat (Beattie 2000: 126), bearing Eve in her own person, each implying the other. The ARCIC document writes, 'Hearing Eve called "the mother of all living" (Genesis 3.20), they may come to see Mary as mother of the new humanity, active in her ministry of pointing all people to Christ, seeking the welfare of all the living' (ARCIC para. 72, p. 72). In the light of Beattie we could propose that Mary be recognized as mother of the new humanity because she stands not as counterpart to a disobedient Eve (all women other than Mary) but because Eve's 'mothering' of all living, graced by God, underlies and finds new embodiment in Mary, who speaks with her and for her. Eve and Mary then may be presented and re-presented in the living presence of women in the liturgy of the church, rather than Mary excluding them. This would indeed make it clear that as Mary 'received the Word in her heart and in her body, and brought it forth into the world' (ARCIC para. 51, p. 48) so, analogously, 'all ministries of the Church, especially those of Word and sacrament, mediate the grace of God through human beings' (para. 68, p. 68) which would mean, at last, women as well as men, women's bodily presence in the manifestation of salvation.

Whatever we think of the variety of proposals to which attention has been given here, it should at least be clear that 'Mary' not only has a continued 'life' in theological reflection, but that it is inexcusable for academic theological agendas to fail to attend to the marian tradition, in which so many theological issues of central importance to the continued vitality of the Christian tradition find a particular expression.

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THE CELLULOID BROTHEL:
IMAG(IN)ING WOMAN IN *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST*

Melanie J. Wright

Abstract

This essay explores the representation of Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Critical literature has characterized the 1988 film as progressive in its treatment of Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus. Scorsese has suggested that he intended *Temptation* to transcend patriarchy. This article argues the contrary view that in the film Jesus' empowerment goes hand in hand with the diminishing of Mary Magdalene. Like the clients it depicts visiting her for paid sex, *Temptation* reduces Mary Magdalene to her body, reflecting centuries of popular Christian imagination and the conventions of the film medium, in which representations of women are constructed for the satisfaction of male consumers.

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I

In the celluloid brothel of the cinema, where the merchandise may be eyed endlessly but never purchased, the tension between the beauty of women, which is admirable, and the denial of the sexuality which is the source of that beauty but is also immoral, reaches a perfect impasse (Carter 1978: 60).¹

In mainstream cinema, as Angela Carter senses, women are caught in a double-bind, positioned by entwined yet contradictory impulses towards reverence and revulsion. Screen representations of women, be they 'virgins' or 'whores', are in some measure fantastic constructions created for the satisfaction of male consumers. Within a film's diegetic world, male characters are typically the primary subjects of the narrative and bearers of the look or active eye, while female ones are passive to-be-looked-at objects; the organization—mise-en-scène, cinematography and so on—of the screen image marks the spectatorial gaze as male.² In this short essay, I want to

1. This idea is further discussed in Stam 2000: 172.

2. For the classic articulation of male looking and female looked-at-ness in the cinema, see Mulvey 1975.

explore the particular kind of impasse associated with screen images of biblical women. On the one hand, such representations are constructed in industrial and social contexts marked by struggles with a heritage in which maleness has been inscribed as normative. On the other hand, they also operate within a distinctive set of challenges: in playing, say, Mary the Mother of Jesus, an actress lends a concretizing presence to a woman with a long-established place in our cultural imaginations. Given such factors, screen images of biblical women are rarely sites of radical innovation. But despite, or because of, their overdetermination,

it would be reductive to argue that the end result [of a study of biblical films] can be calculated in advance as a double negative, a closed patriarchal reworking of a patriarchal source. These films are complex negotiations between the original texts and later cultural moments marked by female demands for autonomy and by an instability in the meanings of masculinity and femininity. Even where the films carry the heaviest stereotyping, there may be sub-texts of a less absolute kind (Babington and Evans 1993: 107-108).

The Last Temptation of Christ, specifically its treatment of Mary Magdalene, provides clear examples of sexualizing and passivizing images of women. Yet the film may also be negotiated in ways that engender alternative meanings, ones that disrupt those dominant within the screen text.

Among scholars of Bible and film it is widely held that, of all the representations of Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the classic Christ film, that of M. Scorsese (and his script-writer P. Schrader) in *The Last Temptation of Christ* is perhaps the most challenging, and the most contemporary (Telford 2000: 386).

Scorsese comes from an Italian-American family and was briefly a Catholic seminarian, while Schrader was raised a Calvinist and is the author of a still-influential study of transcendental style in film (Scorsese 2007: 267-68; Schrader 1972). The pair's biographies and consequent theological literacy make the consideration of their work highly appropriate in the context of this volume.

There are, however, risks inherent in delineating 'biblical women' or 'women and film' as discrete topics of study. Like the 'women' entry in a reference book it might seem to imply that women are 'other' or non-normative, and that their experience and representation is a 'minority'³ preserve of interest and relevance 'only' to other women. (See, for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's 'Women in Christianity' [2005], which occupies fourteen of the 1,364 pages that make up *Christianity: the complete guide*; there are no entries titled 'gender' or 'men'.) Evidence of tokenism and ghettoization in the arts and humanities persists: consider, for example, the typical contributor

3. In a sociological sense, rather than a statistical one. See Hacker 1951.

profile for a conference or volume on some aspect of 'women and religion'. Moreover, as Adele Reinhartz (2003; 2007: ch. 7) perceives, female characters are never the primary focus of biblical films. Although they may feature significantly, and their images are frequently capable of sustaining the weight of critical analysis, their function is overwhelmingly a relational one. In other words, women in films like *Temptation* are typically vehicles for the exploration of Jesus' nature (especially his human nature as evidenced by the experience of domesticity and less commonly, of sexuality) or for the modeling of Christian faithfulness and discipleship. In order to do justice to Scorsese's film and to reflect a discursive shift (discernible today both in writing on film and in the study of religion) away from the emphasis on female difference and towards the consideration of male-female relationality, it is necessary, then, to begin with some general remarks on *Temptation*.

II

Until the 2004 release of *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson) *The Last Temptation of Christ* was 'the most vilified of all Jesus movies' since Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 *King of Kings* (Stern, Jefford and Debona 1999: 266; see also Riley 2003; and on the earlier film, Wright 2005: 174-76). Like those accompanying Gibson's and DeMille's films, the controversies surrounding its release reflected wider debates about the limits to toleration in a plural society and the place of religion and religious sensibilities in a seemingly increasingly secularized world.

As indicated by the film's title, Scorsese's film was based not on the New Testament Gospels but on Nikos Kazantzakis's 1951 novel, *The Last Temptation* (1975), a copy of which had been given to the director some years earlier by Barbara Hershey, the actress who plays Magdalene. The novel, which is listed in the Roman Catholic *Index librorum prohibitorum* and prompted the Greek Orthodox Church to instigate excommunication proceedings against Kazantzakis, is an exploration of Jesus' self-perception. Through a series of struggles with his human nature, Jesus gradually comprehends his divinity; the final cry from the cross "IT IS ACCOMPLISHED!" (Kazantzakis 1975: 507) is as much a declaration of self-realization as it is of universal salvation. Signaling a shared interest in exploring the problem of the dual nature of Christ, the first screen image in *Temptation* is a title card bearing a quotation from the novel's prologue:

The dual substance of Christ,
The yearning, so human, so superhuman, of man to attain God...has always
been an inscrutable mystery to me.
My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from
my youth onwards has been the incessant, merciless battle between the
spirit and the flesh...and my soul is the arena where these two armies have
clashed and met (Kazantzakis 1975: 7).

Taking its cue from the novel, the film is distinguished by an unrelenting, intense preoccupation with the psychology of Jesus. Its protagonist is an outsider, as so many of Scorsese's protagonists are; a fearful, doubt-wracked figure, fearful as to the true source of his dreams and visions, unsure whether to accept or reject his messiahship, and torn by the desire for hearth and home. The beginning of *Temptation* finds him working as a carpenter, ostracized for his role as a maker of the crosses on which the Roman authorities crucify his fellow Jews. Although the journey towards his own execution entails some measure of social and emotional integration, Scorsese's Jesus largely remains a lonely and embattled figure. It is only at the story's end, that he, having faced and rejected the 'last temptation', reconciles self and cosmos through the willing embrace of the cross.

Visually as well as narratively, the film is organized around Jesus' tortured, fractured psyche. As viewers, we are intended to accompany him in his quest to learn who he really is and what he must do. The extensive use of a hand-held camera (to convey, for example, a sense of what Jesus sees as he moves through a particular location) and close-ups, to suggest nuances of emotion and personality, contrast with the more controlled, distancing techniques commonly associated with earlier Bible films, which tended to favour medium- and long-shots of somewhat static and impassive Christ figures. Overall, the film is characterized by a realistic, immediate style. The crucifixion scene was at the time the most bloody one seen in the cinema. Ordinary accents (mainly North American, although David Bowie's performance as Pontius Pilate is noteworthy) take precedence over received pronunciation, counterpointed by a striking use of extreme high angle shots (for example, as an Essene-like community buries its dead master) and series of dissolves that rapidly collapse time when travelers on camel-back take their rest, or Jesus calls his disciples. Coupled with the frequency of dialogical questions (Judas questioning Jesus; Jesus questioning his mother and so on) this lends the film a nervous, energetic pace, as Babington and Evans have observed (1993: 151). It is in this context that *Temptation*'s treatment of Mary Magdalene (hereinafter Mary M) must be assessed.

Mary M first appears as an unnamed woman, who spits in Jesus' face as he assists at a crucifixion. In this brief moment, complex dynamics are at play. The gesture is aggressive; it goes beyond the verbal abuse inflicted by Jesus' male detractors, and simultaneously establishes the depth of his humiliation and her position of relative strength. Spitting in such a way is also an intimate act, requiring close physical proximity, and suggesting a prior relationship between the two characters. Mary M's clothing, jewels, and henna tattoos are visual markers that distinguish her, like Jesus, from the crowd. Yet in emphasizing her body as a site of display, they also circumscribe it as a commodity, to be viewed and purchased. The Gospel

sources identify Mary M simply as one of a number of women of means, who follows and supports Jesus after being exorcized of seven demons (not, in the New Testament, associated with sexual deviance), witnesses his crucifixion, and is then among the first to proclaim his resurrection. But reflecting Kazantzakis's text, and the broad thrust of popular Christian tradition, *Temptation's* Mary M is a prostitute, a woman both spirited and spiritually deficient.

Issues of sexuality, performance, and identity are developed in a further early scene in which Jesus visits Mary M's brothel. Together with the infamous 'last temptation' sequence, which invoked claims of blasphemy because of its depiction of a sexual relationship between Jesus and a series of women beginning with Mary M, the visit scene is crucial for an understanding of this particular 'afterlife' of a biblical woman. Indeed, taking a cue from Carter's use of the brothel as a figure for cinema as a whole, the image of Mary M in this scene may be regarded as illuminating not just *Temptation*, but broader issues concerning screen representations of women, including biblical ones.

In Kazantzakis's novel, Jesus visits Mary M, but remains in the courtyard outside her closed door until the day's end (1975: 89-93). The film departs from its primary source at this point by having Jesus, and the viewer, enter the brothel with Mary M's clients (Friedman 1997: 155). There are probably several reasons for this innovation. Film is a visual medium, and in moving beyond the door Scorsese has the opportunity to communicate the sexual desire that torments Jesus and to dramatize the feelings of guilt that accompany his sense that the abasement of Mary M is in some way his responsibility. But such factors do not account for the specifics of the scene's visual economy.

Traveling hand-held shots capture Jesus' disorientation as he searches Magdala for Mary M's house; the camera also suggests something of the nature of his yearning when it lingers—alone of the characters that populate the town's streets—on a young, bare-breasted woman. The symbol on Mary M's door is a pair of intertwined snakes and a lizard. These motifs are reiterated inside the house, where the interweaving bodies of live reptiles double the endless couplings between prostitute and clients, and later in the desert, where Jesus is tempted by a snake that addresses him in Mary M's voice. They at once associate Mary M with the archetypal temptation narrative in Genesis 3; her treatment in the film has been aptly described as an intensification of 'the stereotype of Eve's daughter' (Babington and Evans 1993: 109; see also Humphries-Brooks 2006: 87).

Once inside the chamber we first hear, and then see Mary M having sex with her clients, as other men, from many different cultures and ethnicities, sit waiting and watching. A slowly panning camera situates the spectator, with Jesus, among the ranks of the voyeurs. The image of Mary M

here reflects a double colonization at the hands of mutually supportive discourses of imperialism and patriarchy.⁴ The men's bodies and costumes, music, and props, participate in Othering constructions of the East as a site of promiscuity and deviance. At the same time, the camera-work—particularly its negotiation of the diaphanous curtain that partially obscures the view of the bed from the chamber—effectively fragments Mary M. She is rendered less a human being, more a series of body parts, which are by turns withheld from and offered up for male consumption.

While Scorsese has subsequently claimed that in the brothel scene he sought to 'show the barbarism of the time, the degradation to Mary...to show the pain on her face', *Temptation* struggles to transcend the subordinating conceptions of women that mark cinematic and theological traditions (Scorsese in Friedman 1997: 154). As the sun sets, the last of Mary M's clients leaves, finally providing the opportunity for a meeting between her and Jesus: he has not sought to intervene in or curtail what has happened. At first, the dialogue appears once more to establish Mary M in a position of relative strength:

MARY M: [Covering her body] What are you doing here?

JESUS: I want you to forgive me. [Kneeling at her side] I've done too many bad things. I'm going to the desert and I need you to forgive me before I go.

MARY M: I see...you sit out there all day with the others and then you come in here with your head down and you say 'forgive me'. 'Forgive me'...it's not that easy... Now get out. Go away.

Whether one views Jesus solely as a human figure, or as a figure both human and divine, without sin, this is a startling exchange. He is the weak, pleading figure who seeks absolution; she is angry, withholds forgiveness, and castigates him for acting self-servingly. Yet even as she speaks, Mary M covers her body, a gesture of vulnerability that gives the lie to her defiant tone.

As the conversation continues, interest and initiative shift to Jesus. There are clear hints at a prior close relationship between the two; Mary M's prostitution is linked to her rejection as a lover by Jesus when she tells him, '[God] already broke my heart, he took you away from me and I hate both of you'. When he counters with a call to healing—'God can change this, God can save your soul'—she seizes his hand and, in an inversion of the words of institution (Humphries-Brooks 2006: 87) places it on her abdomen, urging, 'Here is my body; save it'. But he wrenches himself free from her grasp, and subsequently declines Mary M's second offer, which is of chaste hospitality ('I promise, you'll still be a virgin for the desert'). By the scene's end, then, Jesus has embarked on a faltering path towards

4. On double colonization see Holst Petersen and Rutherford 1986 or briefly McLeod 2000: 175-77.

messiahship. His conciliatory words are his first articulation of a message of salvation that as yet, he does not himself comprehend. Conversely, Mary M's anger has been rationalized, and thereby trivialized, as the wrath of a woman scorned.⁵ Perhaps more disturbingly, her subjected, objectified body has been established as her sole means of self-expression (Kennedy 2005). If Jesus' departure positions him as the more powerful, active agent, Mary M seems doomed to remain within the confines of the celluloid brothel.

From this point onwards, Mary M assumes a more conventional role in *Temptation's* drama, if not a scripturally attested one. Following Kazantzakis's text, which is in itself a reformulation of post-biblical traditions that identify her with the unnamed woman of John 8, she is next seen being dragged into the street by an angry mob that seeks to stone her for adultery. As in the fourth Gospel, Jesus intervenes to save Mary M by challenging the men who condemn her to examine their own behavior and consciences. Scorsese's treatment of the incident invites comparisons with the earlier spitting episode. Both are set in the street and juxtapose a significant but comparatively silent interaction between the pair with the noise of the crowd. Such similarities serve to highlight the shift in the relationship. A silent, submissive Mary M lies in the dust at the feet of her savior; his brief descent, to wipe her bloodied feet, is a compassionate but paternalistic gesture.

Following her redemption, Mary M is transformed from prostitute to obedient disciple, a shift indexed by changes in costume and make-up. The henna tattoos, revealing black dress and beaded headdress that signify decadence and excess are replaced by garments that assimilate her to the chaste, God-fearing identity patterned *par excellence* in Christian iconography by Mary the Mother of Jesus. Like Jesus' mother, the reformed Mary M appears in a modest dress of heavy blue-ish fabric and a mantle that veils her hair.

Yet *Temptation* does not straightforwardly assimilate Mary M to conventions of female Christian chastity and obedience. In a break with previous Jesus films, but in keeping with Leonardo da Vinci's famous realization of the scene, Mary M is one of a number of women placed alongside Jesus at the Last Supper. According to Scorsese,

Jesus was so great, I just couldn't see him telling the women at the Last Supper, 'Wait in the kitchen.' I remember saying, 'How could he say "wait in the kitchen" to those ladies?' Especially since he was a man who broke

5. This rationale for Mary M's action is not unique to Kazantzakis/Scorsese. According to one popular thirteenth-century compilation, Mary M was betrothed to John when Jesus called him to be an apostle, and in her anger at being abandoned, 'gave herself up to every sort of voluptuousness'. See Jacobus de Voragine 1995: 382.

the rules. [...] He would have them take part in the first Mass. I don't think he made a distinction between men and women. Why should he? (Scorsese in Kelly 1997: 224-25).

In this statement, Scorsese appears to advocate an image of Jesus as a social radical. Yet tellingly, Scorsese does not endow 'those ladies' with agency or subjectivity; the relationship he imagines between teacher and disciple is still by implication a hierarchical one, at least so far as women are concerned. The quotation is also a salient reminder, of course, that screen images can tell us nothing about the facts of the life of the historical Mary Magdalene who stands behind the Gospel texts. Like other acts of representation, they cannot but embody the position of their enunciation, and to expect otherwise would be pure folly.

III

In concentrating on a number of scenes, I have sought to offer a modest corrective to the over-emphasis on the 'last temptation' that characterizes much of the discussion surrounding the film. A consideration of the film's final moments is, however, vital for an appreciation of the production as a whole and more particularly, of its representation of Mary M. In this sequence, the film's register shifts from the realism of the depiction of Jesus' physical suffering on the cross, to the surrealism of a dream-like sequence in which, at the prompting of a young girl who identifies herself as his guardian angel, Jesus steps down from the cross into an idyllically verdant landscape. On a grassy hillside, Jesus meets Mary M, who is dressed in a white robe, ready for their marriage ceremony. Afterwards, in their woodland home, she cleans his wounds: the gesture invites comparisons between this scene, which effectively functions as Jesus' initiation into an everyday, domestic life, and the earlier scene in which he wiped her feet as part of the encounter that heralded her assimilation to the ranks of his disciples. The couple have sex. The discreet long-shots and Mary M's words as she orgasms, 'We can have a child!' underscore the fact that this is not intercourse between client and prostitute, but a socially sanctioned relationship within marriage, linked first and foremost to the procreation of children.

Time passes. Mary M is indeed pregnant, but dies before the child is born, a white light illuminating her smiling face and then eclipsing it as she looks upwards to the sky. Discovering her body, Jesus takes up an axe to seek out Mary M's murderer, but is told by his guardian angel that 'God killed her'. He can do nothing to avenge the death: powerlessness is the price he must pay for a normal life. Instead, Jesus can pursue happiness with other women since, the angel counsels him, 'There's only one woman in the world. One woman, with many faces'. Following this dictum, Jesus first marries Mary,

Lazarus's sister (whom the angel describes as 'Magdalene with a different face') and then enters into a *ménage à trois* with her and her sister Martha, fathering several children.

Finally, after a long life, the aged Jesus lies close to death, surrounded by his old friends, the disciples. Outside, in the Jerusalem streets, the Jews are revolting against Rome: it is 70 CE. Eventually a 'still angry' Judas, whose hands are bloodied from the conflict, enters the house. He reveals the guardian angel to be Satan, who has led Jesus astray, and orders Jesus back on to the cross:

[JUDAS] Traitor! Your place was on the cross. That's where God put you. When death got too close, you got scared and you ran away and hid yourself in the life of some man... What are you doing here? What business do you have here with women, with children? What's good for men isn't good for God... If you die this way, you die like a man. You turn against God your father. There's no sacrifice, there's no salvation.

These words end the dream-like reverie. Jesus returns, physically and mentally, to the cross in order to carry out God's plan. The film closes at the moment of his death.

Leaving aside the debate that exercised the film's first commentators (the question of whether the depiction of Jesus' fantasies should be judged as blasphemous or courageous) the treatment of Mary M in this sequence, and that of women generally, is startling. Like its male characters, fantasy-Judas and fantasizing-Jesus, the film seemingly cannot imagine Mary M in other than sexualizing, passivizing terms. Judas's claim that women are part of that which must be renounced in pursuit of God's plan is reinforced by a representational strategy that similarly constructs Mary M as a 'biological trap' (Babington and Evans 1993: 165) for the film's hero. Whether appearing as a semi-veiled whore, a stereotypically virginal bride in white gown and flower garlands, or a heavily pregnant wife, sitting mutely, with hand extended across her abdomen, Mary M's body constitutes her sole means of expression, her total person. This women-as-biology determinism finds its practical expression in Jesus' casual swapping of one lover for another. But it is also an ideology internalized by the female characters themselves, whom the film represents as subservient and biddable. Perhaps most strikingly, the notion of an inescapable man-woman / spirit-flesh binary is heightened further by *Temptation's* depiction of the devil as a pre-adolescent girl—a departure from Kazantzakis's text, in which he has 'two wide green wings', a body covered in 'a blue-black disquieting fluff' and a face like a man's (1975: 454). For Scorsese's Jesus, the youngest and most innocent woman is at once the most seductive and dangerous of them all.

As Friedman (1997: 161) and Baugh (1997: 67) emphasize, it is important to stress that this is a *fantasy* sequence. At its beginning, the noise of the

crowds of onlookers who have gathered to watch the crucifixion suddenly fades to an unreal silence. Jesus hears only the small voice of his guardian angel. On leaving the cross (itself an unseen move) he is able to walk unnoticed through the crowds as they continue their still inaudible jeering, and the green landscape that he enters is clearly not that of dry, dusty and barren first-century Judaea, as depicted elsewhere in the film. There are similar indicators of the fantastical nature of the film's/Jesus' presentation of women. For example, Jesus is blissfully married to Mary M, but on her death the angel encourages him to seek out Mary, Lazarus's sister, on the basis that she is 'already carrying your greatest joy inside her, your son'. These are clearly not, then, real women but fantasies, created by Jesus' human nature in order to satisfy his own selfish desires—and these patriarchal constructs, too, are part of what Jesus chooses to renounce when he makes his 'return' to the cross.

IV

The Last Temptation of Christ might, then, be regarded not as 'a closed patriarchal reworking of a patriarchal text' (Babington and Evans 1993: 107) but as a critique of patriarchy, which figures the subjugation of women as at odds with Jesus' divine mission. More egalitarian readings of *Temptation* are further opened up by hermeneutical strategies that take as their serious starting point the notion that Jesus' warring psyche is the film's organizing principle, the 'I' of the camera and the narrative it represents. Approached in this way, the colonizing gaze in the brothel scene, and the treatment of Mary M and the other women in the last temptation, are manifestations of the baser side of Jesus' nature, which he eventually rejects. Conversely, the authentic Christ, and the authentically Christ-like, is figured by the open table fellowship at the Last Supper.

While the interpretation of *Temptation* as an attempt not to reinforce but to transcend patriarchy seemingly bears out sentiments voiced above by Scorsese himself, the film cannot be described as other than failing in this ambition. The extent of this failure is thrown into relief by a brief consideration of its treatment of the male disciple-antagonist, Judas Iscariot. 'Like Scorsese's (and Kazantzakis's) Mary Magdalene and Jesus, Judas and Jesus have a prior relationship marked by both tension and love' (Reinhartz 2007: 171). More specifically, Judas is a freedom-fighting Zealot, who is commissioned to kill Jesus because he makes crosses for the Roman authorities, but twice abandons his task because of his concern for and attraction to the other man. However, although the relationships between both pairs (Mary M and Jesus; Judas and Jesus) begin in a similarly ambivalent fashion, Judas's subsequent joining of the ranks of Jesus' disciples does not entail the kind of erasure that happens in Mary M's case. As noted

above, in *Temptation* the empowerment of Jesus goes hand in hand with the silencing of Mary M. We learn nothing of her attitudes, questions, or fears as a follower of Jesus. In sharp contrast, Judas remains in constant debate with Jesus, arguing about the nature of true messiahship, and the merits of violent as opposed to non-violent revolution. At the end of the film, Judas performs the vital task of unmasking the devil and thereby pulling Jesus back from temptation's brink (in this sense, he fulfils his mission to 'kill' Jesus, although not in the manner first envisaged by the Zealots). Distinctive camera-work—rather than the shot/reverse shot structure usually associated with the screen representation of debate, the two men are often depicted together in the same frame—indicates that despite the tensions, the pair are intimately connected. In one striking high angle shot, Jesus even falls asleep in Judas's embrace.⁶ Thus verbally and visually the film evokes an intense, transformative relationship without requiring that Judas's strength be dissolved wholly into Jesus' inner-worldly concerns (Babington and Evans 1993: 162).

In conclusion, despite Scorsese's own professed belief in an historical Jesus whose acts at the Last Supper were intended to institute a community of sympathy between women and men, the film's vision remains a highly gendered one. As Tammie Kennedy suggests, *The Last Temptation's* 'Magdalene is "trafficked" [sexualized; commodified] in exchange for Scorsese's vision of Jesus' (2005). In *Temptation* (meaning here both the film's diegetic world, and its production processes and values) Mary M remains trapped in the celluloid brothel. When Mary M joins Jesus at a wedding in Cana, the other guests cannot see beyond her reputation as a prostitute, and wish her gone from the celebrations: 'You don't belong here... It's against the law'. Jesus' response is to proclaim his 'heart' as a source of authority to rival the law, and to speak parabolically of the kingdom of heaven as a wedding. But like the wedding guests, the film itself continually reduces Mary M to her body. Indeed, it must do so. Scorsese's film must propagate a series of binaries—Mary M/Jesus—flesh/spirit—woman/man—if the final temptation scene, in which Jesus will finally choose between domestic pleasures and the redemption of the world through suffering and death, is to be plausible. That women can be expendable in this way is ultimately, as Carter divines, a painful reflection both of the film medium and of our culture as a whole.

6. Undoubtedly, the pair's relationship teeters between the homosocial and the homoerotic. Just as Mary M's association with the serpent aligns her with Eve, so Jesus' consumption of an apple when he rises from Judas's arms evokes the paradigmatic temptation narrative of Genesis 2.

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RECASTING THE MAGDALENE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE: THE PAINTING WORKSHOP OF MICHELE TOSINI

Heidi J. Hornik

Abstract

The Florentine sixteenth-century painter, Michele Tosini, advanced the visual ‘afterlife’ of Mary Magdalene through his bust-length portraits of this popular biblical figure. Through the examination of Tosini’s connections to the most influential artists (and their works) and his associations with wealthy Tuscan patrons and intellectual religious communities, we see how this Late Renaissance artist was able to paint the Magdalene as understood by his contemporary culture. The visual sources and precedents of the Tosini *Magdalene* (Fig. 1) will be discussed in conjunction with the influential biblical narratives, apocryphal legends, and contemporary teachings known to sixteenth-century artists.¹ The Magdalene portraits in the beginning of the sixteenth-century were of two types: an aristocratic woman or a voluptuous seductress. The Mary Magdalene paintings by Michele Tosini served as a transition or ‘recasting’ of the biblical figure as it developed within the genre of female portraiture and allowed the post-Trent Baroque portraits of the Magdalene to be sensuous and elegant while regaining her role as penitent and intercessor for the faithful.

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Introduction

The Florentine painter Michele Tosini lived from 1503 to 1577 and was best known by his contemporaries as Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio. In 1564, Michele inherited one of the most influential and productive Florentine workshops, the Ghirlandaio. Tosini did a series of bust-length

1. A second Magdalene, securely attributed to Michele Tosini, is illustrated in Garstang 1988: 101. Two additional Magdalene paintings that I believe to be workshop pieces under Tosini’s direction: *St Mary Magdalene*. c. 1570. Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. 60.7 × 47.8 cm. Oil on panel; *St. Mary Magdalene*. c. 1570. Christie’s, London. 14 Dec. 1990. 58.5 × 45 cm. Oil on panel.

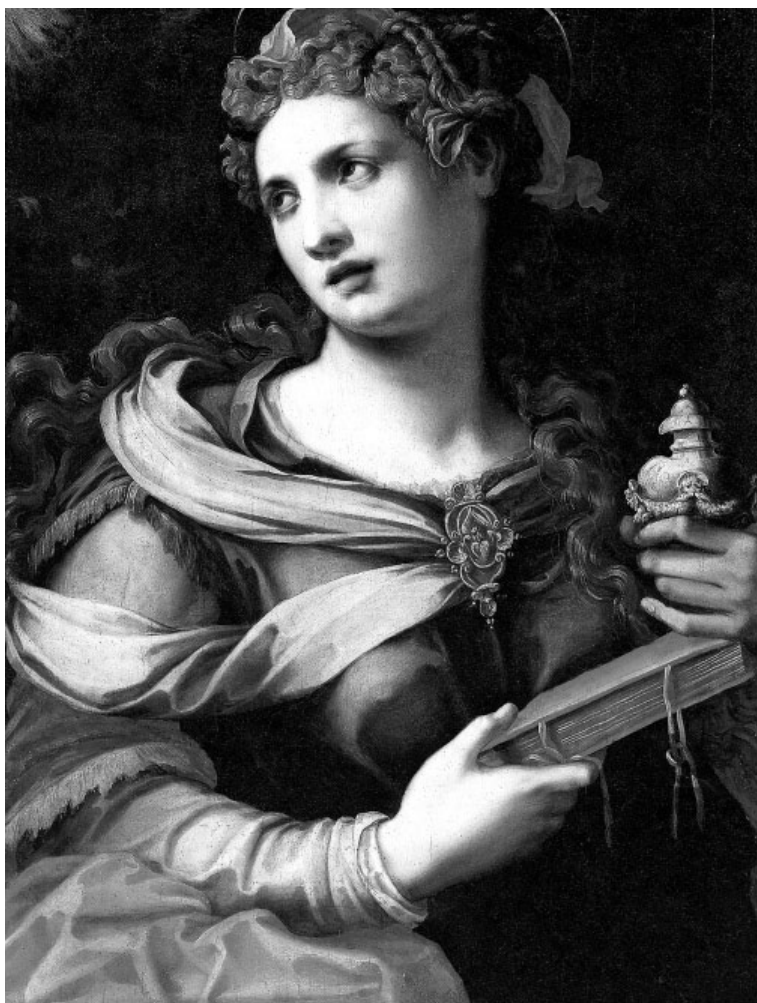


Fig. 1. Michele Tosini (1503–1577). *St Mary Magdalene*. c. 1570. 87 × 65.7 cm. Oil on panel. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Photo credit: With permission of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Samuel H. Kress Collection.

female portraits in the early 1570s. A popular theme for these portraits was that of St Mary Magdalene. Through these portraits Michele Tosini, and his workshop, advanced the visual ‘afterlife’ of Mary Magdalene from the Renaissance aristocratic portrait of the fifteenth century to the Baroque or Catholic-Reformatory penitent figure of the seventeenth century. This study focuses on works of art produced in Tuscany and predominantly in the city of Florence, the heart of the Renaissance.

A brief examination of Tosini's connections to the most influential artists (and their works) and his associations with wealthy Tuscan patrons and intellectual religious communities reveals how this Late Renaissance artist was able to paint the Magdalene as understood by his contemporary culture. The visual sources and precedents of the Tosini *Magdalenes* will be discussed in conjunction with the influential biblical narratives, apocryphal legends, and contemporary teachings known to sixteenth-century artists.

Background to the Artist

Michele di Jacopo Tosini was born to the family of Jacopo Tosini, a Florentine notary, on May 8, 1503 (Hornik 1995: 156-67). They lived in the Dominican parish of Santa Maria Novella. Giorgio Vasari (1511-77), artist, adult friend of Michele, and author of the *Vite* or *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* wrote that Michele initially trained in the traditional and conservative High Renaissance workshops of Lorenzo di Credi (1459-1537) and Antonio del Ceraiolo (d. 1525) (Vasari VI [1568] 1885: 543). It was not uncommon for an artist to be in several workshops (or even receive training in different media) before settling and finding the best fit. Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio (1483-1564) was the son of Domenico Ghirlandaio and inherited the Ghirlandaio *bottega* upon his father's death in 1494. Michele joined the Ghirlandaio workshop under the direction of Ridolfo at the age of 13 in 1516. According to Vasari, Ridolfo loved Michele like a son causing Michele to be known by no other name than Michele di Ridolfo (Vasari VI [1568] 1885: 543). Michele painted alongside Ridolfo in several documented paintings dating from c. 1535.² In the late 1540s, Michele began to assert his stylistic independence, and an influence from contemporary Mannerist or Late Renaissance Florentines can be detected.

After Ridolfo's death in 1564, sixteenth-century documents refer to Michele as Michele Tosini.³ This probably reflects on the well-established Tosini family name now shared by Michele's two sons, both of whom were painters: Baccio di Michele Tosini (b. 1530/35), the eldest, and Fra Santi, a Dominican brother, whose given name has not yet been discovered. By this next generation the Tosini name and its associations with the Ghirlandaio workshop were recognizable to his Tuscan contemporaries. Michele Tosini could read, write, do sums and knew Latin. His extensive knowledge of the biblical narratives was sought after by very selective Florentine families such as the Strozzi family (Hornik 2002: 97-118).

2. Franklin 1998: 445-55, specifically n. 39 for the chronology.

3. Florence. Archivio di Stato. Accademia del disegno prima compagnia dei pittori. N. 7, 81 verso.

In addition to the Dominican familial connections mentioned above, Michele also had two daughters in the Dominican convents of San Vincenzo, Prato and S. Jacopo, Florence (Hornik 1995: 158). Works for both of these churches and convents were painted under his direction in 1559 (Hornik 2007: 164-87). Another important patronage connection for Michele was that of Giorgio Vasari. Vasari's close association with Cosimo I de' Medici, and Don Vincenzo Borghini, the Benedictine director of the Innocenti hospital and official of the Accademia del Disegno, as well as the artists Michelangelo (1475–1564) and Bronzino (1503–72), placed Michele at the heart of Florentine patronage and contemporary artistic production. Michele, alongside Bronzino, Montorsoli and Vasari established the Accademia del Disegno in 1563. This event changed the way future artists would be trained. Some of the first projects of the newly established Accademia document Tosini directing his students and other artists in the decoration throughout the city for the funeral processions for Michelangelo in 1564 and the marriage of Cosimo I's son, Francesco I to Giovanna of Austria in 1565. Throughout the 1560s there are letters between Giorgio Vasari and Cosimo I de' Medici discussing the inclusion and talents of Michele.⁴

The Mannerist Portrait

Stylistically, in the 1560s Michele Tosini adapted the *maniera* of Francesco Salviati, Agnolo Bronzino and Michelangelo. Courtly patronage, as seen in the numerous portraits by Bronzino, was a highly successful business at this time. The Mannerist style in these bust-length figures can be characterized as elegant, ornate, decorative and with meticulous attention to detail. Bright *changeant* or changing colors resembled shot silk and showed off the sitter's wealth through the luxurious textures and thickness of the draperies. Female portraiture exaggerated the long, graceful necklines and slender fingers of the sitters. Secular portraits often included elaborate coiffeurs and beaded hairstyles. Jewelry on the neck and clothing also expanded the beauty of the figure.

In addition to the aristocratic portraits being painted in sixteenth-century Tuscany, other subjects are also depicted. Bust-length female portraits include subjects from Roman legends (Lucretia) and Greek mythology (Leda). There are also allegorical figures (Fortitude) appearing in this compositional format. The Uffizi drawing of an *Ideal or Divine Head* (Zenobia?) by Michelangelo was very popular and copied often.⁵ There is visual

4. For documents related to Tosini and his workshop, see Hornik 2009.

5. For Michelangelo. *Testa ideale*. c. 1524. Galleria degli Uffizi, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, see Joannides 2002: 164-65.

evidence of at least three painted versions of Tosini copying this Michelangelo drawing (Joannides 2002: 164).⁶

Certain female saints became popular in this size format, approximately 70 × 55 cm, for private viewing and devotion by wealthy audiences who wanted to relate to these women. The most frequently painted saints in Florence in the 1570s were Mary Magdalene, Catherine, and Helen. Aristocrats, their wives, and families would view these paintings in both the private and guest areas of their homes. This audience needed a visual vehicle to enjoy their wealth and celebrate their Christianity under the new guidelines decreed by the final meeting of the Council of Trent in December 1563.⁷ Post-Trent art had to be decorous and must teach the faithful.

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene, in her role as sinner-turned-penitent, offered an excellent role model for a sixteenth-century aristocratic audience but the challenge faced by the Florentine Mannerist Michele Tosini was that he had to apply the new post-Trent requirements to the existing visual ‘types’. The Magdalene sources for Michele Tosini are both textual and visual and can be determined with accuracy.

The Mary Magdalene known by Michele Tosini was the composite Mary that scholars trace to Gregory the Great’s homily delivered in 592 CE. Gregory (540–604 CE) combined Mary of Magdala, Luke’s unnamed ‘woman in the city who was a sinner’ (Lk. 7.37), and Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha) along with other extrabiblical ‘Marys’ to form one conglomerate story about Mary Magdalene, the reformed prostitute. Michele Tosini also heard stories on this Mary Magdalene in sermons given on Sunday, Lent and holy days. He would have read about her in catechisms and other devotional literature. Tosini knew the visual tradition (paintings and sculptures) of the Mary Magdalene and the textual sources that contributed to the tradition. The medieval works, *Meditations on the Life of Christ* and the *Golden Legend*, were the most popular sources for non-biblical details of these important lives that made for great additions to paintings. Contemporary sixteenth-century painters also knew the works of *Annales ecclesiastici* by Baronius (1538–1607) and *Vita Jesu Christi* by Ludolphus of Saxony (d. 1377).⁸

6. For Tosini, *Portrait of a Woman (after Michelangelo)*. c. 1565–70. Medici Villa, Artimino. 76 × 56 cm. Oil on panel; Tosini, *Portrait of a Woman (after Michelangelo)*. c. 1565–70. Private Collection, Treviso. 73 × 56 cm. Oil on panel, see Hornik 1990: 250–51.

7. For the ‘Decree of the Council of Trent concerning Images’, see Chemnitz 1986: 53–54.

8. Baronius 1864: Vol. I, An. 1–69; Ludolphus of Saxony 1878: 4 vols.

Mary Magdalene had a repertoire of visual attributes that enabled her to be easily identifiable by both literate and illiterate audiences. The alabaster jar used for anointing in Lk. 7.37 in the house of Simon the Pharisee becomes one of her most popular symbols. The naked figure of Mary Magdalene covered only by her hair is taken from the *Golden Legend*. She may also be seen holding a prayer book and crucifix.

Magdalene Sources and Precedents for Michele Tosini

Two of the most popular Magdalene 'types' available to Tosini in the 1570s that would have fed easily into the bust-length genre were the aristocratic portrait of Mary Magdalene painted by Perugino (1456–1524) in the 1480s and the voluptuous penitent by Titian (c.1485–1576). Perugino's High Renaissance painting (Fig. 2) looks more like a portrait of an unknown fifteenth-century woman than it does the Magdalene. There are no attributes in the painting, only the labeling 'S. MARIA MADALENA' across her bodice informs the viewer of her identity. This is complicated in the twenty-first century because the words are not visible in many of the published illustrations of the painting.⁹

Titian first tackled the subject in the 1530s (Fig. 3), and the painting is located today in the Pitti Gallery, Florence. He combined the *Golden Legend* detail of a naked Magdalene covered only by her hair with the Venetian courtesan tradition. One need only be reminded of the 1454–55 Donatello wood sculpture, today located in the Museo del Duomo, Florence, of the penitential old hag Magdalene draped with her hair to realize that Titian and the Venetians are looking at things differently. The result is a sensual figure whose breasts are revealed through the strands of her hair as she gazes heavenward. The character of Mary Magdalene is seen here as both temptress and penitent.¹⁰ The alabaster jar is present in the lower left corner of the composition.

Titian returned to the subject in the 1560s. Documents reveal that he executed six versions of which only two, in Naples and St Petersburg (Fig. 4), are extant today.¹¹ The first version was lost in a fire in Great Britain in 1783. This version, whose patron was King Philip II of Spain, is known through a reference in a letter dated December 1561, from the King to his ambassador to Venice that discussed shipping of the painting.¹² The

9. The identification on the bodice does not appear in the illustrations of the following publications: Chiarini 1988: 38; Sölle and Kirchberger 1994: 280. It is clearly visible in Becherer 1997: 280.

10. In the oral presentation at the Oxford symposium, I offered parallels to Monica Bellucci as both temptress in the *Matrix* movies and penitent Magdalene in *The Passion of the Christ*.

11. Biadene and Yakush 1990: 334–37.

12. Biadene and Yakush 1990: 336.



Fig. 2. Perugino (1456–1524). *St Mary Magdalene*. 1480s. 47 × 34 cm. Oil on panel. Pitti Gallery, Florence. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

signed Hermitage version is dated to 1565 and depicts the iconographic and stylistic modifications in accord with Catholic-Reformatory morality. Titian covers the breast and makes the image appropriate and decorous. He also adds the attributes of the skull and book to the always-present alabaster jar to assist in the goal of teaching. Scholars believe that Titian himself liked this version as he kept it and it was in his home until his death in 1576.¹³

13. Biadene and Yakush 1990: 334.



Fig. 3. Titian (1485–1576). *St Mary Magdalene*. 1530–1535. 84 × 69 cm. Oil on panel. Pitti Gallery, Florence. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

Michele Tosini's direct connection to the Titian *Magdalenes* came from their mutual friend Giorgio Vasari. Vasari visited Titian in 1566 as he was preparing the second edition of the *Vite* (1568). Vasari traveled to many of those artists still living who were included in this enormous set of biographies. Vasari could not have seen the 1561 version that had been shipped to King Philip II, but probably saw the Hermitage version. His description is a primary source that represents the sixteenth-century attitude toward the significance of this painting:

He then did a dishevelled Magdalene with her hair falling over her shoulders, throat and breast, to send to the Catholic king. She raises her eyes to



Fig. 4. Titian (1485–1576). *The Penitent Magdalene*. Signed. c.1565. 118 × 97 cm. Oil on canvas. Hermitage, St Petersburg, Russia. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

heaven, showing her penitence in the redness of her eyes and her tears for her sin. This picture, therefore, greatly moves those who behold it, and what is more, although very beautiful, it moves not to lust but to compassion. When finished, it so pleased Silvio, a Venetian noble, that he gave Titian 100 crowns for it, so that the artist was forced to do another of equal beauty for the Catholic King (Vasari, *Vite*).¹⁴

14. Biadene and Yakush 1990: 334.

The importance of Vasari's words that he 'was moved not to lust but to compassion' would have been conveyed to Michele Tosini when Vasari was back in Florence working with his friend. In 1564, prior to seeing Titian's *Mary Magdalene*, Giorgio Vasari painted a Magdalene with the portrait of his wife, Nicolosa Bacci, in the voluminous draperies and colors of the Mannerist style but lacking the more sensual side that he witnessed in Venice.¹⁵

Michele Tosini was looking for exactly the innovation that Vasari brought home to him from Venice. The Houston *Mary Magdalene* (Fig. 1) depicts a long-haired beautiful woman whose hair drapes over her shoulders but begins with an elegant braid over the top of her head secured by a piece of drapery or ribbon. The thin, translucent halo carefully frames the pose she seems to have held for a red-carpet opportunity in the twenty-first-century style. She wears several intricate layers. Her gown is yellow and is revealed only in the lower half of her right arm. The second layer of fabric is thicker with *changeant* colors (similar to shot silk) of pink, rose, blue and green. The sleeveless green smock is gathered at the shoulder to emphasize further the two layers beneath. A pale yellow scarf is draped above and below the shoulders and gently drapes across the breasts. It is fastened between her breasts by a floral pin. She holds a reddish-pink book in her left hand. Her breasts are sensuous without revealing any flesh. Her nipple is visible. This concealing and revealing technique was learned from antique drawing throughout the history of the Ghirlandaio workshop. The alabaster jar is held in her right hand by elongated fingers. The graceful and long neck captures Mannerism at its most beautiful.

Tosini has created a Mannerist Magdalene that conforms to Trent without being the bland aristocratic 'type' by Perugino or the overtly indecorous Titian of the 1530s. There are numerous Magdalenes attributed to Tosini and his workshop using the same compositional type. The Houston Magdalene (Fig. 1), as a secure attribution, offers us the best example of this type. This format worked for Tosini and, by extension, his workshop. Patrons knew what they would get from Tosini with this successful bust-length Magdalene.

Artists of the Baroque Catholic-Reformatory period of the seventeenth century may have used Tosini's works as a source to paint their own Magdalenes. One example is Artemisia Gentileschi's *Conversion of the Magdalene*, c. 1615–1616, today in the Pitti Gallery. Artemisia painted this piece for Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici. The patron probably requested that Mary Magdalene be depicted as a sensuous, although entirely decorous, woman adorned in beautiful aristocratic garments. Although I am

15. Corti 1989: 109–10. Vasari's *Lazarus and Mary Magdalene* (detail of predella), in the Badia di SS. Flora e Lucilla, Arezzo is illustrated on p. 110.

not suggesting that Michele Tosini single-handedly changed the Mary Magdalene type, he certainly contributed to a necessary development begun by the religious pressures of Trent and the requests of the courtly patrons. A Mary Magdalene painting by Tosini appeared as an attractive, aristocratic woman in her contemporary finery (clothing, hair and body position), but was allowed to be sensuous and devotional at the same time. As Mary Magdalene's role grew, during the seventeenth-century, to include *vani-tas* symbols of human mortality, the beauty of the sixteenth-century type worked well (Mormando 1999: 118-20).

Conclusion

It was very clear who Mary Magdalene was to the sixteenth-century painter, Michele Tosini. She was a saint, a sinner, and a beautiful, stylish woman whom he chose to paint in a way that appealed to his male patrons as well as their wives. As art historian, Mary Garrard, points out, although there may be much ambivalence in the Magdalene as an image of and role model for women, she does represent an affirmation of women (Garrard 1989: 46; cited by Mormando 1999: 113). Especially when we take into consideration her final, serene, spiritually triumphant years in the desert, the Magdalene's 'sanctioned, transforming meditation could be seen to carry women to an intellectual and spiritual plane normally occupied only by men' (Mormando 1999: 113).

As noted by Franco Mormando (1999: 113), some people in early modern Italy, men included, already understood this. In his *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528), one of the best known and most influential works produced by Renaissance Italy, Baldassarre Castiglione defends women's equality with men, as far as the highest achievements of love and mysticism are concerned. Here Giuliano the Magnificent replied:

Women will not be surpassed at all by men in this [love and mysticism], because, as Socrates himself confesses, all of the mysteries of love which he knew had been revealed to him by a woman, that is Diotima; and the angel who with a flame of fire marked St. Francis with the stigmata has likewise considered certain women of our time worthy of the same distinction. I must also remind you that Mary Magdalene's many sins were forgiven because she loved much, and perhaps as a result of no less a gift of grace than that of St. Paul, she was many times seized by angelic love and raised to the third heaven, and the same can be said of many other women (Mormando 1999: 113).

So, Tosini assisted in the 'recasting' of the biblical figure as it developed within the genre of female portraiture. These paintings offered the sixteenth-century aristocratic viewer/patron a portrait not of a woman scarred by the rigors of her penitential practices (including fasting and self-flagellation) of

the early fifteenth century (as in the Donatello); nor the bland, aristocratic woman with no attributes (as in the Perugino) from the late fifteenth century; nor as the voluptuous seductress of Titian that could have served as an example of what not to do by the Council of Trent.

Instead, Michele Tosini, working in the Late Renaissance style known as Mannerism, found a way to give his patrons, their wives, and the Church an appropriate image of Mary Magdalene as he understood her and as they could relate to her—a female saint who could be sensual but decorous, stylish but identifiable, repentant but physically beautiful. This ‘type’ assisted the seventeenth-century Baroque painters in depicting a Mary Magdalene who maintained her sensuality and elegance while at the same time regaining her role as intercessor and penitent for the faithful.

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MARY MAGDALENE AS *JOCULATRIX DOMINI*:
FRANCISCAN MUSIC AND VERNACULAR HOMILETICS
IN THE SHREWSBURY *OFFICIUM RESURRECTIONIS* AND
EASTER PLAYS FROM GERMANY AND BOHEMIA

Peter Loewen

Abstract

The article proposes that composers and compilers of some medieval Easter dramas portrayed Mary Magdalene as a *joculatrix Domini*—a term derived from Francis of Assisi's own reference to his friars as minstrels (*joculatores*) of the Lord. Comparing a variety of medieval sources concerning Franciscan preaching to songs Mary Magdalene sings in Easter dramas from Shrewsbury, Trier, and Prague reveals common registers of pious rhetoric in vernacular song and chant.

———— * * * ————

‘Where does one find a pious woman?’, asks Berthold of Regensburg at the beginning of his sermon ‘On the Lord’s Cross’ (Berthold 1965: I, 537).¹ One need look no further than Mary Magdalene, says the thirteenth-century Franciscan preacher. For while the Paris masters argue over who is the greatest saint in heaven, and whose virtue exceeds the other, Berthold asserts that ‘the holy lady Saint Mary Magdalene is certainly the greatest saint in the entire kingdom of heaven’ (Berthold 1965: I, 537, lines 15–17 to 538, lines 34–36). He elaborates on the illuminating light of her contrition, which serves as a beacon for all sinners. ‘It is like the light of the moon’, he says, made gloomy by her weeping, which shows us how we, too, could become completely illuminated through our sorrow, contrition, and tears (Berthold 1965: I, 540, lines 20–27). Then, drawing on themes from the Resurrection of Christ, he tells us that it is in this state of illumination that sinners arise from their deadly sins and arrive at holy penance. Just as Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalene, he will reveal himself to all sinners who wish to rise up from their sins (Berthold 1965: I, 541, lines 3–13).

1. The passage is derived from Prov. 31.10. My translation.

These are forthright statements indeed from Brother Berthold, but quite in keeping with the sermons of his brethren, which often dwell on the sins of vanity and lechery, and zeal for penance. We are familiar with Francis of Assisi's devotion to the passion of Christ; but in his penitential way of life, Francis followed the path of Mary Magdalene. In this study, I hope to identify the penitential voice of Mary Magdalene through poetry, music, and drama—methods of exegesis in which St Francis and his friars excelled. To do so, I will examine connections between Franciscan preaching and a selection of Easter dramas preserved in Shrewsbury, Trier, and Prague, with particular regard to their common representations of Mary Magdalene as a *joculatrix Domini*—a term I derive from Francis's own reference to his friars as minstrels (*joculatores*) of the Lord.

The medieval Easter dramas are based largely on the Gospel of Mark (16.1-8), which tells the story of how Mary Magdalene, Mary of Jacob, and Salome visited the Holy Sepulcher on Easter morning. The tradition of identifying them as Three Marys, as one often finds in medieval Easter plays, seems to derive from exegetical literature such as Peter Comestor's *Historia evangelica*. There he identifies the third woman in Mark 16 as Maria Salome (PL 198: 1635C).² The numerous Latin-vernacular Easter plays composed and compiled in the German lands and Bohemia (Bergmann 1986; Schuler 1951) between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries are devoted almost entirely to laments of Mary Magdalene and her companions. They grieve on their way to the tomb. Finding it empty, Mary Magdalene then launches into dramatic monody where she reminisces over the events and emotions of the Passion and Crucifixion, her penance, and contrition.

In an article I published with Robin Waugh in *Speculum* in 2007, I showed how the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in Easter plays from Füssen, Trier, and Prague bear striking resemblance to a Shrewsbury fragment of an *Officium resurrectionis*. But it remains to explain how this representation developed in England at the same time as it did on the Continent. I take my inspiration from the comparative literary studies of the Latin *Visitatio sepulchri* ceremonies by Helmut de Boor (1967) and David Bjork (1980), and the musicological research of Susan Rankin (1981) and Michael Norton (1987), which have shown that such plays exhibit patterns of regional development, rather than evolution from simpler to more complex forms. Rankin attributes the rise of separate Latin traditions concerning the Mary Magdalene scene in Easter ceremonies to a rapid growth in her cult in the

2. The scholarship concerning the liturgical Easter ceremony and drama is extremely rich. Beginning with Karl Young's seminal study of *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Young 1933), one might also consult Rankin 1981, McGee 1976, Flanagan 1974, and de Boor 1967. Lipphardt 1975–90 offers a text edition of many Latin liturgical Easter ceremonies and plays.

eleventh century. She writes, 'As a sinner greatly honoured by Christ, this saint was an excellent example for Christian teaching, and the liturgical drama a ready didactic medium' (Rankin 1981: 255).

In light of this, I wish to consider here the further transmission of this didactic model in vernacular exegeses, showing how it coincides with Franciscan preaching in England and on the Continent. One should be cautious not to construe a drama as 'Franciscan' simply because of its penitential subject matter and vernacular songs. The Easter Play from Origny-St-Benoît, for example, predates the arrival of the Franciscans in France (Coussemaker 1964). But when we see Mary Magdalene portrayed in later dramas as a penitent and preacher, turning chant into vernacular *contrafacta*,³ we may perceive in the plays from Shrewsbury and the Continent the familiar methods of the Franciscan preacher.

Franciscan Missions and Preaching and the Context of the Easter Plays

The sudden and rapid expansion of Franciscan missions in late medieval Europe is well attested, especially in England and the German lands. The first successful missions of the Franciscans in the German lands and Hungary, including Poland and Bohemia, began in 1221 (there was an earlier failed mission in 1219) and by the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Friars Minor had established in this region approximately 300 convents; the Poor Clares had founded 25 (Freed 1977: 21, 49, Appendix I; Kloczowski 1982: 321; Gründler 1982: 335). The region of Franconia, which according to Ursula Hennig and Andreas Traub produced the Trier Easter Play (Hennig and Traub 1990: 3), was home to many Franciscan institutions active between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (Moorman 1983: 282-83, 460, 525-26, 610, 666). Prague, the current location of the Czech-Latin *Ordo trium personarum*, had several Franciscan convents which were active through the fifteenth century (Moorman 1983: 395, 650). The Franciscans arrived in England in 1224, and by 1255 they had established 49 convents (Moorman 1968: 171). Their convents in Lichfield and Shrewsbury, cities important in the history of the Shrewsbury Fragments, may be traced to the first decades of Franciscan activity in England. The convent at Lichfield was founded by a certain Richard the Merchant in 1237 and Henry III founded the convent at Shrewsbury in 1245-46. Both convents remained active until 1535 (Hutton 1926: 89-90, 306-308; Moorman 1983: 263, 450).

Although the Franciscans suffered extreme devastation from the ravages of plague in the mid-fourteenth century, it was, nevertheless, a period of

3. A contrafactum is a song that substitutes one text for another without changing the music.

intense productivity. The English Franciscans Nicholas Bozon, William of Herebert, and John of Grimestone left us Latin and vernacular songs in very large numbers in their collections of preaching tools and commonplace books (Klenke 1951, Reimer 1987, Wilson 1973). Most of the extant Franciscan preaching supplements in German and Austrian archives appear to have been compiled in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Several manuscripts include examples of German penitential songs, but not in the numbers composed by English authors.⁴

Connections between English and German Franciscans in the late Middle Ages are well attested. The account of Anglo-German Franciscan relations in the thirteenth century, described by Jordan of Giano, is essentially a story of teachers and students. The central figures in this story are Brothers Simon and Bartholomew, who served in succession as *lectors* of theology at the central Franciscan *studium* in Magdeburg between 1228 and 1249 (Jordan of Giano 1961: 59-60; Seymour 1992: 4). It is thought that Bartholomew the Englishman completed his *De proprietatibus rerum* while at Magdeburg, (no later than 1247). His study of music therein describes its role in divine revelation and how its rhetorical properties may be used in preaching (Seymour 1992: 11).⁵

Roger Bacon suggests to us in his *Opus tertium* (c. 1267) how such ideas might have been received, since he connects the affective use of music in preaching to the practices of the Franciscan preacher Berthold of Regensburg (c. 1220–72). Toward the end of his treatise, Bacon concludes that both Christian clerics and lay preachers would do well to study the writings of Aristotle, Al-Farabi, Seneca, St Augustine, and others to improve the rhetorical style of their sermons. He says a preacher should ‘implore with pleasure for himself and for the public, and to abundantly pour out devoted tears in a succession of persuasion’ (Bacon 1965: 305).⁶

Taking St Francis as his model, Bacon praises the evocative powers of melodies because they ‘can be so exquisitely shaped that the power of music can arouse Christian people to devotion’ (Bacon 1965: 298).⁷ In fact,

4. See, for example, Kremsmünster, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex Cremifanensis 239; Mainz, Stadtbibliothek Hs. I 208 and Hs. I 240; and Munich, Clm 14093.

5. The dating of the manuscript is based on conjecture, but Seymour posits that the text was written in Magdeburg between 1242 and 1247. For his commentary on the affective characteristics of music, see especially Bartholomew 1964: 1251-54. The marginal glosses that appear in many manuscript copies of *De proprietatibus rerum* describe the relevance of music in preaching. See, for example, Paris, BnF, lat. 346A.

6. My translation.

7. ‘Et certe possent tam exquisete excogitari, et cum tanta poetia musicae, quod ad omnem gradum devotionis, quem vellemus, excitaretur populus Christianus’. ‘Possent’ here refers to Bacon’s previous discussion about enharmonic music (*enharmonicus*) and its many layers (*multos gradus*).

he considers music essentially as a rhetorical art form, which should be ornamented and embellished to such a high degree that it transports the listener 'into a love of goodness and hatred of evil, insofar as a human caught completely unawares is both elevated beyond his own powers and does not have power over his own mind' (Bacon 1965: 306-308). Bacon's concept of music sounds idealistic. Indeed, he laments at the low state of musicianship among bishops and others who should have had better training. But help arrives in the singular model of Berthold of Regensburg, who, Bacon says, 'does more with magnificent utility in preaching than almost all of the friars in both orders' (Bacon 1965: 310).⁸

To show such a high degree of passion for music and its affective qualities is a common trait among Franciscan schoolmen, and one need not go as far back as the Classical writers Bacon invokes to find its inspiration, for the foundation of a mission through music has its origin in St Francis himself. In the *Life of St Francis* by Thomas of Celano, we read that after teaching his companions the music and text of his 'Cantic of the Creatures', he called on Brother Pacifico, who had been a professional musician at the imperial court, to lead them on a mission of music. He told them to remind their audiences:

We are minstrels of the Lord [*joculatores Domini*], and this is what we want as payment: that you live in true penance. And he said: What are the servants of God if not His minstrels [*joculatores*], who must lift people's hearts and move them up to spiritual joy (*Mirror* 2001: 348).⁹

We wonder what music Berthold of Regensburg used to exhort his audiences, perhaps even to embellish his sermon in praise of Mary Magdalene; but the few references he makes to the use of songs in the extant copies of his sermons, all of them from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, are the only tantalizing evidence of what they must have been (Berthold 1965: I, 405-406; and II, 63). English Franciscans like William of Herebert (c. 1270-1333), John of Grimestone (fl. 1372), and the author of the *Fasciculus morum* have, however, left us ample evidence of a thriving culture of *joculatores Domini*. In particular, Herebert and Grimestone's method of joining Latin to vernacular lyrics bears striking resemblance to the practices of composers responsible for the German, Czech, and Shrewsbury Easter

8. 'Frater Bertholdus Alemannus, qui solus plus facit de utilitate magna in praedicatione, quam fere omnes alii fratres ordinis utriusque'. Patricius Schlager suggests that 'fratres ordinis utriusque' refers to Franciscan and Dominican friars. Schlager has also identified Bertholdus Alemannus as Berthold of Regensburg (Schlager 1907: 42).

9. The term *joculator* is often defined as entertainer or jester; but in the way the biographer uses the term to refer to a singer, he seems to imply a meaning closer to the French *jongleur* or our sense of minstrel.

plays. It is in light of this evidence that we may recognize in the portrayal of Mary Magdalene her role as *joculatrix Domini*.

The Hymns of William of Herebert in Relation to the Easter Plays

William of Herebert's extant works include six Latin sermons and twenty-three hymns in Middle English.¹⁰ Two of the hymns are translations of poems that appear in Bozon's Anglo-Norman verse sermons; the rest, save two completely original compositions, perhaps by Herebert, are sense translations of Latin hymns, responsories, antiphons, and a versified extract from Alcuin's *Pippini Regalis disputatio cum Albino scholastico*.

A cursory examination of Herebert's English hymns shows much of the usual Franciscan devotion to the Passion and penitential piety. The theme of Christ's redemption of the world from sin through his terrible sacrifice and bitter pain is a theme that runs through many of the Latin texts he chooses as models for his hymns. 'Cryst, buggere of alle ycoren' [Christ, redeemer of all chosen] (Luria and Hoffman 1974: 95; Reimer 1987: 124-45) and 'Iesu, our ransoun' [Jesus our ransom] (Luria and Hoffman 1974: 97; Reimer 1987: 129-30) are rather close translations of the hymns 'Christe redemptor omnium' (AH 51: 49-50) and 'Jesu nostra redemptio' (AH 2: 49). The Latin incipits that appear in the margins of Herebert's commonplace book offer us a glimpse of the translator working out individual lines.

In several other examples, however, Herebert plays more freely, reworking his sources into dramatic representations or popular forms of verse. 'What ys he, pys lordling' [What is he, this lordling] (Luria and Hoffman 1974: 204; Reimer 1987: 132-33) is based, as Herebert himself indicates, on the opening verses of Isaiah 63, beginning 'Quis est iste qui venit de Edom'. Herebert's notes on fol. 210r of his commonplace book tell us that he found verses one to five in the liturgy from the *lectio* for Wednesday of Holy Week, and verse 6 in the Vulgate (Reimer 1987: 132 n. 1). Following his liturgical source and, likely, the *Glossa ordinaria* (PL 113: 1306-308), Herebert transforms the hymn into a drama for Angels and Christ, as he indicates with the rubrics 'Questio angelorum' and 'Responsio Christi' in both margins of his manuscript. His interpretation of this passage from Isaiah as a piece of Passion exegesis offers us a view of Christ as a vengeful healer-knight¹¹ (lines 4-6) who cures mankind through single-handed combat (lines 16-17), crushing the 'volk' (line 20) and their shame under foot. As a vintner treads on his grapes (line 8), so Christ treads on the

10. British Library, MS Additional 46919, formerly Phillipps MS. 8336. See Reimer 1987.

11. Rosemary Woolf suggests that the image of the knight derives from the phrase 'propugnator sum' in Isa. 63.1. See Woolf 1968: 200.

wicked. Their blood, like wine, fouls his garment, but it also reminds us of the blood he shed. The penitential message becomes clear at last in the rubrics for the final two lines, sung by the Jewish people. Under the heading ‘Ista sunt uerba Iudeorum penitenciam agencium’ [Such are the words of the Jews exercising penance] they praise God and beg him for mercy (lines 22–23).

R.H. Robbins (1957: 194-98) identified two of Herebert’s verses as exhibiting incipient forms of the carol. ‘Wele, herizyng, and worshype’ [Joy, praise, and worship] is a translation of the Palm Sunday processional hymn ‘Gloria, laus, et honor’ (Reimer 1987: 113-14). ‘My volk, what habbe y do þe?’ [My folk, what have I done to thee] is based on the *Improperia* from the Mass for Good Friday (Reimer 1987: 115-16). Each of these hymns repeats its first lines like a burden. Figure 1 shows the burden and first stanza of ‘Wele, herizyng, and worshype’ along with the text and music of its Latin model. One can see how closely the English matches the refrain form and meaning of the Latin. By vernacularizing the chant, Herebert converts the liturgical model into common understanding and a form that evokes connections between the Latin processional hymn (which, indeed, one might construe as a kind of dance song) and vernacular dance songs like the carol.

Latin Hymn Text	Gloria, Laus, et Honor
Gloria, laus, et honor, tibi sit Rex Christe Redemptor Cui puerile decus prompsit osanna pium.	Wele, herizyng, and worshype boe to Crist, þat dōere ous bouht, To wham gradden “Osanna!” chyl dren clene of þoute.
Israel es tu Rex, Davidis et inclyta proles: Nomine qui in Domini Rex benedite, venis. Gloria laus. [etc.]	þou art kyng of Israel and of Davidþes kunne, Blessed kyng, þat comest tyl ous wypoute wem of sunne. Wele, herizyng, [etc.] ¹

Fig. 1. Burden and First Stanza from ‘Wele, herizyng, and worshype’ by William of Herebert, MS Additional 46919, fol. 205v and Possible Setting of ‘Wele, herizyng, and worshype’ to the melody of ‘Gloria, laus, et honor’ British Library, Additional MS 12194, fol. 39v.

*Herebert's Hymns as Contrafacta
and Songs in the Easter Plays*

It seems inconceivable that Herebert would have recalled the Latin hymn 'Gloria, laus, et honor' without the music to which he would have learned and sung it. The melody is not in his commonplace book, but he summons it to mind with the Latin heading. Following this inspiration, I have realized in Figure 1 a possible solution to a setting of the English text, using my transcription of the melody that appears in a thirteenth-century Gradual of English Provenance. Scholars since Helmut Gneuss have mostly argued against such potentialities, citing the incongruence between the English and Latin verse structures (Gneuss 1960: 191; Greene 1977: cliii). E.J. Dobson and F. Ll. Harrison would appear to agree, offering Herebert's translation of 'Gloria, laus' as an example. They argue that

a translation need not be a *contrafactum*; an English verse translation of (say) a Latin song, even when on a superficial view it appears to be in the same sort of verse or stanza-form, may on a closer inspection prove to vary so much from the meter of its original that it could not possibly be fitted to the same music, any more than a prose translation could (Dobson and Harrison 1979: 17).¹²

Even so, the evidence of translations of the sequences 'Planctus ante nescia'¹³ and 'Stabat juxta Christi crucem', for example, shows that medieval English composers did allow for some flexibility in their *contrafacta*.¹⁴ That is to say, there is clear evidence that medieval composers modified pre-existing chant melodies to accommodate different numbers of syllables in a *contrafactum* (Dobson and Harrison 1979: 18, 230-40, 251-55). The *contrafacta* that appear in Latin-vernacular Easter plays from Germany and Bohemia offer striking corroborating evidence. The textual and musical connections composers realize between Latin chant and vernacular song reflect the same connections one finds in potential in Herebert's commonplace book. Moreover, similar concern in these plays for themes of penance, the Passion of Christ, and the art of preaching, conveyed through Mary Magdalene, show their authors in tune with a typical Franciscan program of vernacular exegesis.

12. See also Dobson and Harrison 1979: 17-18 n. 5.

13. It is worth noting that the history of the medieval German *Marienklage*—a dramatic monologue sung by the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross—is also part of the reception history of the 'Planctus ante nescia'. See Schönbach 1874: 2-9; Mehler 1981; and Loewen 2008.

14. Only the first stanzas of 'Eyns ne soy ke pleynte fu' and 'Ar ne kuth in sorghen' actually translate the first stanza of 'Planctus ante nescia'.

*Music and Poetry in Easter Plays
from Shrewsbury, Trier and Prague*

Norman Davis explains in his edition of the so-called Shrewsbury Fragments that the *Officium resurrectionis* is part of a fifteenth-century paper manuscript (Shrewsbury School MS VI, folios 38r–42v) that also includes fragments from an *Officium pastorum* and an *Officium peregrinorum* (Davis 1970: xiv–xxii). Susan Rankin suggests the fragments form a *triplum* part book for one actor, probably the vicar choral at Lichfield Cathedral who played the role of Mary Magdalene (identified in the play as Tercia Maria [iij^a m^a]) in the *Officium resurrectionis* (Rankin 1976: 133). The lines for the other players are represented by incipits. Between these passages in Latin appear Middle English texts that, as in Herebert's hymns, translate, elaborate on, and preach about the message of penance in Christ's Resurrection.

Only two texts in the *Officium resurrectionis* are transmitted with music, both in Latin: 'Iam iam, ecce, iam properemus' and 'O Deus, quis revolvēt'. In each case, they appear to be the *triplum* voice parts of sung polyphony. As I have shown in my larger comparative study, the Shrewsbury Resurrection play shares these and all but one of its other Latin texts with a huge number of Easter dramas from the German lands and Bohemia (Loewen and Waugh 2007: 601–603). From among them I have selected corresponding excerpts from two representative works, from Trier and Prague (see Figure 2), both copied in roughly the same period as the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis*. The *Trierer Osterspiel*¹⁵ and *Ordo trium personarum*¹⁶ are much more elaborate than the Shrewsbury drama, as far as one can tell from the fragments that survive; nevertheless, the correlation between their Latin and vernacular lyrics show that these plays are closely related.

In the first excerpt from the Easter plays from Trier and Prague, we join the action at approximately the half-way point, shortly after Mary Magdalene has discovered the empty tomb. In Trier, she sings the Latin antiphon 'Heu...redemptio Israel' followed by a loose elaboration of the chant in German ('Myn leyd dat wysset') [My grief that understands], and then a close translation of the Latin text ('Owe, owe, owe myn heyl') [Alas, alas, alas, my help] to a variation of the Latin chant melody. They are all in the first church mode—that is, in the D mode that ranges mostly in the

15. Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 1973/63, pp. 19–30. See Hennig and Traub 1990; and Bergmann 1986: 345–47.

16. Prague, University library, MS I.B.12, fols. 135v–137v. See Máchal 1908: 98–105 and facsimile pages 1–5. Máchal also uses the Czech title *Prvníhra tři Marií* (First Play of the Three Marys) for this Latin-Czech drama.

Shrewsbury <i>Officium Resurrectionis</i> Shrewsbury School MS VI (c. 1430), fols. 38r-42v Hic incipit Officium Resurrectionis in die Pasche.	<i>Trierer Osterspiel</i> Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 1973/63 (first half of the fifteenth century), pp. 19-30 Incipit Ludus de nocte pasche de tribus Mariis vel tres Marie	<i>Ordo trium personarum</i> Prague, University Library, MS I.B.12 (1384), fols. 135v-137v
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III. Maria. Heul Redemcio Israel, V't quid mortem sustinuit!	1	Deinde Maria iterum cantat [...] Heu, heu, heu redemptio Israel [...]	103	Cantet heu redemptio. Heu redemptio israhel [...]	123
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[II. Maria.]
... payne.

Trier

Heu, heu, heu red - em - ti - o is - ra - el, ut quid mor - tem sus - ti - na - li.
Myn heyl dat wys - set, myn her - cze tra - - - - - rych yst,
na myn lye - be moy - ster ghe - - - - - stor - ben yst,
Der mych van se - wen du - felan mach - - - - - le fry, dyes myr al - - - - - by.
les ste - dyes ween - ten na - be by.
O - we o - we o - we myn heyl, myn troest, myn got, war - umbe ly - de - stu dem bit - ter - ren deet?

Prague

He - u re - demp - ci - o is - ra - hel, ut qui nuss - ci vol - u - it,
He - u re - demp - ci - o is - ra - hel, ut qui pa - ti vol - u - it,
He - u re - demp - ci - o is - ra - hel, ut qui mor - tem sus - tin - u - it pa - ci - ens,
A - wech, myne hu - be - ny - cze, Yenz syse chysel na - no - dy - ty,
A - wech, myne hu - be - ny - cze, Yenz tr - ppe - ty ra - cze! za ny
A - wech, myne hu - be - ny - cze, ienz chysel vm - rze - ty za ny po - kor - nye.

III. Maria.		
Allas! he bat men wend schuld by	Myn leyd dat wysset,	129
All Israel, bothe knyght and knaue,	nu myn hercze trurych yst,	
Why suffred he so forto dy,	nu myn lyebe meyster	105
Sithe he may all sekenes saue?	ghestorben yst,	
Heul! cur ligno fixus claus	Der mych van sewen	
Fuit doctor tam suavis?	dufellen machte fry,	
Heul! cur fuit ille natus	dye myr alles stedys	10
Qui perfodit eius latus?	woenten nahe by.	
	Owe owe owe myn heyl, myn troest, myn got,	
	warumbe lydestu den bitterren doet?	
[.....]	[.....]	[.....]
		(Hoc finito cantet: Victime paschali
		la).
		Quo finito cantet per ordinem
		"Victime paschali" usque "Dic nobis
		Maria."
		Interim Petrus et Iohannes currant
		ad eam et dicant: "Dic nobis, Maria,
		quid vidisti in via."
		180
		Maria cantet "Sepulcrum christi
		viventis" usque "Surrexit christus."
		181
		Quo finito Petrus et Iohannes dicant
		"Dic nobis Maria" ut s.
		182
		Maria respondeat:
		Surrexit Christus.
		183
III. Maria.		
Surrexit Christus, spes nostra;		35
Precedet vos in Galileam.		

Crist is ryssen, wittenes we By tokenes bat we haue sen pis mom! Oure hope, our help, oure hele, is he, And hase bene best, sithe we were born! If we wil seke him for to se, Lettes noght pis lesson be forlorn; But gose euen vnto Galilee — Pere schal ae fynd him aow befor!	40		
Et dicit rickmum			
[N]v myrcket alle crystenlude, Dye vff dysem dage hude Vmb genade hy vorsammet stayn, Ich verkundygen uch genzlichen an allen waen, Das vff erstanden yst vnker troest, Der alle de werlde ouch hayt erloest. Ich muess daz werlych jeheen, Das ich yn liebennych hayn gheseheen, Der dae leyt vor alle sunder den bytteren doet Vnd mannge angst vnd groesse noet Jemerychen hayt geleden, Das her vns muchte gefreden Myd dem ewygen vader syn. Her hayt vorrycht dye ewyge pyn Vnd wyl vns nu dye ewyghe freude geben In dem ewyge<n> leben, Dye her vns gar dure ghekaufft hayt Myd syme roeken varben blode roet. Des keyn menzsche vmmer vergessen sal, Is sal eme dancken ane zal. Hude van des dodes banden Ist vnser here froelychen vff erstanden. Myd deme sollen wry alle froelychen syn Vnd laessen alle truren lygen.	156		
	160		
	165		
	170		
	175		
Et cum hoc incipiet cantor sequentiam Victimae paschali etc.			

Fig. 2. Excerpts from Three Medieval Easter Dramas.

octave above D. The *contrafactum* is absolutely clear in the corresponding passage from the Latin-Czech *Ordo*, where stage directions instruct the singer to sing the Czech lyric ‘Awech, mnye hubenyczy’ [Alas, wretched me] to the same melody as the Latin antiphon.¹⁷

Clearly Mary Magdalene’s German song ‘Myn leyd dat wysset’ offers her audience much more than a translation of the Latin chant. Indeed, the author seizes upon this moment of Israel’s loss of her Redeemer to interpolate the story of Mary’s redemption from sin, as described in the Gospel of Luke (8.2) where Jesus liberated Mary Magdalene from seven devils (‘sewen dufellen’). The memory of her former life of sin modifies Mary Magdalene’s moment of grief in the Easter story so as to amplify and renew her emotion of contrition. One imagines that hearing her sing of her penance in the vernacular would raise the relevance of this message among her German-speaking audience.

A musical analysis of ‘Myn leyd dat wysset’ corroborates this view. It takes a song form, but not of a carol like Herebert’s. Rather, it reflects the salient characteristics of the ‘bar form’, commonly used in medieval German *Minnesang* and *Meistergesang*. One can see in this melody a varied repetition of music for the lines beginning ‘Myn leyd’ [My grief] and ‘nu myn lyebe’ [now my beloved], which seem to form the two *Stollen* of the song form. The middle portions of each *Stolle* offer distinctive *melismae* on the words ‘trurych’ (wretched) and ‘ghestorben’ (died), perhaps to emphasize the depth of Mary Magdalene’s despair. The rhetorical use of music is certainly in keeping with Franciscan models described earlier.¹⁸ The musical setting of ‘Der mych van sewen dufellen’ [who saved me from seven devils] begins with a change of range, in this case to the upper *ambitus* of the D-mode, as one often finds in the *Abgesang* of a *Minnesang*. The melody then descends through *melismae* on ‘machte fry’ [made free] and ‘alles’ [all] on its return to the modal final. ‘Owe...myn heyl’ reprises the music for ‘Heu...redemptio Israhel’ but with variations that expand the melody in order to accommodate the extra words.¹⁹ The use of music thus frames the passage of Latin antiphon, sacred *Minnesang*, and *contrafactum* as a rhetorical unit that directs our attention to the message of penance in the Easter story. Seen in this light, the portrayal of Mary Magdalene corresponds to Berthold’s view of the plangent Magdalene and Francis of Assisi’s concept of a *joculator* (or *joculatrix*) *Domini*.

17. ‘Quo finito eadem nota cantet in vulgari’ (Máchal 1908: line 129).

18. See also Loewen 2008.

19. It is interesting to note here that in fashioning the *contrafactum*, the scribe follows roughly the same advice Nicolaus Beuttner offers his reader in 1602 in the preamble to his *Catholisch Gesang-Buch* (Beuttner 1965: fol. 4v). Despite its distant reference to these late-medieval dramas, it is surprisingly relevant.

On the basis of this evidence and other textual and spiritual parallels between the plays, I have argued elsewhere that 'Heu! Redemcio Israel' in the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis* might have been sung, and that the following English lyric 'Allas! he þat men wend', may have been performed as a *contrafactum*—that is to say, sung to a varied form of the chant melody (Loewen and Waugh 2007: 619-20). This evidence from the German and Czech Easter dramas might, in the absence of notated music, also shed light on the musical performances of William of Herebert's English hymns. It remains uncertain how Herebert would have used these hymns in their sung form. Siegfried Wenzel argues against the possibility that the medieval sermon, which he postulates was a spoken genre, could have accommodated singing (Wenzel 1986: 18).²⁰ But this does not prevent one from making further connections between these repertories of Franciscan lyric and the Easter dramas. Working from the perspective of the Franciscan preacher, one may consider how the preaching tools of William of Herebert, John of Grimestone, and the *Fasciculus morum* shed light on programs of lyrical exegesis and homiletics in the plays.

*'Victimae paschali' and Mary Magdalene's
Role as Singing Preacher*

In the dramas, the combination of Latin antiphons and vernacular lyrics seems to emphasize Mary Magdalene's changing role from witness to interpreter of the message of the Resurrection. As a singer of Latin chant in the plays from Trier and Prague,²¹ and perhaps also Shrewsbury,²² Mary Magdalene serves as a witness to the liturgical foundations of the Easter drama. The addition of vernacular songs seems to express their authors' or compilers' desire to communicate, indeed to preach in a register more readily accessible to their audiences.

The inspiration for Mary Magdalene's preaching role in the Easter dramas may have been 'Victimae paschali laudes', the sequence from the Easter Mass composed in the twelfth century by Wipo of Burgundy. It occurs at the end of each of the plays under consideration here. The sequence elaborates on scriptural accounts of the dialogue between the informed Mary Magdalene and Jesus' disciples. They ask her, 'Tell us, Mary, what you saw on the way?'

20. Wenzel's argument rests partly on the evidence of directions in preachers' manuscripts that use the verb *dicere* for poems, which he construes as 'speaking'. The use of the same verb in stage directions for chant and vernacular songs in medieval German-Latin dramas, however, casts doubt on this interpretation. See Mehler 1981.

21. See the complete comparative study of these dramas in Loewen and Waugh 2007: 622-41.

22. The fragmentary state of the play precludes any greater certainty.

and she replies, 'I saw the sepulcher of the living Christ and the glory of his rising. The angelic witnesses, the shroud and vesture. Christ my hope is risen. He will go before his own into Galilee'.²³ None of the plays include the music for the sequence, but the lovely mode-two melody is so well attested in medieval sources that one could easily imagine singers performing it from memory (AH 54: 12-14). A modern edition using chant notation is available in the *Graduale romanum* (GR 1973: 198-99). As Ernst Schuler has shown, the sequence appears in many Continental Easter dramas composed between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries (Schuler 1951: 350-56). The rubrics and incipits at the end of the *Ordo trium personarum* from Prague (Fig. 2) indicate how 'Victimae paschali' plays out dramatically. The Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis* includes only the phrase beginning 'Surrexit Christus'.

Before singing the sequence in the Easter play from Trier, Mary Magdalene takes to the pulpit, as it were, to preach to her audience in the vernacular (lines 156-79). In fact, the passage may have been sung in a kind of recitative, as the stage direction 'dicit rickmum' implies (Loewen and Waugh 2007: 610). She sings: 'Take note, all you Christian people who have assembled right here today' (lines 156-58).²⁴ She tells them that their Comfort has arisen (line 160). He suffered a bitter death, and horrible pain and agony for our sake so that we might have eternal freedom and eternal life (lines 164-67). He bought it dearly with his rosy red blood (lines 172-73). But today the Lord is arisen, so leave off your weeping (lines 178-79). Themes from the Passion and Crucifixion are noteworthy. Like Berthold of Regensburg, she joins the message of penance to the Resurrection. References to the gory details of Christ's slaughter as the price he so dearly paid for the salvation of sinners also remind one of Herebert's drama and vernacular dance song.

Mary Magdalene's Preaching in Relation to Franciscan Preaching Tools

Mary Magdalene's preaching role in the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis* becomes more obvious with the help of John of Grimestone's commonplace book (dated 1372)²⁵ and the fourteenth-century *Fasciculus morum*. As with Herebert, the English poems in Grimestone's commonplace book are sense translations of Latin verses, but Grimestone usually includes the Latin. 'Nostre salutis primogenita/Al oure wele and al oure lif' in his chapter 'De peccatis moralibus' is a good example (Wilson 1973: 56-57). Here

23. 'Dic nobis, Maria, quid vidisti in via/sepulcrum Christi viventis, et gloriam vidi surgentis./Angelicos testes, sudarium et vestes./Surrexit Christus spes mea: precedat suos in Galileam'.

24. My translation.

25. National Library of Scotland, Advocates' Library, MS. 18.7.21.

we find the rhyming Latin source material at the beginning of every stanza. The lyric lacks the liturgical and so, too, the possible musical connections available in Herebert's hymns and the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis*, but Grimestone gives us a clear sense of their homiletical function in the Latin notes to the right of each stanza. He tells us how Christ combats each of our sins—vanity, lechery, anger, gluttony, etc.—through various details of his great sacrifice of pain on the cross. The last two lines of stanza two are especially striking, since they resonate with Mary Magdalene's final speech in the Shrewsbury play (lines 37–44). Grimestone writes 'But anoþer les-soun Crist gan vs teche:/He bad for is fon in his penaunce'. In the Shrewsbury play, Mary Magdalene says (or sings) 'Oure hope, oure help, oure hele is he ... If we will seke him for to se, lettes noht þis lesson be for-lorn' (lines 37–44). But what lesson is this? Grimestone directs his reader to the message of penance. In the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis*, Mary Magdalene teaches by the example of her cure from sin and through contrition. Earlier in the drama she exclaims 'Alas! .../why suffered he so forto dy,/Sethe he may all sekenes save' (lines 6–7). Mary Magdalene identifies sickness where the corresponding passage in the German drama inscribes Luke's story of the seven devils that Jesus exorcised from her.

The *Fasciculus morum* devotes considerable attention to Christ's work as a physician who heals sinners from spiritual sickness. In the Franciscan author's commentary 'On the Passion of Christ', he writes that 'Christ shed his blood so that he might wash us from the sickness of guilt' (Wenzel 1989: 207). When writing about 'The Nature of Confession', he describes spiritual healing as a three-fold cure. Just as the physician cures the body by means of a 'prophylactic, purgative, [and] a healing diet [...] a person who is spiritually ill first prepares himself by contrition of heart, then purges himself by confession of mouth, and thirdly regulates his diet by satisfaction in deed' (Wenzel 1989: 465). In his commentary on 'How charity fights against the devil', the author shows, by means of Mary Magdalene's example, how she was saved through the purgation of devils (Wenzel 1989: 617). And in his statements about 'What Good Effects Prayer Has', he completes the picture of her salvation from sickness through her contrition of tears. He writes

that prayer must be made with tears and lament in grief for one's sin and fault. Another example is Magdalene; and Blessed Francis, how in the beginning of his new life, as he wept and in prayer grieved over the days of his past life, he was comforted by a honey sweet voice and strengthened in his resolve (Wenzel 1989: 525).

Perhaps these are like the 'devoted tears in a succession of persuasion' that Roger Bacon encourages in his musician-preacher. It is certainly in keeping with the model of Magdalene virtue in which Berthold of Regensburg feels we ought to find comfort. The Latin chants and vernacular songs that surround the liturgical materials in the Continental dramas under discussion

here are devoted heavily to Mary Magdalene's expressions of grief, especially in contrition. And they help us to recognize those characteristics in the fragmentary play from Shrewsbury.

Scholars such as R.H. Robbins and David Jeffrey have already established that the Franciscans—these self-proclaimed 'minstrels of God'—were crucial to the development of English religious lyric after 1224 (Robbins 1938; Jeffrey 1975a). The host of evidence that David Jeffrey has brought to light in his study of medieval English drama shows, moreover, that the Franciscans were engaged in the production of religious drama in England before 1400 and were well placed to influence the works of others (Jeffrey 1975b). Examining the hymns of William of Herebert alongside the Easter dramas from Shrewsbury, Trier, and Prague leads us to important conclusions about both repertoires. With Herebert's help, one may recognize in Mary Magdalene's lyrics the hallmarks of Franciscan vernacular exegesis. Its purpose was not to translate Latin chants *verbatim*, but rather to render a more deeply affective, dramatic, and song-like version of the liturgical model that would give a vernacular-speaking audience greater emotional access to its spiritual meaning. In return, we learn how Herebert's hymns may have been sung as *contrafacta*.

The homiletical program of the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis*, while unclear in its fragmentary state, becomes more obvious in light of the *Trierer Osterspiel* and the English Franciscan preaching tools. These pieces of dramatic exegesis exceed the normal boundary of ritual worship by incorporating aspects of preaching and popular piety in order to declaim the message of penance through the voice of Mary Magdalene—a favorite Franciscan saint.

Susan Rankin observes that 'despite the profound alterations' that occurred in the Latin Easter drama over the roughly 600 years of its development, the repertory maintained its 'basic formal characteristics' (Rankin 1981: 228-29). The textual and musical evidence on view in the Shrewsbury *Officium resurrectionis* and the representative dramas from Germany and Bohemia shows how this argument may be broadened to include vernacular lyrics. Under the influence of Franciscan preachers and their missions, I propose this new layer of drama developed its didactic principles along parallel lines. Mary Magdalene is portrayed as penitent and first preacher of the Resurrection, indeed a *joculatrix Domini*.

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‘WHAT KIND OF WOMAN IS THIS?’ READING LUKE
7.36-50 IN THE LIGHT OF DANTE ROSSETTI’S DRAWING
MARY MAGDALENE AT THE DOOR OF SIMON THE PHARISEE,
1853–1859¹

Rachel Nicholls

Abstract

This essay looks for a fresh insight into Lk. 7.36-50 by examining the text in the light of Rossetti’s drawing *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*. The focus of the discussion is the character and motivation of the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet. A preliminary reading of the Lukan text highlights the complexity of her character. These insights are then brought into conversation with Rossetti’s interpretation as presented in his drawing. The drawing is discussed in the context of the principles of Pre-Raphaelite thought which both motivated Rossetti’s work and governed his style. A reflection on the sonnet which Rossetti wrote as a kind of meditation on the drawing is also included. It is then argued that the problems inherent in rendering a visual representation of this woman also give rise to a controversy about how to represent Jesus in relation to her. The powerful image which Rossetti has made alerts us to the challenges just beneath the surface of this Gospel story.

———— * * * ————

This article lies in the awkward hinterland between two disciplines, not so much working in both of them as defying the protocols of each. It is unlikely to satisfy either a biblical scholar or an art historian: for the one there will be too much art, and for the other too much Bible. It may also seem narrow, since I am focusing on just one pericope and just one artefact. I am not offering a summary of the realization of this story in art, but trying to create a new hermeneutical situation for the story’s interpretation: I want to read Lk. 7.36-50 in the light shed by Dante Rossetti’s drawing *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*.

1. A plate of this drawing accompanies this article. For other Rossetti images, please consult <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/index.html>>. Other art works can be viewed by making an internet image search by title.

I am convinced that the introduction of Rossetti's work to the process of interpretation brings a very particular benefit. It turns my own dialogue with the text into a sort of conference call, or perhaps more appropriately a video conference call, since Rossetti's contribution is visual. Instead of the traditional linear dialogue between the reader and the text, we now have a triangular relationship of text, reader and another interpreter. This opens the possibility of a kind of hermeneutical trigonometry, where the introduction of a third point (Rossetti's drawing) makes it possible to get a more precise 'fix' on the distance and difference between the reader and the biblical text.² Rossetti's drawing not only contributes its own interpretation, but functions within a relationship of companionship and difference with my interpretation. In other words, Rossetti's drawing may present me with some good ideas that I had not considered previously, but it may also be in abrasive discord with my interpretation, which will force me to examine my own preconceptions.

The status of Rossetti's drawing in this process is important: I am not going to make up my mind about the meaning of Lk. 7.36-50 and then give Rossetti marks out of ten on the basis of how accurately he portrayed it; nor am I going to privilege his drawing over the text—as if the really interesting activity is interpreting Rossetti's drawing, and the biblical text is just an excuse for this. The real situation is that the introduction of another interpreter into the interpretative process is a tacit admission of my own finitude. It is also an acknowledgment that there is no all-singing, all-dancing scientific method which would release me from this finitude and raise me to some dizzy suprahistorical height from which the original and definitive meaning of Lk. 7.36-50 would become clear. I need the help of other interpreters from other times and other places, not only to supplement my understanding, but also to put my understanding under cross-examination so that my own preconceptions are brought to light.

Some Questions Raised by an Initial Reading of Lk. 7.36-50

Among the issues one could discuss in Lk. 7.36-50, I am going to focus on the character of the unknown woman.³ She does not speak, so she can

2. Trigonometry uses two known values of a right-angled triangle (lengths or angles) to establish a third value. It can be used to measure long distances and angles of elevation. This may seem an unusual metaphor to apply to hermeneutics, but it makes the point that the perspective supplied by another interpretation can be enlightening simply due to its difference, without any claim to be accurate, superior or definitive.

3. When discussing Lk. 7.36-50 directly, I will refer to her as an unidentified and unknown woman. Rossetti, however, makes the traditional identification of her as Mary Magdalene, so when I discuss his drawing I will refer to her as 'Mary'.

only be known by her actions—gatecrashing a dinner party, crying, wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair, kissing and anointing his feet—and by the reactions of others to her, including narrative detail provided by the evangelist. In church tradition, this woman has often been identified as Mary Magdalene (a tradition which Rossetti has followed in his drawing), but the identification is rarely asserted now. In a lengthy article defending the traditional view, André Feuillet can only really offer his feeling that it would be so much better if Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and this unknown woman were one and the same person, ‘ce personnage extraordinaire qu’est Marie-Madeleine’.⁴

Luke describes her as ‘a sinner in the city’. She enters the dinner uninvited and unaccompanied; the combination of these three factors suggest that ‘sinner’ should be understood here as ‘prostitute’. She is a ‘public’ woman rather than someone’s wife, and her home is identified as the city streets. Corley suggests that she could be a freedwoman, who has obtained her freedom through prostitution and now continues to make her living in the only way open to her (Corley 1993: 124). It is interesting that Luke has not used the actual word πόρνη but this can be attributed to the tenor of the whole story, which concludes with the affirmation of the woman and not her condemnation or objectification as a prostitute.

Some commentators raise the question of whether or not the woman is a *forgiven* sinner. For instance, Kilgallen suggests that she may have already received John’s baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and therefore her actions at the dinner should be interpreted as an outpouring, not of grief, but of gratitude (Kilgallen 1985). This prompts me to wonder how we should interpret her tears: a few tears of gratitude would not be enough to wet the feet of Jesus to the point where they needed drying. This is a woman in crisis, and we are not told whether this crisis springs from a kind of joyful release, a deeply felt penitence or some other emotion. Of course, declaring that the woman was previously forgiven does take some of the sting out of the story.

4. Feuillet 1975: 391. The question of whether this unknown woman is a variant on the Johannine character ‘Mary of Bethany’ requires a little more consideration, resting as it does on some questions about the origins and development of this story. In brief, if Lk. 7.36-50 is a story fashioned from the raw material of Mk 14.3-9, then it is quite likely that all four Gospel stories of a woman anointing Jesus are, in essence, one story about one woman. I remain unconvinced by this conflation, not least because of the awkward detail that this woman in Luke anoints Jesus’ feet and not his head. This detail does not appear in Mark, so why would Luke invent it when it complicates the telling of his own story? This seems to be exactly the kind of narrative anomaly that would only be preserved if it had its provenance in earlier pre-Gospel tradition. If Luke got this detail from a source independent of Mark, it remains at least a possibility that he got a substantial part of his story from this independent source, thus undermining the one story theory.

Simon the Pharisee is appalled that Jesus is allowing a socially, morally and ritually unclean woman to touch him; but we need have no such fears, it turns out that she was 'clean' after all! This becomes a story about the marvels of repentance and forgiveness, and ceases to be about the disquieting approachability of Jesus.

The same transformation of meaning happens when interpreters comment on the woman letting down her hair. Some (for example Caird 1968: 114; Marshall 1978: 308) take this to be an accidental action. This is an unsatisfactory interpretation. People generally do not flout social taboos without noticing that they are doing so, unless they are intoxicated or in some other sense psychologically impaired, so it would be better to assume that this woman consciously chooses to let down her hair, either because she feels that it is appropriate in these circumstances or because she wants to shock those around her.

The anointing of the feet rather than the head is also puzzling. Jesus himself mentions that Simon did not anoint his head when he arrived at the dinner (v. 46), and this fits with the Jewish tradition of anointing at banquets (see, for instance, Ps. 23.5). In the context of Graeco-Roman meals and symposia, women who anointed men would be prostitutes hired to approach the male guests sexually (Corley 1993: 125). So there are two conflicting traditions here: against which background, Jewish or pagan, should we interpret this anointing? Does the woman mean to honour Jesus by anointing him as a banquet host would, but is simply unable to reach his head; or is she using a gesture from her professional repertoire as a prostitute and putting it to a new purpose? As Kathleen Corley suggests (1993: 126), it is only the woman's tears which mitigate the erotic overtones of her actions.

The description of this woman as a 'sinner' and the surprising sequence of her actions at this dinner make her difficult to interpret. She arrives without an invitation, she anoints the feet of Jesus and she lets down her hair. Is she enormously brash and determined to be controversial? The vulnerability of her tears suggests not. Or is she so grief-stricken that she is out of control? Her careful action of anointing suggests not. And behind the question, 'What kind of woman is this?' lies another: 'What kind of man is this, who would allow her to touch him?' In order to reflect on Rossetti's interpretation of these issues, we need to understand the context of his work.

*Approaching Rossetti's Drawing:
Some Principles of Pre-Raphaelite Thought*

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a Victorian protest group, a small gathering of like-minded young men who wished to overturn the received

wisdom about what made a work of art excellent. Holman Hunt recounts that the name ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ was originally an insult by fellow students at the Academy, who wanted to point out the logical result of rejecting the philosophy and technique that had been developed by artists from Raphael onwards (Hunt 1974: 32). To the jeering students, the very idea that there could be value in getting behind the patterns of composition and notions of ideal beauty which they had been taught was ridiculous, therefore the name ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ was both dismissive and a *reductio ad absurdum*. Most artists assumed that art had been progressing steadily since the days of Raphael and that any return to earlier values would be a descent into primitivism, a loss of technical skill and a capricious defiance of their elders and betters in the guise of the Academy. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood thus defied two key Victorian values—the belief in progress and the proper respect for institutions. In another sense, though, they were very much the children of their day, valuing observation and experiment, and expressing optimism over the possibility of making new discoveries. They felt that art had lost its expressive power under a weight of technical protocol and that religious art in particular no longer expressed faith but simply repeated convention. Perhaps the best way to appreciate Pre-Raphaelite concerns is to read the complaint which Ruskin, an influential art critic who was sympathetic to their views, made against Raphael. This is a quotation from volume three of *Modern Painters*, where Ruskin is reflecting on the story of Peter being recommissioned by Christ on the shores of Lake Galilee after the resurrection. Ruskin invites us to imagine the scene:

They sit down on the shore face to face with Him, and eat their broiled fish as He bids. And then, to Peter, all dripping still, shivering and amazed, staring at Christ in the sun, on the other side of the coal fire—thinking a little, perhaps, of what happened by another coal fire, when it was colder, and having had no word once changed with him by his Master since that look of His—to him, amazed, comes the question, ‘Simon, lovest thou Me?’ Try to feel that a little, and think of it till it is true to you: and then, take up that infinite monstrosity and hypocrisy—Raphael’s cartoon of the charge to Peter. [Raphael *Christ’s Charge to Peter*, 1515-16.] Note first, the bold fallacy—the putting all the Apostles there, a mere lie to serve the Papal heresy of the Petric supremacy, by putting them all in the background while Peter receives the charge, and making them all witnesses to it. Note the handsomely curled hair and neatly tied sandals of the men who had been out all night in the sea-mists and on the slimy decks. Note their convenient dresses for going a-fishing, with trains that lie a yard along the ground, and goodly fringes—all made to match, an apostolic fishing costume. Note how Peter especially (whose chief glory was in his wet coat girt about him, and naked limbs) is enveloped in folds and fringes, so as to kneel and hold his keys with grace. No fire of coals at all, nor lonely mountain shore, but a pleasant Italian landscape, full of villas and churches, and

a flock of sheep to be pointed at; and the whole group of Apostles, not round Christ, as they would have been naturally, but straggling away in a line, that they may all be shown.

The simple truth is, that the moment we look at the picture we feel our belief of the whole thing taken away. There is, visibly, no possibility of that group ever having existed, in any place, or on any occasion. It is all a mythic absurdity, and faded concoction of fringes, muscular arms, and curly heads of Greek philosophers (Ruskin 1987: 313-14).

Rossetti's drawing of Lk. 7.36-50 (Fig. 1) could be seen by a present day observer as just as unrealistic as Raphael's work. The architecture and the costumes are not Palestinian, for instance. But the key to the kind of realism or naturalism being attempted by Pre-Raphaelites lies in that phrase of Ruskin's: 'Try to feel that a little, and think of it till it is true to you'. What is being strived after is an integrity of feeling and execution. As Holman Hunt expresses it, 'a man's work must be the reflex of a living image in his own mind' (Hunt 1974: 40). This is not 'art for art's sake', but 'art for truth's sake'—a significant attempt to make the forms and techniques of visual art serve the spiritual development of humankind. The imagination was a vital element in this endeavour, along with the careful observation of nature. From our present day perspective, the determination to paint and draw from life (including individual details of actual people and objects, and a portrayal of natural scenes in natural light) probably seems an unremarkable, even a conservative aim; yet for artists trained to paint and draw ideal beauty, not flawed reality, it was a radical departure. Joshua Reynolds regarded the skill of making likenesses from life as the lesser talent of a jobbing portrait artist and not the kind of skill required of a great painter, and his *Discourses* were still influential in this period.⁵ The Pre-Raphaelites disagreed; they used people they knew to model famous figures, faithfully reproducing their features. Mary Magdalene in Rossetti's drawing is the actress Ruth Herbert (Grieve 1978: 45). The head of Christ is Burne-Jones (Surtees 1971: 62) and escapes the generalized blandness of many Victorian Christs as a result. In a letter of 1859, Rossetti requests from his mother the loan of a bowl (Doughty and Wahl 1967: 347), which he used as the model for the one in the hands of the girl begging.

Pre-Raphaelite artists also resisted the current strictures on composition, unwilling to arrange figures in the characteristic 'S' shape. Rossetti, particularly, is inclined to fill his compositions to the point of claustrophobia, perhaps in order to heighten the emotional intensity of the image. This approach is evident in a drawing which Rossetti was working on in the same

5. For instance, Reynolds is quoted in detail by a contemporary critic of Rossetti called Masson; see Masson 1974: 72-74, originally published 1852.

period as this one: *Hamlet and Ophelia*, 1858. The architecture is barely able to contain the dimensions of the figure of Hamlet, giving a sense of the emotional intensity of the scene. A similar claustrophobia is generated within the drawing we are considering: the heavy beam encloses the alleyway, keeping our attention within the main group of figures and particularly on Mary herself. The beam is heavily underscored with an ink line which contrasts with the lighter area of wall on the left, suggesting that it was perhaps a later addition intended to heighten this effect.

*An Analysis of Mary Magdalene at
the House of Simon the Pharisee*

Rossetti worked on this drawing between 1853 and 1859. This period of time is significant, because he sometimes simply abandoned works which were challenging to complete (for instance, the painting called *Found*, 1853–82). On the other hand, in the case of drawings, he often completed them very quickly—in a matter of hours or days. The time period here involved suggests that this image remained important to him throughout the 1850s. Ruskin commented about Rossetti's drawing, 'That Magdalene is magnificent to my mind, in every possible way: it stays by me'.⁶ He meant that it stayed with him in his thoughts; he was never able to persuade Rossetti to let him buy the work, even though he was willing to swap Rossetti's oil painting of *St Catherine* for it; a work which, being a painting, would have had a higher market value.

The moment of the story depicted in this drawing is important. Gotthold Lessing, in his discussion of poetry and painting as contrasting media, suggests that when artists are depicting a story they have to find the quintessential moment in the narrative, the moment which is, 'the most encapsulating one, and from which the actions which precede and follow are most easily understood'.⁷ Rossetti's drawing offers an 'encapsulating moment' which anticipates the biblical text—the moment when Mary decides to enter Simon's house. This is interesting, as other depictions more commonly focus on the moment when the woman is at the feet of Jesus. (Compare it with: Pierre Subleyras's *Christ at the House of Simon the Pharisee*, 1737; Juan de Valdés Leal's *Le repas chez Simon*, 1690; Pieter Pauwel Rubens's *Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, 1618–20.)

It is particularly surprising that Rossetti has not chosen this moment, since it would have given an opportunity to depict the woman using her hair to wipe Jesus' feet. Women's hair was particularly important to Rossetti,

6. Quoted in Surtees 1971: 62.

7. See Lessing 1990: 117. Originally published 1766: 'den prägnantesten wählen, aus welchem das Vorhergehende und Folgende am begreiflichsten wird'.

both as a motif in his art and a factor in his own relationships. In the story 'Hand and Soul', Rossetti imagines his own soul appearing to him in the guise of a beautiful woman: 'He knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams... And she came to him, and cast her hair over him, and, took her hands about his forehead'.⁸ It seems that Rossetti could have had great imaginative sympathy with this encapsulating moment and his refusal to tackle it has perhaps robbed us of a masterpiece, especially when one considers his ability in later paintings to express a spiritual longing through the physical beauty of a woman (see *Beata Beatrix*, 1864–70). Several preparatory sketches⁹ for this drawing of Mary Magdalene still exist, but none of them suggest that Rossetti even considered the moment that Mary is at the feet of Jesus. Why might this be so? My guess is that it is to do with the portrayal of Jesus. After all, it is one thing to produce a sensuous, passionate and convincing Mary but the corollary of this is a figure of Jesus who is man enough to accept her touch, with all the threatening theological implications this engenders.

Consider Jean Béraud's depiction of this same scene (Jean Béraud, *The Magdalen at the House of the Pharisees*, 1891). Béraud has made a bold imaginative leap in equating Simon the Pharisee and friends with the respectable gentlemen of his own day. He has also depicted Mary as a woman of his own day—although she does appear in virginal white and keeps her hands clasped in prayer, rather than reaching out to touch Jesus. She lacks the emotional intensity of the woman in his painting *Après la faute*, 1885–90 (*After the Misdeed*), but the picture continues to be interesting until one reaches the depiction of Jesus. Here Béraud lost his nerve: Jesus appears in 'Bible clothes', colour-coordinated to the setting, but wholly unconvincing. His feet are demurely hidden under his robes, safely out of the reach of this woman. Béraud could not bring himself to imagine Jesus really engaged in a conflict over social propriety; Jesus has to remain a bloodless, sexless figure who belongs, not so much to the first century, as to a kind of Sunday School Never-Never-Land.

Similar cultural and theological perils would have faced Rossetti. He could have created a much more convincing Mary than Béraud did, but this would have required him to create a much more daring Jesus. Rossetti has depicted Jesus with not simply his feet hidden, but his whole body concealed. We see him through a window, which signals that he belongs to an alternate, spiritual reality. The light around his head radiates out in

8. 'Hand and Soul' was published in the first issue of the Pre-Raphaelite Journal *The Germ*, edited by Rossetti's brother William. This quotation is from *The Germ* 1: 29–30.

9. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery has two earlier sketches (No. 275'04; 276'04). The British Museum has perhaps the earliest (No. 1912-11-9-5).

dynamic threads rather than being a static halo. It is also reflected on his hair. This connects with the intensity of his gaze and the urgency of his unspoken call to Mary. She struggles towards him, oblivious to those who would stop her.

The sheer number of extrabiblical characters in this drawing is startling. At least seventeen are clearly visible, with an additional crowd receding into the distance. Beyond the revellers in this alleyway are figures representing the world of work—a man beating a donkey, another with a scythe on his shoulder and another carrying a heavy sack. Why are all these people here? The preliminary sketches do not show so many, but they all include a group of figures trying to prevent Mary from entering the house. Rossetti's vision of the streets is of a place full of people who are anxious to keep Mary from leaving them. There are many other details, too, such as the vine in the foreground, the white hart and the hens. The art critic and member of the Bloomsbury group Roger Fry perhaps puts it best; in describing Rossetti's work as springing from passionate desire, he went on to say, 'Passion in itself was not enough; it must rage in a curiosity shop, amid objects which had for him peculiarly exciting associations'.¹⁰ 'Passion raging in a curiosity shop' is a convincing reflection on the detail in this picture.

The poem¹¹ that Rossetti wrote to accompany this drawing introduces one character in particular—the man who has one hand on Mary's knee and the other on her foot. He is her lover, and tries to persuade her that she should come with him to the party which they originally planned to attend; the entrance can be seen on the opposite side of the street, where musicians are playing and a couple are kissing in the doorway. The lover speaks the opening line of the poem: 'Why wilt thou cast the roses from thine hair?'

This sonnet was written some ten years after the drawing was completed. It is useful to us as it identifies the extrabiblical character of the lover, but should we regard it as a definitive interpretation of the drawing? Does even Rossetti intend us to do this? Rossetti was a poet as well as an artist, and so regularly expressed himself in word as well as image. He did not privilege one medium over the other, but often pursued a twin expression of his narrative art (see, for instance, the poem and painting of *Pandora*, where Rossetti wrote the sonnet while he was still working on the image). Moreover, he wrote poems in a similar vein on the work of other artists,¹² and so is unlikely to be making a claim that these are, in any way,

10. Quoted in Doughty 1973: 157.

11. The text of this poem, written by Rossetti in 1870, is included at the end of this article. It is reproduced in Surtees 1971: 62.

12. For example, see *For 'Our Lady of the Rocks' by Leonardo da Vinci*, a poem published in 1881 in the same volume as the sonnet for this drawing.

definitive interpretations. It seems to me that Rossetti takes his inspiration wherever he can find it, and that he was sometimes inspired to write poetry by visual images—some of his own making, some the work of others. A prose footnote is included with each of these poems to describe the image to a reader who has never seen it. The factual nature of these brief sentences strongly suggests that the poems themselves are not intended to be read in the same way.

The sonnet for this drawing does not give a voice to the figures of Jesus or Simon, perhaps confirming Rossetti's reticence about the former and his lack of interest in the latter. In Mary's speech in the poem there is a reference to clasping 'those blood-stained feet', perhaps a foreshadowing of the deposition. Christ's call to her is compelling, rather than attractive, and even overcomes the seductive words of her lover (who certainly has the best of the poetry, e.g. 'this delicate day of love' and 'love's whispering night'). For Rossetti, the heart of this narrative is the conflict between two loves, the claims of Christ winning out over the attractions of the earlier relationship, even to the point of physical struggle: 'let me go!' The drawing conveys so much more than the poem about the dynamics of this struggle: the lack of eye contact between Mary and her lover, for instance, and the pressure being applied by the female companion who has her hand on Mary's knee and her arm braced against the wall of Simon's house. This woman's physical determination to stop Mary underlines the forward movement of Mary's body, caught for an instant in this drawing, but stepping up to enter Simon's house, regardless of the obstacles put in her way.

The roses worn by the revellers and Mary are significant: this is one of the flowers Rossetti associates with the mythical character Lilith (see *Lady Lilith*, 1868, 1872–73) and so it symbolizes seduction and erotic experience. Moreover, all the flowers that the revellers wear are cut and will soon fade, whereas the flowers in the doorway of Simon's house—a lily for purity and a sunflower to symbolize the soul's search for God—are planted in sturdy pots and will continue to grow.

An intriguing extra character is the girl begging to the left of Mary. In a letter to Mrs Clabburn,¹³ Rossetti explains that this girl has just received something to eat from the banquet in Simon's house. She has no expectation that she can leave the streets and enter a different world; she can only beg the scraps from the table. The hens at her feet make the same point—Rossetti suggested that they were the visual equivalent of the dogs mentioned in the Gospel story who eat the children's crumbs from under the

13. This letter was actually a description of an unfinished oil replica, but the composition of the picture is the same. Rossetti wrote to her in 1865, the letter was published in the *Pall Mall Budget*, 22nd January 1891. It is quoted in Surtees 1971: 62.

table (Mk 7.24-30).¹⁴ Her naked back suggests poverty and vulnerability, her gaze reveals frank amazement at Mary's choice. The darkest line in the drawing is the stem of the leaf decoration which hangs from Mary's waist. This swings out with the movement of Mary's hip, and so is pointing directly to the beggar girl, contrasting the abject vulnerability of the one with the decisive audacity of the other.

While Rossetti has depicted the extrabiblical characters and Mary in the light of the alleyway, Simon the Pharisee is only half visible in the shadow of the doorway of his house. His downturned lip and sour expression suggest that he has already formed his opinion of Mary and that it will intensify into outrage when she enters his house. His prominent double chin marks him out as older than any other figure in the drawing, and its shape is accentuated by the line of his fringe. The pupils of his eyes are not visible on the original drawing—his eyes are either closed or narrowed to the extreme. The lively figure of a serving girl behind him emphasizes his solid and stationary disapproval. It seems that Rossetti is not interested in the conversation which will occur between Jesus and Simon after Mary has entered the house: he does not endow Simon with even a hint of a doubt about the rightness of his own judgment.

Lk. 7.36-50 in the Light of Rossetti's Drawing

When Ruskin wrote to Tennyson about the engravings which Rossetti, Millais and others had prepared for an edition of Tennyson's poems, he said this: 'Many of the plates are noble things, though not, it seems to me, illustrations of your poems. I believe, in fact, that good pictures can never be; they are always another poem'.¹⁵ Rossetti's drawing is certainly 'another poem', another story in its own right, standing out from the biblical text and even from his own sonnet. However, is it interesting only as a window into Rossetti's highly original Victorian mind, or can it challenge our thinking about Lk. 7.36-50?

There is something compelling about the visual characterization of Mary. Her very physical and energetic female presence takes us back to the text to reconsider the encounter between Jesus and this unknown woman. She can no longer fade into the background of this story or become a mere cipher of the theme of repentance and forgiveness. We are forced to face the intimacy of the moment when she will touch Jesus and this opens us to the kinds of doubts which Simon will raise: 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is' (v. 39). More to the point: what kind of a prophet is this, who allows this moment of intimacy to happen?

14. Quoted in Surtees 1971: 62.

15. Quoted in Munro and Goddard 2006: 40.

Rossetti has chosen to encapsulate the story in the very moment in which it begins—the moment when the woman chooses to enter the house. He has placed the viewer in the street, among the crowds and parties, not in the house, at table with the Pharisee. We are asked to identify with this woman and with the intensity of her choice to go to Jesus. Rossetti has given her dignity in the way that Jesus does within Luke's story. Luke's account ends with Jesus asserting to Simon that she is not a sinner, but someone who is grateful, more grateful than Simon; nor is she a gatecrasher, but someone who anoints him as a good host would (vv. 44–46). Rossetti's drawing is almost an echo of Jesus' question to Simon, 'Do you see this woman?' (v. 44).

The drawing does not show the moment when the woman wets the feet of Jesus with her tears, but this woman is already loosening her hair as she comes in from the street. A closer inspection of the roses that she is combing from her hair reveals that they have leaves and thorns attached: the symbolic removal of the roses is causing her more pain than is evident in her expression. She is positively choosing to go to Jesus rather than to the party across the road. This is a woman with her head up.

So what kind of Jesus is this, who gazes at this woman? He is a kind of allegory of divine love calling to her with his eyes and eclipsing the ties of earthly love. He neither speaks in the poem nor gestures in the drawing—he simply looks across from his window, emphatic yet vulnerable, protected from us by the formidable brickwork which surrounds him on two sides. Even the open doorway is blocked with a forbidding obstacle: the tablecloth under Simon's elbow is edged with a cross-stitch pattern which is echoed in the criss-cross of the table legs. These combine to look like a symbolic 'no entry' sign. This Jesus is a convincing man, unlike, for instance, Holman Hunt's Jesus in *The Light of the World* (1853–54), but he perhaps remains convincing because he is contained and apart. His face is filled with passionate intensity, but we are barred from seeing his body, or seeing anyone touch his body. Since the head of Christ appears on the strip of paper Rossetti added at the right hand side of the drawing, it is more than possible that the earliest version of the drawing was composed without a visible Christ at all. We could wish that Rossetti had given us a complete figure of Christ, as dynamic as his figure of Mary, but he has alerted us to the controversy that such an image would have created (and might still create). This encourages me to re-read the text, expecting to find this encounter christologically and politically challenging, rather than theologically clear cut and comfortable.

There is something in Rossetti's portrayal of this woman which is neither objectifying nor patronizing. Rossetti has given her dignity, encapsulating the conclusion of the story in a moment before its beginning. This determined and honoured Magdalene may 'stay with us' as she did with Ruskin, altering our perception of the unknown sinner who wept at the feet of Jesus.

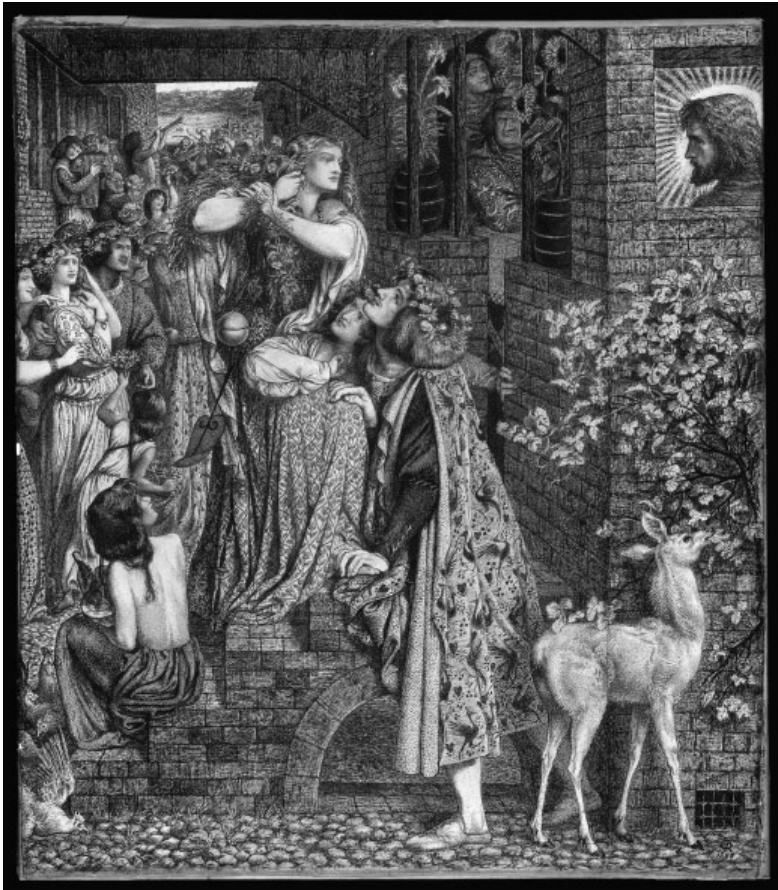


Fig. 1. Dante Rossetti. *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, 1853–1859. Photo credit: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

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

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

Original Footnote to the Poem

In the drawing Mary has left a procession of revellers, and is ascending by a sudden impulse the steps of the house where she sees Christ. Her lover has followed her and is trying to turn her back.

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MARY MAGDALENE AS AGENT (OR WITNESS) OF APOCALYPSE

Christopher C. Rowland

Abstract

This essay juxtaposes Botticelli's 'Mystic Crucifixion' and a section of William Blake's unfinished poem 'The Everlasting Gospel' to show the ways in which Mary Magdalene (identified by Blake with the woman taken in adultery in John 8) is both a witness of an apocalyptic event and herself one who experiences revelatory insight. Both Botticelli and Blake demonstrate an awareness of features of the respective biblical texts and bring out the apocalyptic significance of the passage on which they comment in image and words.

———— * * * ————

This essay juxtaposes two pictures of scenes from the life of Jesus, one picture by Botticelli, the other by Blake, which is complemented by a poem by Blake. In the pictures and the poem Botticelli and Blake read the Gospel stories as events of an apocalyptic moment with Mary Magdalene as a key figure in both (Mary being identified with the woman taken in adultery in Blake's poem). In the Botticelli picture Mary is a witness, in the other she is more a participant in earth-shaking events and of an apocalypse about her own redemption and the insight it offers for understanding the death of Jesus.

Despite its damaged state, the main point I want to make about Botticelli's 'Mystic Crucifixion' (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Fig. 1) is clearly seen in the stark contrast between light and darkness, at the centre of which is the crucified Jesus. In portraying the death of Jesus as a defining moment of apocalyptic significance, Botticelli picks up on themes in the synoptic Gospels: in Matthew, where the resurrection from the dead is linked with the moment of the death of Jesus along with events like the darkening of the sky (Mt. 27.45, 52-4), and in Luke which has Jesus' death being marked by an eclipse of the sun (Lk. 23.45). Indeed, modern commentators on the synoptic presentation of the crucifixion of Jesus have found a fulfilment of Jesus' predictions of darkness and cosmic disturbance (Mt. 24.29)



Fig. 1. Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445–1510). *Mystic Crucifixion*. c. 1500. 72.39 × 51.44 cm. Tempera and oil on canvas. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. Photo credit: Rick Stafford © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

taking place at the moment of Jesus' death and noted similarities with the Book of Revelation (Rev. 6.12; 8.12; 9.2).¹

The crucified Jesus, dead, hanging on the cross, divides the picture. On the right are dark clouds. There appear to be angels holding white shields with red crosses as they fight seven brown devils armed with burning wood and torches. The shields of the angels bear the symbol of the people of Florence, a

1. For example, Myers 1988: 389-92.

symbol also prefiguring the resurrection.² On the left is brightness, with Florence shining in the background, easily recognizable from the Cathedral, and Campanile (Weinstein 1970: 336). At the foot of the cross is a woman with flowing ginger hair clinging to the cross. This is widely interpreted as Mary Magdalene, one of the women who witnessed Jesus' death (Mt. 27.56, 61) and who, it is suggested, is thought to symbolize a penitent Florence.³ She lies close to the dead Jesus, prostrate in grief. Her position, as close as possible to the dead Jesus, contrasts with the refusal of intimate contact with the resurrected, but still not ascended, Jesus in Jn 20.17.⁴ To her right the angel is about to slay another animal. This could be a sign of the angelic destruction of the sins of Florence, or, alternatively, Mary at the foot of the cross maybe pleads, to avert the angelic vengeance, though this is less likely as Mary's eyes are not looking up at the angel but seem to be closed in grief.

The apocalyptic and eschatological significance is heightened by the appearance in the left hand corner of the picture of what seems to be an enthroned God with a book open before him, presumably the book of judgment (Rev. 20.11-15 or Dan. 7.9-10). The Final Assize takes place at the cross as the clouds move away and Florence is bathed in glory. Suffering and tribulation are the context for the renewal of Florence. Botticelli, in a way reminiscent of late medieval piety, sees identification with the sufferings of Christ as the necessary gateway to life.

It has been suggested that the 'Mystic Crucifixion' may relate to a sermon of Savonarola from 11 November 1494 in which Savonarola had exhorted the church to renew itself in the face of the woes to come upon Italy. In this sermon Savonarola reported a vision he had in 1492 in which he saw two crosses, one was blackness, with the words 'crux irae Dei' (the cross of God's wrath) on it, which hung over Rome. There was another cross, this time hanging over Jerusalem, with the words 'crux misericordiae Dei' (the cross of God's mercy) on, and the light of this cross illuminating the world. The themes of Savonarola's sermon, it has been argued, are carried over to the 'Mystic Crucifixion', therefore, where they now apply to Florence, with the woes of the 'crux irae' on the right hand side, therefore, while the clear sky, 'crux misericordiae Dei', is on the left (Weinstein 1970: 72-3).

2. This insignia had informally replaced the Medici arms when the Florentine republic was established in 1494.

3. Weinstein 1970: 335.

4. Out of her cloak runs either a wolf or a fox (perhaps a symbol of Pisa which had escaped from Florentine control in 1494. See Weinstein 1970: 336). The clinging to the foot of the cross may reflect the reversal of the Fall when a tree becomes the means of Eve's seduction but here the tree becomes the means of obedience and salvation. Thus, we read in Hippolytus's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 'The tree of seduction no longer deceives her. She now rejoices in life through the tree, and tastes of the tree through confessing Christ. She is worthy of the good and desires food' (McConvery 2006: 211).

The presence of Mary Magdalene, the forgiven sinner of Christian tradition, at the foot of the cross, on Florence's side of the picture, denotes the act of penitence and, perhaps also, intercession which must precede the eschatological renewal.

This picture has been seen as a companion to Botticelli's much better preserved 'Mystic Nativity' (National Gallery, London, Fig. 2). In 'Mystic Nativity' Botticelli does two things: he positions himself in the period described in the midst of the woes (Revelation 11) leading up to the messianic age (Revelation 12), the latter being the focus of this picture which depicts the birth of the male child. Botticelli has depicted the imminent messianic event in terms of the earlier messianic birth. To adapt words from Acts 1, he has presented the Messiah coming 'in the way in which he came' previously.



Fig. 2. Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445–1510). *Mystic Nativity*. 1500. 108.6 × 74.9 cm. The National Gallery, London. Photo credit: © The National Gallery, London.

The birth of the Messiah is a moment which Botticelli believes is linked with the overcoming of the powers of darkness.⁵ His picture and its textual heading reflects the simple story line of the Apocalypse: it has to get worse before it gets better and in the meantime God's prophets testify and suffer. Botticelli takes this simple scheme and relates it directly to his own situation, which he glosses textually in the picture, but he then depicts his optimistic future hope based on Revelation 12:

'I, Alexandros, was painting this picture at the end of the year 1500 in the [troubles] of Italy in the half time after the time according to the chapter of St. John in the second woe of the Apocalypse in the loosing of the devil for three and a half years. Then he will be chained, and we shall see him [trodden down], as in this picture'.

Thus, Revelation 11–12 together function as a kind of epitome of the whole of the Book of Revelation viewed as a disaster/new age sequence. The unleashing of the powers of darkness that Botticelli has witnessed in his own circumstances is a prelude to the messianic glory of the messianic kingdom on earth focused in Florence.

At least at first glance, 'The Mystic Nativity' seems more hopeful, or, better, the new age has already dawned: the devils are scurrying to their holes in the ground and the sky shines bright with the dawn. 'Mystic Crucifixion' at first sight fits more closely with the moment reflected in the inscription in the 'Mystic Nativity', namely, the time of the messianic woes. I think it more likely, however, that 'Mystic Crucifixion' is an alternative presentation of the same sequence that we find in 'Mystic Nativity', though this time using the cross as the fulcrum of the apocalyptic moment. This has its biblical antecedents in Matthew 27 and its parallels, unlike the nativity story, whose apocalyptic significance was only drawn out later.

I turn now to the story of 'The Woman taken in Adultery'. In his depiction of this story [Fig. 3],⁶ Blake captures the moment in Jn 8.10 between Jesus stooping to the ground and seemingly writing in the dust (I say seemingly because in the picture Jesus' finger does not seem to touch the ground), and his words to the woman ('Sin no more'), when he is left alone with her as the accusers flee (Moskal 1994: 32–35).⁷ The woman's hands are tied, and

5. This is reminiscent of Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity' stanza xviii and Blake's depiction of this which has many similarities with 'Mystic Nativity'.

6. See further Butlin 1981: 486.

7. This would parallel what Blake does in the Job depiction when he has Job's words, 'Now my eye hath seen thee' without 'therefore I repent in dust and ashes'. Blake painted both this scene (c486/pl.565) and a Transfiguration for Thomas Butts (c484/pl.545). In the latter, we read that Peter, James, and John see 'Jesus only' (Mt. 17.8; Mk

she has her left breast bare and her hair dishevelled. Jesus' fingers point to nothing at all on the earth. The woman watches his actions. His right leg is turned towards the woman, and the woman's left foot slightly moves toward Jesus, with one of the accusers' feet turning away. At the very bottom left of the picture, at the hem of Jesus' robe, are Blake's initials. Jesus seems to point to the space where the woman can be, which the accusers have vacated. It is either a space near Jesus which the woman can share, or a recognition of the value of her own space as also sharing the human form divine. This is a key element of the verses to which we shall now turn in Blake's poem 'The Everlasting Gospel'.



Fig. 3. William Blake (1757–1827). *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. c. 1805. 35.6 × 36.8 cm. Pen and watercolor over graphite on paper. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photo credit: © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

9.8). There is a Greek inscription 'Jesus alone' which stands above a crescent moon in Jerusalem plate 4, touched with gold in the original copy E.

Was Jesus chaste? or did he
 Give any Lessons of Chastity?
 The morning blushd fiery red:
 Mary was found in Adulterous bed;
 5 Earth ground beneath & Heaven above
 Trembled at discovery of Love
 Jesus was sitting in Moses Chair¹²
 They brought the trembling Woman There
 Moses commands she be stoned to Death.
 10 What was the sound of Jesus breath
 He laid his hand on Moses Law
 The Ancient Heavens in Silent Awe,³
 Writ with Curses from Pole to Pole
 All away began to roll.
 15 The Earth trembling & Naked lay⁴
 In secret bed of Mortal Clay
 On Sinai felt the hand Divine
 Putting back the bloody shrine⁵
 And she heard the breath of God
 20 As she heard by Eden's flood
 Good and Evil are no more
 Sinai's trumpets cease to roar
 Cease finger of God, to Write⁶
 The Heavens are not clean in thy Sight
 25 Thou art Good & thou Alone
 Nor may the sinner cast one stone
 To be good only is to be
 A God [Devil] or else a Pharisee
 Thou Angel of the Presence Divine⁷
 30 That didst create this Body of Mine
 Wherefore has[t] thou writ these laws
 And Created Hells dark jaws
 My Presence I will take from thee
 A Cold Leper thou shalt be⁸
 35 Tho thou wast so pure & bright⁹
 That Heaven was Impure in thy Sight,
 Tho thy Oath turnd Heaven Pale¹⁰
 Tho thy covenant built Hells Jail
 Tho thou didst all to Chaos roll
 40 With the Serpent for its soul¹¹
 Still the breath Divine does move
 And the breath Divine is Love
 Mary Fear Not Let me see
 The Seven Devils that torment thee
 45 Hide not from my Sight thy sin
 That forgiveness thou maist win
 Has no Man condemned thee

¹ Matt 23:2

² Rev 6:14

³ Deut 29:20

⁴ Psa 18:7; Psa 68:8

⁵ Exod 20:24

⁶ Exod 31:18; John 8:6

⁷ Exod 14:19 (explicitly mentioned by Blake E559)

⁸ Numbers 12:10

⁹ Ezek 28:12-14

¹⁰ Gen 22:16 and Isa 45:23

¹¹ Rom 7:24; 11:32a; Gal 3:10, 23

No man, Lord! ¹² then what is he
 Who shall Accuse thee. Come Ye forth
 50 Fallen Fiends of Heavenly birth¹³
 That have forgot your Ancient love
 And driven away my trembling Dove
 You shall bow before her feet
 You shall lick the dust for Meat
 55 And tho you cannot Love but Hate
 Shall be beggars at Love's Gate
 What was thy love Let me see it
 Was it love or Dark Deceit
 Love too long from me has fled.
 60 Twas dark deceit to Earn my bread
 Twas Covet or twas Custom or
 Some trifle not worth caring for
 That they may call a shame & Sin
 Loves Temple that God dwelleth in¹⁴
 65 And hide in secret hidden Shrine
 The Naked Human form divine
 And render that a Lawless thing
 On which the Soul Expands its wing
 But this O Lord this was my sin
 70 When first I let these Devils in
 In dark pretence to Chastity
 Blaspheming Love blaspheming thee
 Thence Rose Secret Adulteries
 And thence did Covet also rise
 75 My Sin Thou hast forgiven me
 Canst thou forgive my Blasphemy¹⁵
 Canst thou return to this dark Hell
 And in my burning bosom dwell
 And canst Thou die that I may live
 80 And canst Thou Pity & forgive
 Then Roll'd the shadowy Man away¹⁶
 From the Limbs of Jesus to make them
 his prey
 An ever devo[u]ring appetite
 Glittering with festering Venoms bright
 85 Crying Crucify this cause of distress
 Who dont keep the secrets of Holiness
 All Mental Powers by Diseases we bind
 But He heals the Deaf, the Dumb, & the
 Blind
 Whom God has afflicted for Secret Ends
 90 He comforts & Heals & calls them Friends
 But when Jesus was crucified
 Then was perfected His glittering pride.
 In three Nights he devourd his prey
 And still he devourd the Body of Clay
 95 For Dust & Clay is the Serpents meat
 Which never was made for Man to Eat

¹² John 8:10-11

¹³ Gen 6:2; 1 Enoch 6-9.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19

¹⁵ Mark 3: 29

¹⁶ Col 2:13-15

'The Everlasting Gospel' (c. 1818) is a series of verses about events in the Gospels, no longer extant in a finished form. At several points it starts with questions, for example, 'Was Jesus humble?', or, as in the case of the section we are looking at, 'Was Jesus chaste?'. The answer to the question about chastity is given by a telling of the story of the woman taken in adultery in John 8, whom Blake identifies with Mary Magdalene (line 4, Lk. 8.2).⁸ Blake interprets this as an apocalyptic, 'earth shattering', event, in which Jesus' actions not only challenge, but also revolutionize, the hegemony of the religion of law (lines 5–14). The setting of the biblical passage in the Temple (Jn 8.2) makes the climactic focus of the story even clearer—the presence of God is not in the Temple, the Holy Place, but in the act of forgiveness and reconciliation taking place in the environs of Jesus. This picks up on Mt. 18.20, a passage, which, as we shall see, Blake uses elsewhere, for example in Jerusalem 61. What Blake sees in this passage, and, indeed, is explored in even more detail in John 9, where Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath, means a shaking of the theological foundations of a culture and religion dominated by the law.⁹ In this poem, Blake portrays the Pharisees forcing Jesus to occupy Moses' seat, thereby being asked to make a judgment on the case (Mt. 23.2 in line 7). To describe Jesus' response, Blake evokes the language of cosmic disturbance, such as happened at the crucifixion, to mark the moment (lines 10–14):

What was the sound of Jesus' breath?
 He laid His hand on Moses' law
 The ancient Heavens, in silent awe,
 Writ with curses from pole to pole,
 All away began to roll.

8. This is a link with a long history. The woman who anoints Jesus is identified with Mary, sister of Martha, in Jn 12.3. In the parallel passage in Lk. 7.38 the anonymous woman is described as one whose sins are many. In both the Lukan passage and the story of the woman taken in adultery in the Gospel of John, there is no condemnation, only an instruction: to 'go in peace' (Luke), in John to 'sin no more'. Blake follows the Christian tradition, therefore, in identifying the woman with Mary Magdalene, and later makes this incident the occasion when Jesus cast the seven devils out of Magdalene, mentioned in Mk 16.9 (the longer ending of Mark) and Lk. 8.2.

9. This is brought out more clearly in Rembrandt's picture of the woman taken in adultery (National Gallery, London). This is deceptive, however as John's Gospel, perhaps even more than the Synoptics, portrays Jesus as a law-breaker with the issue of the confrontation between Jesus and Moses running like a thread throughout the Gospel. The opening of the Gospel of John implies a contrast between the grace and truth which came through Jesus Christ and the law which came through Moses (Jn 1.17—the Greek is a juxtaposition rather than a contrast, but it is difficult not to pick that up as an implication).

Echoes of texts like Rev. 6.14 may be heard in line 14. In the words 'Cease finger of God to Write' (line 23), Jesus pronounces the end of the era of law (cf. Rom. 10.4), written on Sinai with the finger of God (Exod. 31.18) and condemns the way in which the moral law makes people ashamed, tyrannizing human lives (lines 63–68).

In lines 29–40 we see the judgment which Jesus passes on the Angel of the Presence for his part in bringing Mary into the predicament in which she found herself. The Angel of the Presence appears here as a demiurge, and lawgiver, as elsewhere in the Blake corpus, a divinity reproached by Jesus for keeping humankind in thrall to the religion of law and the terrible sanctions connected with it.¹⁰

The laying bare of secrets, and the challenge, however, are not reserved solely for the Angel of the Presence, for Mary's experience of release prompts her to confess her shortcomings in response to Jesus' request (line 45). Blake deals with the final comment of Jesus, 'Go and sin no more' by linking it with Lk. 8.2 ('and certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils'). Mary's forgiveness she 'must win' (line 46), however, by her recognition of what has gone on in her life and what she perceives to be a blasphemy against the Spirit. This is preceded by an exorcism, if that is the right term in this context, as Jesus says, 'Come ye forth, Fallen fiends of heavenly birth, That have forgot your ancient love, And driven away my trembling Dove' (lines 49–52). Once the woman's oppression is over Jesus asks: 'what was thy love? Let Me see it; Was it love or dark deceit?' (lines 57–58). Mary now sees the way she has conformed to culture, habit, and circumstances: 'Love too long from me has fled'. The moment of love had become 'dark deceit, to earn my bread; 'twas covet, or 'twas custom, or Some trifle not worth caring for' (lines 59–62). So, the sin is not the fact that she committed adultery (Blake does not suddenly make Jesus an upright supporter of the moral law, therefore!). Mary's sin was the pretence to chastity in conformity with a moral law, whose origins and originator Jesus had already exposed and condemned. It was this that let the devils in: 'In dark pretence to chastity Blaspheming Love, blaspheming Thee, Thence rose secret adulteries And thence did covet also rise' (lines 71–74). *This* was the moment 'When first I let these devils in'.

The conclusion of the poem moves from the particular incident in John 8 to the general question of the mode of redemption and forgiveness and,

10. The Angel of the Divine Presence appears frequently in Blake's illustrations of passages where God is dealing personally with humanity. Blake identified him with the creator of Adam. In 'The Vision of the Last Judgement' Blake refers to the angel of the Lord (Exod. 14.19). ('Last Judgement', Erdman 1982: 559). The Angel of the Presence is reproached by Jesus for keeping humankind in thrall to the religion of law and the terrible sanctions connected with it.

particularly, Mary's blasphemy (line 76) against the Spirit dwelling in the Temple of one's body (1 Cor. 3.16; 6.19, lines 64, 78).¹¹ There is a focus on Jesus (line 82), which is where this section of 'The Everlasting Gospel' started. It is about the involvement of Christ in humanity's 'dark Hell' (line 77), and the way in which his death marks the putting off the clothing of Satan's power. It is in effect a meditation on complex verses from Col. 2.13-15 (particularly in lines 81-83, 91-93) which were among Blake's favourite verses:

And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it (King James Version).

In this passage from Colossians, Christ (if that is the 'he'—the Greek is ambiguous) strips himself of his flesh on the cross and, in the process, not only divests himself of the medium, through which the demons (the principalities and powers) have power over him (and humanity in general), but also marks the end of the dominance of the law ('the handwriting of ordinances that was against us'). Jesus' death, because he was deemed to be a lawbreaker, seems to mark defeat. The demonic powers devour him, as his flesh decays, but this turns out to be the 'perfecting of his glittering pride' (line 92, 'pride' here, we may note, as elsewhere in 'The Everlasting Gospel', is viewed positively, not negatively). This understanding of the death of Jesus opens up the possibility of liberation from the powers of darkness for every one who renounces the hegemony of the powers, their law and its effects. So, in the process of confessing and receiving forgiveness, Mary enacts the moment of the forgiveness of sins which is mentioned in Col. 2.13 and which Blake links with the death of Jesus.

More than that, it is Mary's experience which answers the question about Jesus' attitude to chastity and offers a way of understanding the death of Jesus. Thus, Mary's 'And canst Thou pity and forgive?' is followed by 'Then roll'd the shadowy Man away' (lines 81-82). Mary's plea for forgiveness prompts the 'putting off the body of flesh' which happened to Jesus, as the key to what happened to Mary, albeit, in the context of an event which took place *before* Jesus' death! It is as if the meaning of what happened to Jesus is triggered by Mary's words of recognition and penitence. She has come to realize, not her offence against some external code but against herself. The realization means a renewed recognition of Jesus, *the* human form divine in her breast, so that her true nature can be lived out, and the forces

11. According to Tolley 1962: 175, Line 64, with its reference to 1 Cor. 3.16, shows that this amounts to blasphemy, a denial of the Holy Spirit, cf. 1 Cor. 6.19.

hitherto at work in her, clouding her mind, and preventing her from fulfilling her potential, are replaced by a different outlook and consciousness. It is the moment when ‘the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh’ (Col. 2.11) that happens to Jesus at death is now re-enacted and comprehended. The apocalyptic moment of the Last Judgment, of transfer from death to life, comes through the sequence of events. Blake writes elsewhere about this moment (Four Zoas, viii.481-84, Erdman 1982: 383):

Thus in a living Death the nameless shadow all things bound
All mortal things made permanent that they may be put off;
Time after time by the Divine Lamb who died for all;
And all in him died. & he put off all mortality.

Thus are enacted the words of Jn 5.24: ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life’.

Jesus in this passage thus functions less as a teacher of chastity, or of moral virtue, but one who enables the space for one to enjoy the life of discovering the human form divine in oneself. It is the experience of liberation that enables Mary to know through that apocalyptic moment, in its literal sense, a moment of disclosure, has taken place in her life. In this part of ‘The Everlasting Gospel’, therefore, the understanding of the death of Jesus is illumined by the cathartic experience that Mary has undergone. The poem starts with a question about Jesus and then goes on to answer it by reference to the earth-shattering event of the incident of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery.

In Blake’s reading Mary Magdalene becomes not just a recipient of divine mercy, or the condescension of a biblical hero, but an agent in her own right. This is beautifully illustrated by a remarkable section of Jerusalem 61.1-46 in which Blake imagines the moment when Joseph, the just man—note the play on this epithet once more—finds that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is pregnant (Mt. 1.19-23):

Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

Blake uses the story of Joseph coming to terms with the pregnancy of his betrothed as an example of the inadequacy of strict justice. Mary is confronted by Joseph about her supposed infidelity. Joseph, described in Mt. 1.19 as δίκαιος (just) is not willing to follow the letter of the law and ‘make a public example’ of Mary (δειγματίζειν), by exposing her to public humiliation. These allusive words in Matthew’s infancy story prompt a

remarkable targum-like passage in Blake's 'Jerusalem', which is offered as a demonstration of the nature of the forgiveness of sins. In response to this, in Blake's text, Mary puts bluntly the consequence of Joseph's rejection of her: in effect Joseph would be murdering her. Joseph the righteous man speaks 'in anger and fury' and questions why he should marry a harlot and adulteress. Mary responds by pointing to the character of God who goes on forgiving his bride Israel and appeals to Joseph's compassionate side without denying his righteous indignation. In the voice of her betrothed, Mary says, she hears the voice of God, and it is a God who is compassionate and forgives sins. In other words, Mary refuses to allow the angry righteous Joseph to be all she perceives in her betrothed. Blake, the writer who says most about the 'contraries of the human soul' (to quote the title page of 'The Songs of Innocence and Experience'), has Mary point out that the possibility of the forgiveness of sins cannot happen if she were always holy and pure. Making errors is the nature of humanity and offers an opportunity to practise the forgiveness of sins—a view pretty close to the views expressed in Rom. 6.1 ('What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?') which Paul disowns. Her reaction throughout is neither defensiveness nor contrition. We as readers are none the wiser as to whether Joseph's fear about Mary's morals is correct (incidentally, such agnosticism about Mary's virginity is also apparent in the quatrain about Mary and Blake's contemporary Joanna Southcott).¹²

Joseph's response is to embrace Mary and thenceforth he begins the process of his growth in theological understanding as he first queries whether God does not require a price for forgiveness. At this point he recalls the voice of the angel questioning this reparatory theology. Joseph's dream now makes sense to him in the light of Mary's revelation about her pregnancy. Mary, therefore, functions as a kind of 'angelus interpres' enabling Joseph to apply what he has learnt in the dream to Mary's situation. Joseph's dream is interpreted (like Blake had used Job's dreams of the night) as an inspired questioning of received theological wisdom: forgiveness does not come only after one has made oneself pure (language of purity here indicating sexual misconduct): 'Doth Jehovah forgive a debt only on condition that it shall be Payed?' (Jerusalem 61.17-18). This last is called the religion of the 'gods', 'the Moral Virtues of the Heathen, whose tender Mercies are Cruelty' (Jerusalem 61.20-1). God's 'salvation is without Money and without Price, in the Continual Forgiveness of Sins'. At the heart of the angelic revelation is the phrase 'There is none that liveth but Sinneth not!' (Jerusalem

12. On the Virginity of the Virgin Mary and Joanna Southcott: 'Whate'er is done to her she cannot know, And if you'll ask her she will swear it so. Whether 'tis good or evil none's to blame: No one can take the pride, no one the shame' (Erdman 1982: 551).

61.23-5). This is the basis of the need for mutual recognition and acceptance which is the key to the process of the forgiveness of sins.

Joseph's tone changes from condemnation of the sin to the recognition of the person before him. This may be seen in his 'Ah, my Mary'. The use of Mary's name suggests that forgiveness consists in part in the acceptance of the other as a *who*, a person needing to be forgiven, as contrasted with the *what*, the offence to be forgiven (so Moskal 1994: 36). Using language like harlotry, Blake seems to suggest here, masks the reality of the minute particularities of the person before him. Joseph remains in a state of accusation as long as he calls her by such abstract conceptual names, 'a harlot & an Adulteress'. To see her as 'my Mary', however, is to recognize her as an individual (Moskal 1994: 36).

Blake does not see forgiveness of sins as only one-sided, as it is followed by sentiments which echo the Lord's Prayer ('Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'). But Blake is not uncritical of the Lord's Prayer, with its transcendent theology and its use of the metaphor of financial transaction. His allusion to the words of Isa. 55.1, 'without money and without price', in describing Jehovah's salvation suggests that an adequate model of forgiveness must avoid the metaphor of money and the conception of sins as debts to be paid (Moskal 1994: 37). The need for this mutuality which reflects what Blake calls 'the Perpetual Mutual Sacrifice in Great Eternity' (Jerusalem 61.23) is that 'there is none that liveth & sinneth not' (Jerusalem 61.24). God's covenant with humanity is that 'If you Forgive one-another, so shall Jehovah Forgive You: That He Himself may Dwell among You' (Jerusalem 61.26). Here we may detect echoes of Mt. 18.15-20 in Blake's words, a passage which exemplifies the ways in which mutual forgiveness of sins might take place in practice.

To conclude: in the 'Mystic Crucifixion' Mary Magdalene is, as the biblical narrative indicates, a witness of the climactic, salvific, moment. Botticelli sets up a dualistic contrast in the picture between light and dark, mercy and judgment. The message is roughly that of Acts 3.19-20: 'Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you'. It is just possible that in the Botticelli picture Mary Magdalene is also an intercessory agent, as she seems to plead with the angel. Mary occupies a prominent space in both pictures and features as a key to the understanding of Jesus in the poem. It is her experience and action, which contribute to the meaning of the events described and depicted.

In the Blake poem, Mary is less witness and more agent. Blake avoids the language of wrath and propitiation. For him apocalypse is internal, about

the effects of the death of Jesus, about human understanding and insight and the identification in this life with the experience of the dead Jesus. It is Mary's experience of the moment of release from the consequences of the religion of law that shakes the heavens and the earth and, what is more, enables the poet to answer the question he posed at the beginning about Jesus. The crucifixion is less a climactic event in the past, therefore, but a moment, like the Last Judgment, now, in Mary's life, as in any other person who knows the forgiveness of sins.

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TOO HOT TO HANDLE? A STORY OF AN ADULTERESS AND THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Abstract

The story of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8.1-11) may be widely cited and re-told today, but its early history is, in fact, quite complex. Rarely mentioned by patristic authors and absent from most early Gospel manuscripts, the story is sometimes viewed as too hot to handle. This thesis, however, disregards the multiple and changing ways that Gospel traditions were invoked and transmitted, while also failing to account for references to the story in such diverse contexts as a second-century infancy Gospel, a third-century church order, and a set of fourth-century biblical commentaries. Guilty or innocent, forgiven or simply set free, the story of the adulteress has always been ‘gospel’, in the sense of ‘a good story about Jesus’, to some Christians somewhere. With this in mind, ‘Too Hot to Handle?’ reconsiders the reception of the adulteress in late antique and early medieval exegesis, liturgy and art.

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In 1975, Seamus Heaney published a series of reflections on archaeology, history and place that included the unsettling poem ‘Punishment’. Inspired by the discovery of a mummified body of a very young woman aged about 14 who had been drowned in a bog in Northern Germany, ‘Punishment’ imagines the girl’s execution as a ‘tribal, intimate revenge’ exacted for the crime of adultery. ‘Little adulteress’, Heaney observes, ‘before they punished you, you were flaxen haired, undernourished, and your tar-black face was beautiful’. He continues, ‘I almost love you, but would have cast, I know, the stones of silence. I am the artful voyeur’ (Heaney 1975: 137-38).¹ A careful reader immediately recognizes the allusion: it is a rather oblique reference to a story involving Jesus and an adulterous woman who was nearly stoned to death, now preserved in the Gospel of John (Jn 7.53–8.11). According to this passage, scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery before Jesus, asking him to render a judgment. ‘In

1. For further discussion, see Vendler 1998: 39-57.

the law Moses commanded us to stone such women', they state, 'now what do you say?' (Jn 8.5).² Rather than answering immediately, Jesus writes on the ground. Then he looks up, saying, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her' (Jn 8.7). The men leave and Jesus asks the woman, 'Has no one condemned you?' to which she replies, 'No one sir' (Jn 8.10-11). He sends her on her way, instructing her to 'sin no more' (Jn 8.11). Juxtaposing this story with the execution of a young Viking woman and an incident involving Irish women abused for fraternizing with British soldiers during the 'troubles' of Northern Ireland, Heaney indicts the tragic sameness of 'tribal revenge' against women who dare to betray their husbands, their fathers and their communities by engaging in sexual infidelity.

In an influential 1992 article, New Testament scholar Gail O'Day also sought to interrupt the silent—or actual—stoning of women by re-reading the story of the woman taken in adultery. According to O'Day's reading, this Gospel passage is designed to disrupt violence against women by challenging the assumption that adulteresses get what they deserve. Calling into question the view that sexually sinning women are 'criminals', Jesus treats the woman not as an object, first of scorn and then of mercy, but as a subject, irrespective of her status as a sinner. Thus, rather than reifying the fleshliness, sinfulness and misery of the woman—a prevalent and long-standing interpretation—the encounter between Jesus and an adulteress beckons readers 'to leave behind a world of judgment, condemnation and death and enter a world of acquittal and life' (O'Day 1992: 638). This message, O'Day suggests, was so dangerous that it has been deliberately excluded from Christian sacred Scripture and commentary. Silenced, ignored or edited away, the adulterous woman and her story have been 'kept on the margins of the tradition by the canonizing process and on the margin of theological and ethical reflection by the interpretive community' (O'Day 1992: 639-40) from antiquity until today.

As 'Punishment' demonstrates, however, this story is now remarkably familiar, so well known that a comment about throwing stones can call it to mind. Yet this has not always been the case. Added to the Gospel of John after copies were already circulating, the passage was omitted from many Gospel manuscripts or sometimes marked as spurious when it was included.³ Of the four extant fourth- and fifth-century Greek copies of the Gospel of John, only Codex Bezae, a Greek-Latin bi-lingual manuscript from Syria, incorporates the passage.⁴ Out of sixteen extant Old Latin manuscripts

2. English citations of the Biblical text follow the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

3. For an overview of these problems, see Parker 1997: 95-102.

4. Critical edition with introduction, annotations, and facsimiles in Scrivener [1864] 1978. For an overview discussion of this manuscript, see Parker 1992.

that could contain the story (that is, they preserve complete or nearly complete copies of John), twelve do.⁵ It does not appear in the earliest Coptic or Syriac witnesses; when it does appear, it is often marked or glossed in some way.⁶ Byzantine manuscripts containing the story regularly set it apart with a series of text critical marks,⁷ some leave a blank space where the passage usually appears but omit it just the same,⁸ and some append it to the end of John's Gospel.⁹ In one family of late Byzantine manuscripts from Southern Italy, the pericope was placed within Luke's Gospel.¹⁰

Ancient Christian authors were also aware of this textual instability: the late fourth-century exegete Didymus the Blind (d. 398) noted that the story could be found 'in certain Gospels' (ἐν τισιν εὐαγγελίοις) and thus not every copy;¹¹ Jerome (d. 420) observed that it was found in many of both the Greek and Latin copies of the Gospel, and therefore not in every version;¹²

5. The following manuscripts include the story: Codex Aureus (aur), 7th century; Codex Veronenis (b, the folia containing the pericope have been lost), 5th century; Codex Colbertinus (c), 12th/13th century; Codex Bezae (d), 5th century; Codex Palatinus (e), 5th century; Codex Corbeiensis (ff²), 5th century; Codex Sarzanensis (j or z, vv. 6-7 only), 6th century; Codex Moliensis (μ), 5th century; Codex Usserianus Primus (r¹), 8th century; Codex Sangermanensis secundus (g²), 10th century; Codex Gatianus (Bt/gat), c. 800; and Codex Sangallensis 60.

Codex Rehdigeranus (l) excluded the passage initially, but it was added to the margins in the 9th century, copied out on another piece of parchment and sewn in at the appropriate section of John.

6. Horner 1969 [repr. 1898–1905]: 422–431. The scribe of a thirteenth-century Arabic Gospels with Coptic glosses observes that he found it in one Coptic copy, on a sheet added to an Arabic copy, and in the margins of some Syriac Gospels, but not others (Horner 1969: 430).

7. See, for example, Codex Basiliensis (Basel, Universitätsbibliothek Cod AN III.12, f. 276), Codex Petropolitanus (Leningrad, State Public Library, Cod. Gr. XXXIV), Codex Tischendorfianus III (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Auct. T. Infra I.1 [Misc. 310]), and Codex Dionysiaca (Mount Athos, Convent of St Dionysius Cod 10). These manuscripts and their marks are described in Hatch 1939.

8. For example, Codex Sangallensis 48, containing the canonical Gospels in Greek with Latin translation written above each line (St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek 48).

9. For example, the scribes of Codex Mosqueensis (V, Moscow, Hist. Mus. V.9, S.399) and of Codex 1 (12th century, Basel, Universitätsbibliothek A.IV.2).

10. Family 13/The Ferrar Group, a set of Greek Gospel manuscripts copied in Southern Italy from an eighth-century exemplar. See Geerlings 1961. The *pericope adulterae* was inserted after Lk. 21.38. On the origin of these manuscripts, see B. Botte, 1926–, III, cols. 272–74.

11. *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 223.10. Greek text edited by Kramer and Krebber 1972: 86. For discussion of the phrase 'in certain Gospels', see Lührmann 1990: 289–316 and Ehrman 1988: 24–44.

12. *Against the Pelagians* 2.17 (CCSL 80: 75–78; English translation Nritzu 1965: 321–22).

and Augustine employed its occasional omission to accuse opponents of maliciously editing the Gospels. Defending the rather unpopular view that divorce can never be an option for Christians, even in cases of adultery, he held faithless husbands responsible for the textual problems with the story:

[S]ome men of slight faith, or, rather some hostile to the true faith, fearing, as I believe, that liberty to sin with impunity is granted to their wives, remove from their Scriptural texts the account of our Lord's pardon of the adulteress.¹³

This explanation makes little practical sense: by the time Augustine was writing, Gospel books were largely copied in ecclesiastical centers.¹⁴ Still, it does indicate the seriousness with which he regarded his prohibition on divorce. His pointed accusation impugns those who disagree with him both for their failure to imitate Christ and for their willingness to corrupt the true text of the Gospels.

The textual difficulties associated with the passage, when combined with Augustine's comments regarding the editorial predilections of shameless husbands, however unlikely, has led to a popular hypothesis among modern scholars: Christian men were so disturbed by the forgiveness shown to the adulteress that they intentionally suppressed the story, at least until such time as the secondary status of Christian women had been sufficiently secured or, alternatively, until the Church had grown in influence and size to such a degree that leaders were prepared to relax earlier constraints on penitential discipline.¹⁵ Evidently, this story was too hot to handle, a hypothesis that seems attractive, at least initially. The anxiety about sexual purity displayed by second- and third-century Christian writers is widely known, with followers of Jesus from Paul onwards boasting of their exceedingly strict sexual self-mastery.¹⁶ It is also the case that explicit attention to the adulterous woman began in earnest only in the fourth and fifth centuries, at the very same time that stories about sinner saints—particularly the prostitute saints—become increasingly popular. Perhaps the first Christians could not afford to welcome the adulteress and her story until such time as prostitutes could be invited as well.

Commenting on the adulterous woman in his *Tractates on John*, Augustine offered a moral that other contemporary Christians often linked with former prostitutes. Labeling Jesus 'Pity' (*misera*) and the woman

13. *On Adulterous Marriages* 2.7.6 (CSEL 41.5.3: 388; English translation Wilcox 1955: 107).

14. See Gamble 1995; Haines-Eitzen 2000.

15. Riesenfeld 1952: 106-11; Brown 1966: 337; Schottroff 1995: 184-85; Scott 2000: 53-82; Gench 2004: 136-59.

16. Excellent treatments of this issue include Brown 1988; Cooper 1996; MacDonald 1996. Also see Knust 2005.

‘Pitiable’ (*misericordia*), he observes that, since the Lord is gentle, patient and merciful, it is never too late: serious sinners may still seek forgiveness by humbly beseeching mercy, as this woman did, and so they too may be spared.¹⁷ In the 380s John Chrysostom drew a similar lesson in a sermon preached to the Christians of Antioch, this time from a repentant prostitute:

Let no one who lives in vice despair; let no one who lives in virtue slumber.
Let neither the latter be confident, for often the prostitute will pass him by;
nor the other despair, for it is possible to surpass even the first.¹⁸

Chrysostom’s goal seems to have been to provoke non-prostitutes to enter a competitive race toward virtue; members of the congregation in Antioch should not allow themselves to be outdone by a woman, and a prostitute at that. Augustine’s message was similar: Christian sinners should not give up, but seek mercy and transformation, no matter how grave their sins. The third-century *Didascalia apostolorum*, made an analogous argument a century earlier: exhorting bishops to forgive repentant sinners in imitation of the Lord, the *Didascalia* reminds its audience that the Savior mercifully sent the woman on her way. If she can be forgiven, then others should be forgiven also.¹⁹

The *Didascalia*’s citation of the adulteress points to a problem with the theory that her story was intentionally suppressed: one does not need to wait until the heyday of the prostitute saints to find the trope of the miraculous transformation of a sexually sinning woman under the influence of Christ. The mid-second-century author Justin Martyr made precisely this point in his apologies, in part by recounting the conversion of an adulteress. With lurid detail, he describes a woman living in Rome who engaged in every sort of licentious and adulterous pleasure under the watchful gaze of her lascivious husband. Thanks to the chastening power of Christ, however, this woman came to adopt the temperate lifestyle, a virtue she sought to encourage in her husband as well.²⁰ The drama of Justin’s account lies in precisely

17. *Tractates on John* 33 (CSEL 36.8: 308-309; English translation Rettig 1993: 51-59).

18. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* 67.5 (PG 58: 637, my translation). Chrysostom may be referring to a version of the life of Saint Pelagia, a courtesan who became a transvestite monk under the transformative influence of Christ. After hearing a sermon by the ascetic bishop Nonnos, the beautiful prostitute/actress Pelagia renounced her former occupation, taking on the garb of a eunuch monk and adopting a life of ascetic seclusion. See Petitmengin 1981. For English translations of the stories of the prostitute saints, see Ward 1987 and Brock and Ashbrook Harvey 1987.

19. *Didascalia apostolorum* 7. English translation Vööbus 1979: 89.

20. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 2. English translation Barnard 1997: 73-75; Greek text edited by Goodspeed 1914: 79-80.

the sort of transformation that Augustine, John Chrysostom and the *Didascalia* imagined a few hundred years later: if God can transform this sort of woman, if even she can repent and be changed, then just imagine what Christ can do for you.

One can find even earlier examples of this sort of reasoning. There are two, textually stable tales involving sexually sinning women within what would become the canonical Gospels of Luke and John: Luke's version of the woman who anointed Jesus (Lk. 7.36-50) and the story of a woman of Samaria who had many husbands (Jn 4.1-42). It may be possible to read these stories otherwise—contemporary scholars have been arguing that Luke's 'woman of the city, a sinner' need not be imagined as a prostitute and others have noted that John's Gospel makes little to nothing of the sin involved in having six husbands—but patristic authors certainly did identify these women as sexual sinners. Nevertheless, they interpreted these stories positively. Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, claimed that the anointing by the sinning woman numbered among the 'very important' contributions of Luke's Gospel to the overall gospel message.²¹ Clement of Alexandria also approved of this woman, noting that her penitence won her pardon.²² Tertullian employed the Lukan anointing as a proof-text in an argument for the physical reality of Jesus, observing that when the woman kissed Jesus' feet, 'it was a true and actual body she handled'.²³ Tertullian did take care to point out that Jesus' forgiveness of the Samaritan woman and the woman of the city were to be understood as exceptional, but that did not prevent him from citing both episodes.²⁴ The content of the narrative of the woman taken in adultery, therefore, cannot adequately explain its absence from patristic exegesis, let alone its textual instability. Women with loose morals were welcome, so long as they allowed themselves to be transformed by Christ into a newly chaste or celibate life.

The suppression theory is called into further question by the few second- and third-century references to the adulteress that do occur. For some early Christians, this story could be perceived as 'gospel', in the sense of 'a good story about Jesus', whether or not it was found in a copy of John. A possible second-century reference by Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis, offers the earliest example. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Papias preserved a story involving a woman accused of sins before the Lord, a

21. *Against the Heresies* 3.14.3 (SC 211.270-71).

22. *The Instructor* 2.8.61, 1-3 (Marcovich 2002: 105-106; English translation FC 23: 146-47).

23. *Against Marcion* 4.18.9 (Latin text edited with English translation by Evans 1972: 356-57).

24. *Against Marcion* 4.18.9; *On Monogamy* 8.7 (CCSL 2.1240); *On Modesty* 11.1-3 (CCSL 2.1301-2).

story that Eusebius (and maybe Papias?) also found in the Gospel according to the Hebrews:

[Papias] has put forth also another story concerning a woman falsely accused of many sins before the Lord, which is contained in the Gospel according to the Hebrews.²⁵

It is not clear whether or not Papias had the adulterous woman in mind: this woman is accused of ‘sins’, rather than one specified ‘sin’ and she was ‘falsely accused’ or ‘slandered’ (διαβάλλω), a reading that seems surprising in light of later interpretations of the story, all of which assume her guilt. Still, Rufinus, the fifth-century translator of the *Ecclesiastical History* did read this as a reference to the adulteress; he substituted *muliere adultera* (adulterous woman) for γυναικὸς ἐπὶ πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις (woman accused of many sins).²⁶

Another possible second-century reference may be found in the *Proto-Gospel of James*, an influential work designed, in part, to defend the virginity of Mary. According to the *Proto-Gospel*, Mary was dedicated to divine service as a young child by her pious parents and brought up as a pure virgin in the Temple. Her miraculous pregnancy came as a surprise not only to Joseph but also to the high priest and the other temple functionaries: they quite naturally concluded that she and Joseph had violated their pledge and engaged in pre-marital sexual intercourse. Vehemently declaring innocence, the holy couple submitted to an ordeal designed to uncover any possible fornication, drinking a concoction that would reveal their transgression if guilty or, conversely, demonstrate their innocence.²⁷ When they passed the test, the priest declared, ‘If the Lord God has not revealed your sins, neither do I condemn you’ (*Proto-Gospel of James* 16.2), a statement that directly parallels the judgment rendered by Jesus in the tale of the woman taken in adultery: Jn 8.11 reads οὐδὲ ἐγὼ σε κατακρίνω; the *Proto-Gospel* reads οὐδὲ ἐγὼ κατακρίνω ὑμᾶς. The circumstances faced by the holy couple and the plight of the adulteress are also similar: both were accused of sexual misconduct by pious Jews, both were brought before a male religious figure for judgment, and, in both cases, the evidence of sexual misconduct appeared to be overwhelming—Mary was visibly pregnant and the adulteress was caught in the act (compare Jn 8.1-11 to *Proto-Gospel of James* 15.1–16.2). Together these

25. *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.17. My translation.

26. Becker (1963: 105-16) presents convincing arguments in favor of the view that the story was, in fact, cited by Papias here. Ehrman (1988: 29-30) argues that Papias knew the story from an oral source—he preferred oral sources—and that Eusebius recognized it as a story found in the Gospel according to the Hebrews. Others have been less sure. See, for example, Klijn 1992: 116-19 and Petersen 1997: 196-97.

27. Compare Num. 5.11-31.

coincidences have convinced at least one scholar that the *Proto-Gospel* specifically alluded to the adulteress pericope here.²⁸

Of course, Mary and Joseph were found innocent of the charges against them. Mary's purity and virginity are among the central themes of the *Proto-Gospel*. As such, if this is an allusion to the tale, it seems likely that this author perceived the adulteress to be innocent. Why would he evoke her story, comparing her to the unquestionably innocent Mary, if he believed the woman to be guilty? Moreover, as we have seen, Papias also understood the woman—if, indeed, this is the same woman—to be 'falsely accused' or 'slandered' rather than guilty as charged. Though this seems unusual given later interpretive traditions that assume her guilt, a possible association with the apocryphal story of Susanna (Daniel 13, LXX) may offer a plausible context.²⁹ In that story, the Judean matron Susanna was falsely accused of adultery by two lustful elders; she would have been stoned to death save for the intervention of Daniel who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, recognized her innocence and arranged for her acquittal. In other words, the Susanna story, like that of the adulteress, involves a woman accused of adultery by elders who allege that they caught her in the act and both women are then rescued from stoning by a righteous Judean prophet.

The *Didascalia apostolorum* provides the first certain reference to the adulteress's story. In this case, however, she is assumed to be guilty. The topic at hand for the author is the reception of repentant sinners back into the Christian fold:

But if you do not receive the one who repents, because you are without mercy, you will sin against the Lord God. For you do not obey our Savior and our God, to do as even He did with her who had sinned, whom the elders placed before Him, leaving the judgment in His hands, and departed. But He, the searcher of hearts, asked her and said to her: 'Have the elders condemned you, my daughter?' She said to him, 'No, Lord.' And he said to her, 'Go, neither do I condemn you.'³⁰

In this context, the woman is cast in the role of a miserable sinner whose example can be invoked to shame Christian men into displaying mercy. Still, the source of the accusation against her is interesting and analogous to earlier traces of the story: as in Susanna, it is elders who bring the woman before a male religious authority and, as in Papias's *Expositions*, the woman is accused of an unspecified sin rather than adultery.

28. See discussion in Petersen 1997: 204-21.

29. Becker 1963: 51; Scott 2000: 65-72; Gench 2004: 147-48. But also see Keith 2008: 377-404.

30. *Didascalia apostolorum* 7. English translation Vööbus 1979: 89.

Two possible references by Origen are also compelling, though inconclusive.³¹ In his commentary on Romans, Origen makes the following comment: the law of Israel ‘cannot punish the murderer or stone the adulteress (*nec adulteram lapidare*), for the Roman authorities avenge themselves on these things’.³² The phrase ‘stone the adulteress’ may reflect a familiarity with a question brought to Jesus in the context of the *pericope adulterae*: ‘In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ (Jn 8.5).³³ A remark in Origen’s homilies on Jeremiah strengthens the possibility that he knew the adulteress’s story:

If then one has become an adulterer or adulteress, the threat is not hell, not eternal fire, but he will be stoned with rocks: *Let all of the synagogue stone him*. When he has gone away, the adulterer found in these things will say, the adulteress found in these things will say: ‘Would that the Word will speak also for me; the people hurled stones at me and I would not give heed to the eternal fire’.³⁴

Origen speaks here of stoning adulterers and adulteresses, who, he suggests, wish that the Word (λόγος) would intervene in the punishment, the precise circumstances of the story of the adulterous woman. Additionally, Origen associates the punishment of stoning with the law of Moses—conflating and paraphrasing laws found in Lev. 24.16 (LXX), where the commandment applies to blasphemers, and Deut. 22.24 (LXX)—as did those who brought the woman before Jesus. Finally, he notes that the adulterer and adulteress have been found in the act (εὐρεθεῖς, εὐρεθεῖσα), a detail that is quite similar to the observation in the pericope that the woman was caught (κατελήπται) or found (εὐρομεν) committing the sinful deed.³⁵ But did Origen know, and allude to, the story? Few have been convinced that he did. Origen’s conviction that, from the perspective of Mosaic law, adulterers and adulteresses were to be executed could well have been drawn either from the story of Susanna, which he explicitly defends in a letter

31. Becker argues on the basis of Origen’s *Commentary on Romans* 6.7 and his *Homily on Jeremiah* 19 that he was acquainted with the story but from a non-canonical source. J. Smit Sibinga (1968: 55-61) explicitly rejects Becker’s conclusions in his review of *Jesus und die Ehebrecherin*.

32. *Commentary on Romans* 6.7.11: *Homicidam punire non potest, nec adulteram lapidare: haec enim sibi vindicat Romanorum potestas*. Latin text of Rufinus of Aquileia with German translation, Heither 1990: 244; English translation Scheck 2002: vol. 2, 25.

33. Becker adopts the suggestion that Origen likely knew the *pericope adulterae* from an essay by Daube 1957: 109-13.

34. *Homilies on Jeremiah* 19.15.83-88. Greek text edited with French translation, Nautin 1977: 244; English translation Smith 1998: 219.

35. Both words occur in the textual tradition (see NA²⁷ 273).

to Julius Africanus, or from a rather free interpretation of Deut. 22.24.³⁶ Nevertheless, his choice of words and themes remains suggestive. He may well have adapted circumstances he found in the story to accompany his paraphrase of Mosaic law.

These intriguing but inconclusive second- and third-century references, however, do not solve the mystery of when the story was placed within the Gospel of John. Origen seems not to have read it there.³⁷ Didymus the Blind, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine did find it in John, as did other fourth-, fifth- and sixth-century Latin commentators,³⁸ but it is only gradually associated with John in later Greek traditions. The complex evidence of the surviving manuscripts confirms this impression. Of the important majuscule witnesses to the Greek New Testament listed in standard critical editions, five omit the story entirely, two omit it but leave a place where it could be copied later, one appends it to the end of the Gospel of John, five include it but mark it as spurious, and six fully incorporate it with no marks whatsoever.³⁹ Old Latin witnesses tell a similar story, though Jerome's decision to include the passage in his Latin translation of 383 CE secured its place in every copy of the Vulgate Gospels.⁴⁰ The scribe of Codex Usserianus Primus, an Irish half-uncial written c. 600 in the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark, seems not to have found the passage in his principal, Old Latin exemplar. This did not stop him from including it: instead he located a Vulgate version and added the story at the appropriate canon of John.⁴¹

36. *Letter to Africanus.*

37. Unfortunately, the volume of his *Commentary on John* that would have contained a discussion of the pericope has been lost; still it is telling that Origen neglects to associate the adulteress with John in later sections of the work. His commentary regularly refers back to verses discussed previously, including all of chapter seven and much of chapter eight, but he never mentions the passage. For a full account of Origen's citations of John, see Ehrman, Fee and Holmes 1992, especially 189-90, 355.

38. These include Ambrose (*Epistles* 50 [*Ad Studium*] and 68 [*Ad Irenaeum*], *Apoloogy of David to the Emperor Theodosius* 1.10.51; *On Abraham* 1.4.23; *On the Holy Spirit* 3.15; and *Sermons on the Gospel of Luke* 5.47); Cassiodorus (*Expositions on the Psalms* 56.5-7); Pseudo-Augustine [*Ambrosiaster*] (*127 Questions on the Old and New Testaments* 12.1); Pope Gelasius (*Letter against the Lupercales* 5); Leo the Great (*Sermon* 62.4); and Gregory the Great (*Morals on the Book of Job* 1.16; 14.38).

39. That is, the list of majuscules consulted by the editors of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th revised edition, and the United Bible Society's *Greek New Testament*, 4th revised edition.

40. Including Codex Fuldensis, a sixth-century Gospel harmony that employs the Vulgate text. For an extensive and now classic discussion of the Vulgate, see Berger 1893; also see Gameson 1994 and Gibson 1993.

41. Critical edition by Abbott 1884. Abbott (1884: vii) remarks, 'Our codex borrows the pericope of the adulteress from the Vulgate version, from which one can gather that pericope did not exist in the archetypal codex, however I retain what has been the Vulgate version of the scribe' (Latin translation my own).

Table 1. *Summary of Greek and Latin Manuscript Witnesses to the Pericope adulterae*

<i>Codex</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Marked</i>	<i>Blank Space</i>	<i>Added by Corrector</i>
Sinaiticus	4th century	Greek		x		
Vaticanus	4th century	Greek				
Ephraemi Rescriptus	5th century	Greek				
Bezae	ca. 400	Greek/Latin	x			
Corbeiensis	5th century	Latin	x			
Fuldensis	541-546	Latin (v)	x			
Sarzanensis	6th century	Latin	x			
Usserianus Primus	ca. 600	Latin	x			
Rehdigeranus	8th century	Latin				x
Basiliensis	8th century	Greek	x	x		
Regius	8th century	Greek			x	
Aureus Homiliensis	775	Latin	x			
Borrelianus	9th century	Greek	x			
Wolff A	9th century	Greek	x			
Cyprius	9th century	Greek	x			
Campianus	9th century	Greek	x	x		
U	9th century	Greek	x			
Mosqueensis	9th century	Greek	x	x		
Sangallensis	9th century	Greek/Latin			x	

Manuscripts therefore attest not to suppression or deliberate exclusion per se but to an interest in the story's preservation when it was known. As Frederick Wisse has observed, 'Until the modern period, *lectio facilior* was *potior*, and not *lectio difficilior* or *lectio brevior*!' (1989: 46 n. 27). In other words, when their texts differed, scribes often preferred not the short or difficult reading, as do text critics today, but the long or easy reading, a phenomenon that can clearly be observed in the case of this pericope.

An anonymous author of a sixth-century Greek chronicle now preserved in Syriac adopts a similar approach, and in a striking way. He had never heard of the story before, but when he found it in a copy of John owned by one 'Holy Bishop Moro', he took care to preserve it:

Now there was inserted in the Gospel of the holy Moro the bishop, in the eighty-ninth canon, a chapter which is related only by John in his Gospel, and is not found in other manuscripts, a section running thus: 'It happened one day, while Jesus was teaching, they brought Him a woman who had been found to be with child of adultery, and told Him about her'.⁴²

Rather than ignoring or suppressing this story, he copied it out in his chronicle. Admittedly, his is a rather strange version of the pericope: the woman is pregnant by adultery, Jesus writes after the men leave, the men are not identified, even as elders, and the author places the story in the wrong canon of John (traditionally the story is placed in the 86th, not the 89th canon, though chapter divisions were unstable well into the medieval period). Still, the goal of this author is consistent with the practices adopted by many scribes: if a traditional story about Jesus is brought to one's attention, then it ought to be remembered.

The remarkable tenth-century Armenian Etchamazdin Gospels provide yet another interesting example of this phenomenon. Though largely absent from the Armenian tradition, this manuscript includes the following version of the story:

A certain woman was taken in sins, against whom all bore witness that she was deserving of death. They brought her to Jesus [to see] what he would command, in order that they might malign him. Jesus made answer, and said, 'Come you, who are without sins, cast stones, and stone her to death'. But he himself, bowing his head, was writing with his finger on the earth to declare their sins; and they were seeing their several sins on the stones. And filled with shame, they departed, and no one remained, but only the woman. Said Jesus, 'Go in peace, and present the offering for sins, as in their law is written' (Nersessian 2001: 20).

This odd paraphrase may suggest that the scribe knew the story could sometimes be found in John. When he did not find it in his exemplar, he simply imported what he could recall of it from some other source.

As these examples demonstrate, when the story of the adulteress was known, it was largely preserved, and usually without hesitation. Text critical marks at Jn 7.53 in the important fourth-century majuscule Codex Vaticanus may suggest that this scribe deliberately excluded it, but, if so, his approach seems to have been exceptional.⁴³ Augustine clearly knew it was not reliably present in John, but that did not prevent him from citing it as

42. [Zechariah Rhetor], *Historia ecclesiastica* 8.7; English translation Hamilton and Brooks 1899: 216-17.

43. Vaticanus includes a text critical mark at Jn 7.53 that may indicate the scribe's awareness of an instability in the text of John at this point. See Payne and Canart 2000: 105-13.

a proof text, and on ten separate occasions.⁴⁴ Didymus the Blind employed the tale as a proof text in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, despite his knowledge of its instability. Ambrose cited the example of Jesus and the adulteress without comment, as did Cassiodorus, Pacian, Pope Gelasius and Hilary of Poitiers.⁴⁵ The presence of the story in the Latin West was guaranteed by Jerome's decision to include it within his translation; it was also read as part of the Roman stationary liturgy, perhaps from the fifth century. Read on the third Saturday of Lent at the *titulus Gaii* (later, the Chiesa di Santa Susanna), the passage was included in the Roman lectionary in the earliest stages of its development, before the reform of Pope Gregory II (715–31 CE), when Lenten Thursdays were introduced (Mohrmann 1953: 221–45).

It took longer for the tale to be discovered—or re-discovered—and incorporated in Gospel texts and liturgy in the Greek East. As we have already noted, Bishop Moro seems to have possessed a rare copy of John, one that an anonymous chronicler sought to preserve. The story was still being left out of some copies of John into the tenth century. Nevertheless, communities of Christians did remember it, whether or not they knew it from John. Thus, when Christians in Egypt commissioned ivory pyxides with New Testament scenes at some point in the fifth or sixth centuries, they selected this scene as appropriate, among others.⁴⁶ Eventually, the story was incorporated by the Byzantine church into the feast day of Saint Pelagia (October 8), one of the most popular harlot saints, perhaps by the sixth century. During the cultural revival of the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (913–959 CE), Symeon Metaphrastes included the life of Saint Pelagia and the associated reading from John in his collection of 148 saints' lives, compiled from earlier sources.⁴⁷ This places the tale of the woman taken in adultery in Constantinople in the tenth century, and probably sooner. Byzantine manuscripts point to a similar conclusion. For example, Codex U, a beautiful ninth- or tenth-century manuscript copied in Constantinople, includes the story, and does so without athetizing marks.⁴⁸

44. *Sermon on Psalm 30.2.7; Sermon on Psalm 50.8.21–39; Sermon on the Mount 1.16.43; Against Faustus the Manichee 22.25; On the Consensus of the Gospels 4.10.17; Letter 153.3.8–4.9; Tractates on the Gospel of John 33; On Adulterous Marriages; Against the Opponent of the Law and the Prophets 1.20.44; Reconsiderations 1.18.6.*

45. Cassiodorus *Expositions on Psalms* 56.7; Pacian, *Epistle to Sympronian* 3.20.1; Gelasius, *Letter against the Lupercals* 1.5; Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Psalm 118* 1.8.9; 2.15.10.

46. See Schiller 1971: 160–61; Volbach 1976: 112, plates 179, 180. On the Christian ivories of this period, see Morey 1940–41: 43–55, 57–60 (plates).

47. *Vita of Pelagia of Antioch* by Symeon Metaphrastes (PG 116: 908–920).

48. Dated to the ninth or tenth century by Cavallo 1977: 106.

The story of the story of the woman taken in adultery is therefore much more complicated than is often assumed. The view that the story was suppressed or intentionally ignored cannot be supported on the basis of the evidence at hand. Still, the purported meanings of the adulteress, her sin and Jesus' forgiveness of her have been as unstable as this text. Apparently, early audiences could imagine that the woman was innocent, perhaps on analogy with Susanna. This interpretation was forgotten by later patristic authors, but lingered, if not in exegesis then in the association of the tale with the ancient Chiesa di Santa Susanna during the Lenten stationary liturgy. Susanna was especially popular in Rome, where she was depicted with the elders in the Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus (c. 300), in the 'Greek chamber' of the catacomb of Priscilla (c. 250), and on several fourth-century sarcophagi.⁴⁹ The legend of Saint Susanna, a niece of Diocletian who was supposedly martyred by her uncle for refusing to marry, was added as a parallel to the Judean Susanna at some point in the fifth century.⁵⁰

It may be the case that the adulteress was associated first with Susanna and later with Santa Susanna as her sinning opposites, as at least one scholar has suggested,⁵¹ or perhaps her earlier history as a vindicated woman who had been falsely accused played a role in the selection of this particular Roman lection. In either case, she was firmly assimilated into the category of the sexually sinning woman by fourth and fifth century Latin authors. Her place in the Byzantine liturgy strengthened the association. Linking the adulteress with Saint Pelagia only intensifies her perceived sin and her role as a pitiable example of women's sexuality gone wrong. This sort of interpretation served other ends as well. Identifying the woman as a pitiable but repentant sinner made it possible to shame her accusers in a particularly pointed way: they were even worse than she was for they sought to test Jesus while she desired mercy.⁵²

As a brief but much-loved episode, the story of the adulterous woman has been repeatedly called upon to authorize diverse and ever-changing interpretive and cultural agendas, a process that continues today. Possibly adapting the framework of the story, the author of the *Proto-Gospel of James* sought to defend Mary's virginity. Decrying the repetitive, never-ending cycle of violence against women, Seamus Heaney invoked the story as well. Arguing for the importance of forgiveness within a formal system of penance, the *Didascalia apostolorum* recalled the mercy shown to the adulteress. Asserting that Jesus demands full recognition of women's humanity,

49. See discussion by Smith 1993: 3-24.

50. Pietri 1976: 498-514; Cavalieri 1928: 185-202.

51. Smith 1993: 20.

52. For further discussion, see Knust 2006: 485-536.

'sinners' or not, Gail O'Day accused the contemporary church of a false, though historic, commitment to the objectification of women. Each of these readings depends upon, and seeks to alter, previous engagements with the adulteress and her text, leaving traces for yet another generation of interested readers to discover. As Averil Cameron observes, early Christian narratives were not innocent but pre-formative; Christian literature 'built up its own symbolic universe by exploiting the kinds of stories that people liked to hear' (Cameron 1991: 93). The stories people like to hear change, textually and interpretively, and thus the Gospels remain dynamic texts that simultaneously reflect and provoke the deeply held concerns of those who preserve them. The richness of the story of the adulterous woman, with its numerous ambiguities and provocatively unstable text, has regularly invited just this sort of reappraisal and reuse.

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HERODIAS GOES HEADHUNTING

Caroline Vander Stichele

*Nous sommes tous des Hérodiades
obsédés par un quelconque Jean-Baptiste.*¹

Abstract

In this article two different readings of the story about the death of John the Baptist (Mk 6.14-29; Mt. 14.1-12) are discussed. The first is the interpretation by Jean Delorme in his article 'John the Baptist's Head—The Word Perverted', published in *Semeia* 81 (1998), the second that of René Girard, as presented in his book *The Scapegoat* (1982). The interpretative choices these authors make and how these choices affect their interpretation of the characters in the story are analyzed, focusing especially on the role Herodias and her daughter play in the unfolding of the plot. Attention is also paid to the reception history that can be seen operating in the background of these readings, more specifically the cultural reception of this story in France in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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'We are all Herodias', Girard claims. This particular line struck me when reading his book *The Scapegoat*. It is an intriguing statement for more than one reason. First of all, a tension exists between the use of the present tense of the verb and the choice of the character in question, who belongs to a distant past. As a result, the story is catapulted into the here and now, without necessarily suspending the tension between the two. Moreover, in using 'we' the author suggests he will make a general statement which includes himself as well as any reader. The added 'all' further emphasizes its universal scope. The identification in question is also surprising, because unexpected and even unwanted, in that Herodias is not the character most

1. 'We are all Herodias', Girard 1982: 193). This is a more literal translation of the French than the one in the English edition, which reads, 'We are all like Herodias, obsessed with some John the Baptist' (Girard 1986: 134). The difference, however, is relevant to my point.

readers tend to identify with when reading the story of John the Baptist's death. Rather to the contrary.

The explanation for this unlikely identification follows in the second part of the sentence: 'obsessed with some John the Baptist'. The obsession is ascribed to Herodias in the first place and already reveals an interpretation of the relationship between Herodias and John the Baptist in the underlying biblical story. In addition, we are declared to be equally obsessive: since we are all identified with Herodias, the same applies to 'us'. The object of our obsession is however generalized, in so far as it relates to '*some* John the Baptist' (italics mine). Each one of us is thus said to have such an object.

My reason for dwelling on this quotation from Girard's book is that it nicely captures a number of hermeneutical issues I want to tackle in this essay, more specifically issues of interpretation, identification, and gender, related to the story in Mk 6.14-29 (//Mt. 14.3-12) about the death of John the Baptist. Several issues have already been hinted at so far, more specifically, issues of identification and interpretation involved in Girard's subsumed reading of the story. Another issue, less obvious, but not less important, which I consider relevant here, is the issue of gender. The obsession in question is ascribed to the female character of Herodias and has a male character, John the Baptist, as its object, but the generalization and actualization collapses all readers, female and male, into the female character. This raises the question to what extent the reader's gender is important and how it affects one's reading.

In what follows I will address these issues by focusing on two readings of the story about the death of John the Baptist (Mk 6.14-29), originating from the same cultural background, namely France. The first reading under discussion is the interpretation René Girard himself presents in his book *The Scapegoat*. The second reading I will discuss is the one offered by Jean Delorme in an article entitled, 'John the Baptist's Head—The Word Perverted'² and published in an issue of *Semeia Studies* devoted to Semiotics and Biblical Studies in 1998. In both cases I will analyze the way these interpreters understand the role of the different characters in the story about John's death and compare their approaches. To conclude, I will situate their interpretations against the background of the cultural reception history of this story in France towards the end of the nineteenth century.

1. *Girard's Scapegoat*

Girard (b. 1923) was born in Avignon (France) and studied medieval history in Paris before he moved to the US, where he became professor, first at Johns Hopkins University and then at Stanford University. Although first

2. Delorme 1998a: 115-29.

and foremost a historian and literary critic, the scope of his publications is much wider and touches on other disciplines such as philosophy, theology, anthropology, psychology and cultural criticism. He became famous with his work on the mimetic nature of desire and sacrificial violence.³ These ideas also play a prominent role in *The Scapegoat*. In this book, Girard devotes one chapter to 'The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist' (1986: 125-48). He discusses this story because he considers it to be a second example of a collective murder in the Gospels besides the Passion story, insofar as on a structural level the same mechanism can be seen at work in the death of both John and Jesus. Girard bases his analysis on the Markan account of John the Baptist's murder, but he occasionally refers to the Matthean version of the story as well.⁴

According to Girard the issue at stake in this story is that of sibling rivalry between Herod and his brother, because they both desire the same woman, Herodias. It is precisely against the evil effects of such desire that John warns Herod. Girard labels this type of desire as 'mimetic' because the desire of one brother reflects the desire of the other. John wants Herod to renounce this desire, but Herod ignores John's warning and so does everybody else in the story. As such the mimetic desire of Herod reappears in Herodias's desire: she perceives John as the obstacle to its fulfillment which, therefore, needs to be eliminated. That Herod protects John only increases Herodias's fascination with this obstacle as well as her desire to destroy it. The desire of Herodias is further reproduced in that of her daughter, who, as Girard notes, does not have a name in the story.⁵ She is a little girl (Mk 6.22: *kora-sion*), not a seducing young woman. In Girard's opinion, this is not a detail, but something essential: 'because she is a child, Salome changes immediately from innocence to the convulsion of mimetic violence' (1986: 131). This also explains why she runs to her mother after Herod asks her what she wants from him. Herodias's reply expresses her desire, which the daughter then adopts as her own. The resulting imitation is even more intensive than its original. The daughter immediately rushes back in and at once requests the head of John (v. 25). As Girard notes, 'Herodias uses her own child to circumvent Herod and obtain his consent to the death of the innocent man' and, as a result, 'the child sinks deeper by making her mother's appalling desire her own' (1986: 133). In using her daughter this way Herodias

3. Important works in this respect are René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and his *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort* (1987).

4. In what follows, references in brackets are to the Markan version of the story, unless otherwise noted.

5. Girard is aware that the daughter is nameless, but calls her Salome because Josephus mentions Herodias has a daughter with that name (Girard 1986: 130).

scandalizes her. The dance plays a pivotal role in this process. Through her dance the daughter in turn attracts and engages the desire of the spectators. They are all pleased (v. 22) by her performance and all end up being possessed by her desire, because they do not just accept her request, but embrace it as their own.

Although Salome's desire is not original and the wish she formulates is copied from her mother, there is, however, one detail which truly belongs to her: the idea of the dish. As Girard observes, this is the most famous element of the scene in Mark, but the question can be asked how original this detail really is. Closer inspection reveals it to be rather the result of an excessive concern for accuracy. Salome interprets the request of her mother literally, as a request for John's head, instead of as a rhetorical expression of her mother's desire for John's death, revealed at the beginning of the story (v. 19). Herodias is not thinking here of decapitation as such, but that is how her daughter nevertheless interprets her words, and she adds 'on a platter' to solve the practical problem of where to put it. Therefore, Girard concludes, 'what appears to be most creative in the role of Salome is really what is most mechanical and hypnotic in the submission to the chosen model' (1986: 137).

Herodias has been waiting for a suitable occasion to make her request and that occasion is Herod's birthday. Girard stresses the ritual character of this event: a feast which recurs every year, with a banquet and a dance. In this ritual John's death plays the role of sacrifice. Herodias consciously manipulates the power of the ritual in this direction through the dance of her daughter, who thus mobilizes the desire of Herod and his guests. The effect is expressed in the exorbitant offer Herod makes to her. It expresses his desire to be dispossessed in order to be possessed by her, but as Girard points out, 'An exorbitant offer always receives an apparently modest answer that costs more to satisfy than all the kingdoms of the universe' (1986: 143). Not the actual price of what is asked for is what counts in this case, but its value as an object of desire. Giving up that object is what turns it into a sacrifice. That also explains why Herod is distressed, but he is not in a position to refuse, as he is pressured by the crowd to give in. Salome's choice is first adopted by this crowd and then by Herod, thus achieving a unanimity which puts the mimetic crisis to rest. This is precisely the role of the victim, who thus functions as scapegoat. What makes John the preferential object of this choice, is his message. Because he reveals the truth of human desire, John must die. Although all other characters are driven by the same mimetic desire, Girard identifies Herodias as the one who ultimately 'mobilizes the ritual forces and directs them knowingly toward the victim of her hate' (1986: 140).

In his analysis, Girard focuses on the story in Mark, but also displays an awareness of the parallel story in Matthew and occasionally refers to the

differences between the two. He notes, for instance, that Matthew omits the exchange between mother and daughter and simply states ‘that the daughter is “prompted” by her mother, which is a correct interpretation of what happens in Mark, but deprives us of the striking spectacle of a Salome suddenly transformed, mimetically, into a second Herodias’ (1986: 132). It is quite clear from this observation that Girard gives priority to the story in Mark, but not only that. He also considers Mark to be telling the truth. It is not so clear, however, how he reaches this conclusion. One can hardly escape the impression that he interprets the story in terms of his larger theory in which the whole notion of mimetic violence plays a crucial role. His framework tends to be reductionist in that all elements in the story are interpreted from that perspective. This may well explain his preference for the story in Mark, as it lends itself better to such an interpretation than the version in Matthew does. It would also explain why Girard regards Mark’s story as true. The opening quotation further shows that Girard understands the story to be paradigmatic: ‘we are all Herodias’. It equally demonstrates the important role attributed to Herodias as the ultimate incarnation of mimetic violence in this story.

2. Delorme’s Re-Reading

Jean Delorme (1920–2005) was born in Savoie (France) and became professor of biblical studies, first at the seminary of Annecy and then at the Catholic University of Lyon in France. He was also co-founder of the Center for the Analysis of Religious Discourse (CADIR) and of the journal *Sémiotique et Bible*. He took a special interest in the Gospel of Mark and was still working on a commentary about that Gospel, when he died in 2005.⁶

Like Girard, Delorme considers the story told in Mk 6.17–29 to be a fairly independent unit. It is related to the context by an introduction (vv. 14–16) which explains how John’s death came about. This introduction has the status of a flashback and links the story of John with that of Jesus, although the name of Jesus is not mentioned. Rather, Jesus’ identity is interpreted in terms of past figures, be it John, Elijah or one of the prophets. Thus, the present is understood in terms of the past, but in a different way by Herod and the others. While their understanding is comparative, Herod’s perception establishes a direct link between the present and an act he himself has performed in the past: ‘the one I have beheaded, John, that one has been raised’ (6.16). The story about John’s murder properly speaking follows in 6.17–29.

6. His latest (posthumous) publications include *Parole et récit évangéliques: Etudes sur l’évangile de Marc* (2006) and *L’heureuse annonce selon Marc: Lecture intégrale du deuxième évangile* (2008). In both volumes the same interpretation of the story about the death of John the Baptist (Mk 6.14–29) is reproduced (2006: 175–98 and 2008: 406–21).

According to Delorme, the first part deals with the situation concerning John's arrest and imprisonment (vv. 17-20), the second part with the particular circumstances leading to his death and burial (vv. 21-29). As he notes, the first character who appears on the scene is Herod, who understands Jesus to be John raised from the dead. Herod, however, shows no interest in Jesus as such, he rather seems haunted by the spectre of John's beheaded body. Delorme attributes Herod's perception to his state of confusion. Already in the first part of the story, Herod appears 'perplexed' (v. 20). He is caught in the middle between his desire for Herodias and John's word, which sets a limit to that desire but nevertheless fascinates him. His attitude towards John is divided. It is negative insofar as Herod puts him in prison, but also positive because he protects him.

In the second part of the story (vv. 21-29) a series of events is described, which rush the plot to its fatal denouement. First the scene is set (vv. 21-23). Herod is celebrating life on the occasion of his birthday with a number of guests by giving a banquet (v. 21). On that occasion the daughter of Herodias enters and dances (v. 22a). Not the dance itself is important here, but the reaction of the spectators, who are said to be pleased (v. 22). Delorme compares Herod's positive response to this dance with his positive response to John's words earlier in the story, but notes that a change in register takes place from hearing to watching and that Herod's 'interest in the young girl's body and the hearing of John's word are not conflicting but harmonize under the effect of pleasure' (1998a: 122). The amount of pleasure Herod actually derives from the dance can be measured by his offer to give the girl whatever she wants (vv. 22b-23). The focus here is on Herod in his capacity as king, since he is consistently designated by this title in these verses (vv. 22, 25, 26, 27). However, it is a king who loses control over his word, in promising the girl whatever she asks for and doing so under oath. He commits himself to her desire, whatever that may be, but the daughter, having no desire of her own, turns to her mother for an answer (v. 24) thus granting her the power over Herod's word. Herodias fills it with her own desire for John's death in asking for his head. The following verses (vv. 25-28) describe how her will is executed. The daughter rushes back in and requests at once the head of John on a platter (v. 25). Again Herod appears divided, but this time between his feelings of grief on the one hand, because he does not want John's death, and his obligations on the other hand, because he does not want to break his oath and deny the girl the right he granted her (v. 26). Trapped by his own word in the presence of his guests, he finally has John executed and the head given to the girl who passes it on to her mother (vv. 27-29).

As Delorme further notes, compared with Herod, the other characters in the story look far more simplistic, but that is not so surprising since we also have less information about them. The second character mentioned in the

story is John. He appears as a man of the Word and, more specifically, the superior word of the law in criticizing Herod's relationship with Herodias (v. 18). He is considered by Herod to be 'a righteous and holy man' (v. 20), although his word will finally cost him his head. Herodias is the one who appears as his direct antagonist. She is mentioned in v. 17 in relation to John's arrest, although her precise role in it remains rather ambiguous. However, it is clear that without her intervention nothing would have happened. Verse 20 states that she wants John's death, but that she is powerless. The decision depends on Herod, who is divided and therefore she has to wait until he makes up his mind. It is the question of her daughter (v. 24), which finally gives Herodias the chance to impose her will on Herod and have John killed. Delorme observes that the role of her daughter in this drama is limited, but also indispensable. She ends up expressing the desire of her mother, who uses her in order to get what she wants.

Delorme arrives at his interpretation and evaluation of the characters using a semiotic approach in combination with categories derived from philosophy and psychoanalytic anthropology.⁷ He introduces, more specifically, the category of desire and the notion of 'the Other' in his analysis of the story and understands the interaction between the characters in terms of their relationship to that Other. As a result, John appears as herald of the law understood as a superior word, representing the relationship with the Other. This superior word is directed to Herod, as (male) subject of desire. Both Herod and Herodias respond to John's word, but their reaction is very different: Herodias refuses it and wants to suppress it, Herod's reaction is divided. The focus of his desire shifts in the course of the story and he ends up being torn between conflicting desires. The object of one desire is the word of John, the object of the other is first Herodias and later her daughter. With his oaths Herod summons the word of the Other through the power of the law. The promise he makes to the girl is empty but ready to be filled with her desire. However, what she finally expresses is not her own desire, but that of her mother.

In Delorme's reading of the story the men are depicted as the ones who possess the word even if they both lose control over it: John because he is literally made speechless and Herod because of his rash oaths. The power of the women in the story on the contrary is predominantly located in their body. They are the ones who embody desire. This is most apparent as far as the daughter is concerned. Her dance is described as 'the gracefulness of rhythmic movements performed by a young body' (1998a: 122). The point of view here is clearly that of the male spectators, who take pleasure in this performance. But Herodias is also described in terms of her physical

7. See Delorme 1998a: 119 n. 3. For a more general overview of his literary semiotics see Delorme 1998b: 27-61.

presence: she is seen as the object of Herod's desire but also as a devouring mother, who wants part of John's body served to her as food.

If the men in the story are related to the word, the relationship between mother and daughter is described as a wordless one. Herodias leaves no room for her daughter, but takes control over Herod's empty word, not replacing it with her own word, but filling it with her murdering desire. It is a desire that wants to replace the law. Herod's desire, to the contrary, is described in much more moderate terms as 'attraction' for his brother's wife and 'interest' in her daughter. His character is appreciated as more complex, his attitude as ambiguous. He is seen as having a dilemma. It is only because he is trapped that finally he does what he did not want to do: to have John killed.

The opposition made in Delorme's approach between body and word, the self and the other, is clearly gendered. It can hardly be considered accidental that the women in the story are predominantly linked with the power of the body and the men with the power of the word. In this opposition, John and Herodias represent the extremes. Her desire opposes his word or to use Delorme's words, 'The murdering desire of the illegitimate wife and devouring genetrix takes the place of the law' (1998a: 125). As a result, Herodias is singled out as the one who is ultimately held responsible for John's death.

3. *Why Herodias Goes Headhunting*

When comparing Delorme's interpretation of the story with that of Girard, a number of differences can be noted. The first one relates to their interpretation of John's words: 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife' (Mk 6.18). Delorme interprets this statement as an interdiction placed by the law on the relationship between Herod and Herodias. In his view, reference is made more specifically here to the law forbidding incest (Delorme 1998a: 120 n. 3). According to Girard, however, the emphasis is not on the strict legality of their marriage as such. What is at stake, is rather the rivalry between the two brothers, who fight over the same wife. 'To have Herodias, to carry her off, is forbidden to Herod not by virtue of some formal rule but because his possession can only be at the expense of a dispossessed brother. The prophet warns his royal listener against the evil effects of mimetic desire' (Girard 1986: 128).

A second difference between Delorme's and Girard's reading concerns Herod's birthday. Delorme understands Herod's celebration of his birthday, with its reference to birth (genesis), as a celebration of life. Girard, however, stresses its ritual character. The feast, banquet, and dance are institutions used by Herodias against John. She is the one who waited for this 'opportunity' (v. 21). Moreover, the guests assembled for this occasion are

seen as a type of crowd in which ultimately Herod himself dissolves under the pressure of its collective desire. 'It is the crowd that provides the supplement of mimetic energy necessary for Herod's decision' (Girard 1986: 145). The dance plays a pivotal role in this process. But, although both Delorme and Girard consider this dance to be of major importance and both interpret it in terms of desire, their interpretation of this crucial event also differs. Delorme interprets the reaction of the spectators, who are said to be 'pleased' (v. 22), in terms of the pleasure they enjoyed in watching the dancer. The guests later also serve as witnesses to Herod's oaths. Girard however focuses more on the dance itself, understood as ritual, rather than on the dancer. In his reading, the role of the dancer is much more instrumental. She gathers the desires of the spectators and redirects them to the object of her choice, but it is the power of the dance which accelerates the mimetic process taking place.

Third, the concept of 'desire' used by Delorme as well as Girard serves as a key concept in their interpretation, but takes on a different meaning as well. Delorme uses desire as a psychoanalytical category, while Girard opposes such an understanding and focuses instead on the mimetic quality of desire understood as imitation. This difference in understanding is important, because it also affects their evaluation of the characters involved in the story. While Delorme considers Herod to be an ambiguous figure, torn between conflicting desires—for Herodias and her daughter on the one hand and for John's word on the other—Girard sees Herod instead as the victim of his own mimetic desire. This not only goes for Herod, but for all characters in the story apart from John: 'Except for the prophet, there are only enemy brothers and mimetic twins in the text: the mother and daughter, Herod and his brother, Herod and Herodias' (Girard 1986: 129). The only one who escapes such desire, therefore, is John, but he ends up being the victim of the desire of others. According to Delorme, John is the victim of the murdering desire of Herodias. For Girard, John is a scapegoat, the much needed sacrificial victim necessary to put the mimetic crisis to rest. Girard understands this process in mechanistic terms. Contrary to her own perception, Herodias is not the one who manipulates desire, even if she thinks she does, but is herself manipulated by desire and so are her daughter and Herod.

Fourth, as far as Herodias's daughter is concerned, both Delorme and Girard see her as a girl who adopts her mother's desire as her own. However, for Girard she is more specifically 'a child victim of scandal' used by her mother to obtain John's head (1986: 133). Both scholars also understand the girl to be possessed by her mother's wish, which she tries to communicate as faithfully as possible, but Delorme notes that 'she is in a great hurry to relate her mother's will with precision' (1998a: 124), while Girard draws attention to the way she adds the detail of the dish as revealing 'an excessive concern for accuracy' (1986: 137).

Apart from these differences, similarities can, however, be noted as well. Thus, in the context of their argument, both Delorme and Girard refer to the cultural reception of this story. Delorme opens his article with the observation, stated as a well-known fact, that the story about John's death has been a source of inspiration for painters, writers and musicians (1998a: 115). He comes back to this observation in the closing lines of his article, where he notes that 'the story has remained engraved in the cultural memory' and 'has generated so many inventive and variant readings in literature and the arts' (1998a: 129). Delorme does not mention any particular works of art in which that is the case, but he does not simply dismiss those interpretations either. In his view, they rather testify to the power of the original text. Nevertheless, he believes a distance should be maintained between those readings and a reading that honours the text 'to prevent echoes or resonances that can interfere with listening' (1998a: 129).

Girard equally shows an awareness of the text's cultural reception history. He criticizes the popular image of Salome. 'We must forget the concept of Salome as a professional seducer. The genius of the Gospel text has nothing in common with Flaubert's courtesan, the dance of the seven veils, and other Orientalia' (Girard 1986: 131). Moreover, Girard is well aware that there are two trajectories in the interpretation of the story: one that identifies Salome and the other Herodias as responsible for John's death. In his view, however, the two women are ultimately interchangeable.

By dividing themselves between Herodias and Salome modern critics with their cult of desire are quietly re-establishing the truth that their cult is meant to deny, the knowledge that desire, instead of creating individuals, as it becomes increasingly mimetic, makes those it possesses more easily interchangeable and capable of substitution as its intensity increases (Girard 1986: 132).

Girard does not mention any names of modern interpreters who do this, but this critique applies to Delorme as well, who holds Herodias, rather than her daughter, responsible for John's death. Delorme himself, whose article was published fifteen years after Girard's book appeared, does not seem to be familiar with Girard's interpretation. This is remarkable because there are some striking similarities in their interpretation, in that they both use desire as a key concept in their evaluation of the characters and shift the focus and the blame away from Salome, only to redirect it to Herodias as the ultimate villain. In so doing they in fact reinforce the representation of Herodias that became more prominent in France towards the end of the nineteenth century with Mallarmé, Flaubert and Massenet, who rather than gazing at Salome as *femme fatale*, preferred to ponder on the wicked wiles of her mother.

Mallarmé in a way set the tone in an unfinished poem, entitled 'Hérodiade', which appeared in 1864. In this poem Herodias reflects on John's

death and observes that she is ‘feeling cold sparks from your lucidity, you who die, you who burn with chastity’ (Mallarmé 1994: 34). In a tale entitled ‘Herodias’ and published in 1877, Flaubert equally foregrounds Herodias and the calculating way in which she uses her daughter to achieve her revenge for the insults she had to endure from John the Baptist. She is pictured as an ambitious woman: ‘Ever since childhood she had nursed the dream of a great empire. It was to gain it that she had left her first husband for this one, who she now thought had duped her’ (Flaubert 1961: 96). The image of a vengeful Herodias also appears in the opera *Hérodiade* by Jules Massenet, which was performed for the first time in 1881. Here too Herodias is the driving force to get John killed. She pleads with Herod:

Avenge me a supreme offence! From you, from you alone I expect my vengeance. I went this morning into the desert, and an almost naked man with a menacing look and a rough voice loomed up in the middle of the path! As when a storm-wind rises, his voice, invoking destiny, pursues me, troubling me and outraging me (scene 3).⁸

Although the plot is strikingly different, both Flaubert and Massenet depict Herodias as someone who seeks to manipulate Herod in order to quench her thirst for John’s blood. This image is remarkably similar to the one presented a century later in the interpretations of both Girard and Delorme, who stress that Herodias’s daughter is only a little girl, without a will of her own, unlike the *femme fatale* she became in later centuries, and that Herodias should therefore be held responsible for John’s death.

4. Concluding Observations

In the final pages of his article Delorme states, ‘I think we have attempted to follow the procedure of readers who try to set themselves at the intersection of the possibilities made available by the text itself and the proposals of meaning which they can bring to the text’ (1998a: 128). Delorme clearly leaves room here for a certain amount of input from the reader, but this input is solely defined in terms of conscious choices made by a particular reader. As a result, the interpretative choices related to the context of that reader remain largely unreflected upon. These choices, which are informed by the interests and social location of the interpreter as well as by the culture to which the interpreter belongs, are embedded in one’s interpretation. As such they can be detected and analysed, but often escape the explicit attention of their author. That both Girard and Delorme point to Herodias as ultimately responsible for John’s death and give similar motives to explain

8. J. Massenet, *Hérodiade* (EMI Classics, 1995), English translation by H. Graham. For a more elaborate discussion of this opera and a comparison with Richard Strauss’s opera ‘Salome’, see Vander Stichele 2001.

her behaviour, may therefore have less to do with their analysis of the story than with the cultural context in which their interpretation is situated. Thus neither Girard nor Delorme escape the power of cultural memories, as they go hunting for the head of Herodias. They rather inscribe themselves in a long tradition of those predominantly male interpreters who have done so before them.⁹

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SHORT STORY, MAXIMAL IMBROGLIO: SALOME ANCIENT AND MODERN

Margarita Stocker

Abstract

There have been innumerable paintings and other artistic representations of Salome and the Baptist. Various modern responses to the biblical story can highlight the way in which franker mores unearth popular or populist construals of the narrative. They also chart the way in which the biblical narrative, which I shall argue is striking for its *lacunae*, has positively encouraged elaborations. Ultimately, however, that has had the effect of displacing the biblical narrative itself. The narrative's *lacunae* stimulated 'infill' from its adapters—yet this has reached a point where the narrative has been displaced by a *faux* distortion, depending on a monotone thematics, which dominates the general reception of the story.

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The story of John the Baptist's death at the behest of Salome could be described as consisting of more narrative gaps than information. As anyone acquainted with the texts where the story is given, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark,¹ knows, the person afterwards identified as Salome is not named there at all. She is simply described as 'the daughter of Herodias'. She is the one people mean when they mention the name of Salome, although there were numerous princesses named Salome in the genealogy of the dynasty. Even more surprisingly, given her prominence since then, her appearance in the texts of the story could not be more minimal. In the Gospel of Matthew the recounting of her actions requires only five verses, and in Mark's only six. Indeed, in the latter the whole story in which she participates—the killing of John the Baptist—consumes a mere fifteen verses. Matthew completes it in even less space: twelve verses.

Although it is a very striking narrative, it is after all, in the context of the New Testament as a whole, a single episode in the biography of John the Baptist. The two accounts do not differ much, and they are rather

1. Mk 6.21-8; Mt. 14.6-11.

more concerned with the religio-political character of the events than with Salome. Both tell of Herod's fear that Jesus is John the Baptist reborn, the prophet whom Herod himself had ordered to be executed. John had been imprisoned because he had publicly reproved Herod for marrying Herodias, formerly his own brother's wife—at the time regarded as an 'incestuous' union. According to Matthew, the only reason Herod does not have John executed at this point is because of John's great popular reputation as a prophet. Herod's is a political calculation. According to Mark, however, Herod actively resists his wife Herodias's demand that he kill John. In this case, Herod is portrayed as respecting John's role as a prophet; because of this religious respect, usually 'he heard [John's prophecies and preaching] gladly'. In both cases, Herod prefers to imprison John rather than deprive him of his life. At his birthday feast, however, Herodias's daughter dances for Herod and his distinguished guests. Herod is so moved by this—and so are his guests, adds Mark—that as a result he has gone down in history as a very dirty old man. As a reward for the dance, he promises Salome anything she asks of him. In Mark's version, Herod adds that he is even prepared to give her half his kingdom. From this the reader might deduce that he is actually promising to marry her. That would require him to divorce her mother, just as she had left Herod's own brother, Philip, for him. However, neither text provides such comment or elaboration. Peremptorily, which is our first clue to her character, Salome demands, 'Give me here John the Baptist's head in a charger'. John is executed and his head brought to her on a dish, as she demanded, and she in turn gives this trophy—we have to assume that that is what it is—to her mother.

According to Matthew, Salome has been instructed in all of this by her mother: it is a conspiracy. According to Mark, however, it is after Herod's astoundingly extravagant offer that Salome asks her mother what she should demand as her gift. And she is swift to obey Herodias: she 'hastes' to get the job done. Perhaps she is eager because she shares her mother's hostility to the Baptist, even though she is Philip's daughter, and might therefore be expected to share John's anger that Herodias had deserted her father. Or perhaps she 'hastes' because she is afraid of her mother. Or perhaps that is the word used simply to indicate that she is obedient. Or she herself is eager to achieve this horrific outcome. Is she the dutiful and/or sympathetic daughter, committed to her mother's interests, or herself bloodthirsty? Or best simply described as maliciously 'evil'?

The 'head in a charger' has produced no less than three proverbial expressions in our language, all conveying much in few words. The phrase 'on a plate' denotes someone's receiving something of high value without any commensurate effort on their part. This was, after all, an outrageously extravagant reward merely for a dance. What is now a cliché, 'Bring me his head', or 'Bring me his head on a plate'—as in the film title *Bring Me*

the Head of Alfredo Garcia—is a demand for ‘swift justice’, an expression of fury demanding rapid assuagement, and (most of all) suggests that the speaker possesses inordinate power.² These are demands as peremptory as Salome’s. Yet they actually address more closely the power of Herod the notorious tyrant—his repute ever since—since it is he who must and can give the order for execution. In the event, Salome has the power to demand that he use his power, so that she acquires it. In another proverbial phrase, we speak of someone’s ‘losing his head over’ something or someone. When inducted into an order of freemasons, Oscar Wilde joked that although it was supposedly founded by the Baptist, they must not lose their heads as he did.³ Strictly speaking, though, it is Herod who does that metaphorically: John pays the price, literally yet as proxy.

The triumphalism and insult to the prophet’s head have also become recurrent motifs in responses to the story. Thus, in medieval and Renaissance art, the dish is sometimes shown as placed on Herod’s feast table. Horribly, in these cases it is as if a human head has been used to replace the old traditional marker of a ‘great feast’—the head of a pig or boar, often with an apple stuffed in its mouth.⁴ Perhaps there is tacit encouragement, in such cases, to view Herod’s excessive response to the dancer as his falling for an ‘apple’ of lustful temptation. Traditionally, tyrants—such as the proverbial Nero and Herod—were often portrayed as enthusiastic in all the seven deadly sins, including lechery, gluttony, and alcoholism. The addition of John’s head to Herod’s groaning festive table makes a point about the cost to others of a tyrant’s whims and actions.

Occasionally in such paintings, Herodias—still vindictive beyond the grave—is shown spearing or trying to ‘carve’ the trophy head as its dish rests on the table. Similarly, the extravagance of Herod’s promise to reward Salome was sometimes assumed to be the result of his losing *his* head after excessive drinking at the feast. This is an important explanation for his behaviour in Wilde’s play of 1892, for instance. Although the Gospels do not state that he was drunk, nevertheless this has sometimes been adduced because of the need to explain Herod’s unwise behaviour. That is the more necessary because of the statement in the biblical account that Herod was very much a politician, in his attitude to John particularly. Either an attempt at realistic depiction of the character, and/or a meditation on the consequences of intemperance, sexual or bibulous, can motivate portraying

2. *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1974). For examples of the general nature of ‘cultural studies’ of orality, see *College Literature* 28 (Winter 2001) special issue.

3. Wilde’s joke is recorded by Ellmann 1987: 39.

4. *Carry On up the Khyber* (dir. Gerald Thomas, 1968) spoofs the head-on-a-platter image in its banquet scene.

Herod as inebriated when he permits himself to be duped into an execution he is—the Gospels point out—‘sorry for’ and unwilling to commit.

In popular responses to the image of the head on a platter, there is no such moralistic or reverent content. The most common image of the event in art shows, of course, Salome holding the plate bearing the head. It is unnecessary to emphasize the obvious and widespread response, that this is a devouring *femme fatale*—almost literally—and that both women are driven by greed of various kinds. That is the leitmotif of Beardsley’s illustrations to Wilde’s play, where both women are represented as viciously spiteful, smug, and wanton: misogyny takes its licence from such a story. Wilde’s play itself became, from the 1890s onwards, the single most influential version of the story for the twentieth century. This was unfortunate, because it was the least of his works, and also displaced those French versions which had themselves determined the nature of Wilde’s play. Indeed, it was originally written in French, and the first production was planned for Paris, where it was expected to encounter a more tolerant audience than in Britain. The story had already been a favoured subject for the Franco-phone writers, poets and artists who so strongly influenced the aesthetes in Britain,⁵ and who were obsessed by images of the poisonous harpy.⁶ From classical mythology, the paradigm of this harpy is Circe, the evil enchantress; from the Bible, their destroyer of choice was Salome. Both provide a frisson of sensual titillation and faux horror for Mallarmé, Moreau, Maeterlinck, and Huysmans, but the truly seminal work was Flaubert’s short story ‘Herodias’ (1877). Its predecessor of 1862, his novel ‘Salamambo’, conflated Salome’s characterization with Judith’s story.⁷ Its heroine was insentient, and for a while insensate, in a way which precluded questions of guilt, for she is as guileless as a puppet can be. When Flaubert later decided to adapt the Salomean story directly, he was able to utilize the mood of sexual sleaze which had already accrued to the story. The traditional image of Herodias as a shrewish, ruthless whore, and of Herod as a lubricious ageing predator, inexorably intensified the squalid potential of a calculating, dancing-girl stepdaughter. The whole pattern of ‘depravity’ had been emphasized by Decadent artists and writers. The ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’ was an addition to the biblical narrative, and usually interpreted as a striptease. After Flaubert and Wilde, Maud Allan’s early twentieth-century role as ‘The Salome Dancer’ made her its most celebrated exponent during the years of ‘The Salome Craze’⁸ which was sparked by Wilde and Strauss (whose

5. See, for example, Chai 1990.

6. See Dijkstra 1988. A general study of the grotesque in decadent art is Kuryluk 1987.

7. Stocker 1998: 182–84; Stocker 1990 on a comparison of Judith and Salome.

8. Cherniavsky 1991.

opera's libretto was derived from Wilde's play). Thus by the early years of the twentieth century an emphatic, delimited version of the story, ignoring any religious or political elements in favour of systematic sexualisation, was firmly established as definitive.

At the end of the twentieth century, this sort of titillation had of course become much more common and much more public. The 1988 film *Salome's Last Dance*, directed by the *enfant terrible* of such films, Ken Russell, was at a considerable distance from the biblical narrative. In the mode of the 1990s, it combined Wilde's biography, a brothel, a staging of his play, and enthusiastic evocation of a louche *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere. Meanwhile, striptease even in the opera house became obligatory for Strauss's protagonist. These were particularly telling examples of the way in which the decade of the 1990s became transfixed by its mirror-image in the 'decadent' 1890s—not only in film, but also in exhibitions, remakes, and the academic pursuits of literary and cultural studies. By the end of the twentieth century, indeed, it was no longer clear where the cultural or behavioural boundary of 'lewdness' or 'deviance' lay. If, as one suspects, its backstop has become, by consensus, paedophilia, then the traditionally girlish image of Salome, desired by Herod, is sited at exactly the point where that boundary lies.

Tracing 'deviant' motifs in the story's reception proves instructive. Once it became possible to record flippant responses to the Bible in print—during the twentieth century—the lipsmacking greed of Herodias and Salome became a vulgar running joke. When, in the 1953 film *Salome*, the head was brought in to the banquet, a filmgoer at the premiere shouted 'Dig that crazy dessert!'.⁹ The *New Statesman* magazine ran very popular, and in some cases very clever, competitions for parodies of literature, clerihews, and what they called 'gruesomes'. The latter were imported from the USA: pithy, brief comments on well-known but grim subjects. Several on Salome were selected from a long accumulation of the magazine's competitions, for their occasional, bestselling compilations of parodies. In fact, one was even selected for the title of the first anthology: 'Salome, Dear, NOT in the Fridge!' The person addressed is evidently either a woman of eccentric housekeeping, or a disruptive adolescent being managed by an exhausted parent. One of the clerihews, similarly, measures the difference between a Salome and normal women by evoking the domestic sphere. At this time, the Fifties and early Sixties, the stereotypical woman was a housewife above all:

Salome
Wasn't what you'd call 'homey',
Her dish for a feast
Was *Tete Baptiste*.¹⁰

9. Granger 1981: 63. The film was directed by William Dieterle.

10. Marshall 1968: 66.

By the Eighties, however, when mores had become much franker, the title of the second anthology had moved on from culinary gestures at general deviance and their strong hints of sexual perversion. 'Salome, Dear, Not with a Porcupine!' was perhaps a little puzzling yet the mind could certainly boggle at its autoerotic implications.

Moving swiftly on, there is a particularly revolting version of the culinary and oral motifs in the British film of William Trevor's novel, *Felicia's Journey* (1999).¹¹ This is one of those innumerable films about serial killers that have been such a prominent feature of the last twenty years. (That popular taste for *grand guignol* itself finds the Salome story hospitable.) The protagonist seems an inoffensive, even benign nonentity, until it emerges that he has a paedophilic habit of befriending and murdering young girls. Part of what made him what he is, the film suggests, was his relationship with his dominating single mother, a television chef. As a child he was traumatized most of all by her insistence, as shown on national television, on forcing a piece of raw liver into his mouth. One of the triggers to his memories of this episode occurs when, on a television monitor, he catches sight of a moment from the banquet scene in the 1953 film, in which the age of the star Rita Hayworth concurred with an adult, experienced, version of the character. He identifies her with his mother because of the 'cannibalistic' banquet of Herod. By forcing her son to eat raw offal against his will, his mother provides the most signal proof of the way she regards him—as a chattel or accessory, whose sole value is as an object of enforcement, torture, and the incontrovertible display of dominance. What the film does here is effectively to merge into the mother-figure both 'man-devourers', Herodias the mother and Salome the daughter. Thus it is suggested that the protagonist wants the girls he befriends to be the juvenile Salomes, grateful and dependent. Yet the dominating perversion inherent in the Bible's peremptory, demanding Salome (the mother) he feels he must forestall before they get any older. Whilst the film is dull, nevertheless this is an intelligent use of the way in which mother and daughter are often conflated. First, there are those, like Mallarmé, who simply compound the two in one figure, whether deliberately or carelessly. He evidently thought the compounding of the two figures unproblematic, for despite the fact that his poem's protagonist is the daughter, he named it for the mother. His reason, he said, was a determination to render it very distinct from the work planned by Wilde.¹² Second, in this film, the difficulty of distributing guilt between the two female figures intentionally becomes the pathology of the protagonist.

11. Dir. Atom Egoyan.

12. The reason for Mallarmé's title is mentioned by Ellmann 1987: 320.

The latter example was probably influenced by a very controversial earlier film, *The Night Porter* (1974),¹³ which depicted the sado-masochistic relationship between a concentration-camp inmate and a Nazi officer. That it ended in a *Liebestod* for the once-juvenile ‘victim’ and the predatory Nazi was its most controversial feature. He explains to a confidant that this is not merely a trivial liaison but ‘a biblical story’, with a kind of inescapable logic—that of Salome. Thus, when the adolescent dances for the Nazi officers, her ‘reward’ is to receive the head of another inmate in a box. That this reward is to her unexpected—just as Hayworth was shocked to receive hers in the 1950s movie—demonstrates that here it is the Herod-figure, not the woman, who is obeying some sort of compulsive logic of his own, independent of her motives. In the Hayworth movie, however, her Salome is both innocent of malign intention, and committed to an adult relationship with a Roman officer specially introduced into the story for that purpose.

Paedophilic relationships, though not always with unwilling Salomes, are a common feature of adaptations of the story. Thus in Robert Browning’s poem, the earthy Italian Renaissance artist Fra Lippo Lippi is reproached by the Prior of his monastic order for his too-carnal depiction of Salome. His model, it transpires, is the Prior’s ‘niece’: that is to say, his pubescent concubine.¹⁴ Similarly, in Ruth Nichols’s novel, *The Burning of the Rose*, Lippo Lippi’s scandalous elopement and his ‘ménage à six’ are linked to the contemporary behaviour of artists—characterizing the subtexts, realities behind, or customary responses to, portraits of biblical women. Nichols’s virginal adolescent heroine sits as a model for the artist Tavella. His portrait of her as Salome, she is aware, will misrepresent her to posterity as a concubine at best. ‘You’, he says, ‘are no different [now] from the hundreds of little Salomes and Madonnas who open their knees to the painter when he has finished depicting their faces’. Yet, as the innocent adolescent protests, ‘you invent my guilt’. To protect her reputation, she defaces the new painting. There is an ironic cost: as a result she will lose her employment as a model for artists. Her reputation with *them* is despoiled.¹⁵ Once an inappropriate repute is foisted upon her, even her defence becomes a ‘fault’: she is now viewed as destructive, itself a Salomean attribute. This is intended to suggest that sexual corruption, whether in medieval studios or the medieval church, is always more powerful than the innocent, who cannot escape its depredations in one form or another.

Clearly, it is easy to extract from the biblical narrative not two but three characters who form a kind of triumvirate of excess and/or perversion.

13. Dir. Liliana Cavani.

14. Browning, ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’, lines 195–98 (naming the dancer Salome ‘Herodias’); Litzinger 1961 thinks this episode represents the whole poem in little.

15. Nichols 1991: 34, 19–21.

Herod's reputation became that of a notorious tyrant, Herodias's that of the vengeful woman, Salome's that of the arch-seducer, trick-artist and complacent murderer. Whether that seducer is immoral, amoral, evil, or more an accessory to a plot, is not clear from the biblical accounts. That is to say, it is difficult most of all in the original version to decide whether Salome is as guilty of John's murder as her mother. Herodias wants John dead because he has reproved her and incited the populace to revile her. Salome does as her mother bids her (although it remains ambiguous whether the dance is actually inspired by her mother's plot). Herod, we are told, would have killed John had he not feared him as a prophet, or because John's popularity made this politically unwise. And if nothing else, wise politicians do not make open-ended commitments to the demands of dancing-girls, step-daughter or not. As a king, if in no other respect, Herod bears guilt. Various forms and degrees of culpability appear to be distributed between the three parties. It could be argued that, politically, John's public reproofs of Herod's queen were unwise and that he obviously ran a fatal risk. But Herod himself initially refrains from the ultimate penalty. It could be argued that, as preacher and prophet, John had to speak his mind if the highest in the land were besmirched by sexual scandal. From that point of view, as Chaucer's Pardoner avers, John was murdered even though 'full guiltless'.¹⁶ Moreover, from the Christian viewpoint, few crimes could be worse than to murder God's prophet and Christ's forerunner, let alone whilst he was busy about God's work. But these are religious and political appraisals; and even though the latter can be viewed as secular, the secularizing twentieth century took little interest in them.

Whether Salome is acting solely on the orders of her mother, enthusiastically or not, or is by nature bloodthirsty and duplicitous in any case, is complicated by other factors. Her age, which is not given, may be of some significance also. If she is very young, pubescent even, then perhaps the dominance of her mother might be the sole significant cause of her actions. If Salome is older, then she would be regarded as increasingly responsible for her own actions. Literary and cinematic versions of the story usually incorporate Herodias's role in the story. However, some, like Mallarmé's poem 'Hérodiade', do not discriminate between them, so that Salome seems responsible for what she does—or at least a free agent. However, many paintings omit everything, or almost everything, other than Salome and the head served on the dish. Such images do promote an interpretation of the dancing *femme fatale* as *the* villainess in the case.

It is possible, from the spare and bare narrative provided in the Gospels, to extrapolate a Salome who is an ambiguous character anyway. In

16. Chaucer, 'Pardoner's Tale', in *Works* (1957), line 491. Here Herod's drunkenness and indulgence at 'table' are specified as causes: lines 489–90.

Flaubert's 'Herodias', the author studiously follows the biblical narrative, whilst elaborating upon it. The story explicitly attributes the whole conspiracy to Herodias, who has deliberately plotted Salome's dance at the feast. Going further, Flaubert states that Herodias actually conceived her plot many years earlier, and has deliberately kept Salome distant from Herod's court, so that her seductiveness once introduced will fall upon his senses like a thunderclap. Because of Herodias's mystificatory strategy, Salome hardly appears before the final episode at the banquet. Flaubert even fails to identify her, just as Herodias refuses to tell Herod who she is, because the reader can be relied upon to guess. This narrative strategy does attribute the guilty responsibility to Herodias, by contrast to the horrified and desolate, duped Herod, who is despicable yet (as it were) irresponsible. Yet it is not even as (relatively) simple as that. Flaubert's description of Salome's dance is a *tour de force* description of the gymnastic, arresting, hypnotic, beguiling, dizzyingly dynamic dance. It is suggestive of a kind of immanent depravity and squalor in the dancer, urging on its technical brilliance. And Salome's lack of characterization or development in the narrative is no more communicative of her personality than the Bible itself permits. Yet that note of depravity, sounded in the description of the dance, suggests that this is an unpleasant character by constitution. Relative to that, the adolescent's general air of implacable imperturbability suggests a kind of blankness which may be the consciencelessness of a criminal.

Similarly, in art many representations of Salome with the head depict her as expressionless. Or is it as unabashed, or unfeeling? Or prosaic and workaday, by contrast to the severed head which shares the picture—as if this is the initial instance of her embarking on what might prove to be a long career marked by outrageous actions and events. Such questions can arouse interest and speculation in the viewer, whereas some artistic portrayals seem satisfied merely to proffer a vividly grotesque scene. The fifteenth-century artist in *The Burning of the Rose* explains to the sitter that Salome must be carefully distinguished from Judith, head-taker of Holofernes, pointing out that Judith was an adult and 'powerful' woman who murdered him herself. Salome's case, he says, was different because she was so young: in demanding a man's head she was obeying her mother. 'Salome's sin', he says, 'was that she had killed in ignorance. This, said [he], was why her face need show no passion'.¹⁷ This comment might provoke the reader, and indeed the viewer of some artworks, to wonder whether 'ignorance' of what she does might actually be a worse 'sin' than her parents'. Even if villainous, at least neither of them are casual about their destructiveness, or unthinking, or unaware of what they do and why they do it. An 'ignorantly' unmoved destroyer might be regarded as even

17. Nichols 1991: 19.

worse, because simultaneously malign and trivial. It is a figure with whom there can be no reasoning, and no negotiation.

By contrast, the other participants are bound up in a nexus of political motives. Quite apart from her revenge motive, Herodias wishes to stop John's mouth, or at least to demonstrate that such execrations induce punishment. According to the New Testament, Herod is placed between a rock and a hard place: if he kills John, it will inflame the populace; but, wishing to be an absolute ruler, he feels unable to forswear his oath to give her anything she asks. Both biblical accounts note that he is bound by that oath. To this the reader must add a consciousness that, surrounded as he is by all the important guests he has invited, and his own chief officers, he needs to retain their respect for his words. Later writers, such as Flaubert and Wilde, do emphasize this performative aspect to Herod's dilemma. Indeed, in Flaubert's story Herod is above all else a political animal. When he protests querulously to various parties, representing various factions, that he is not as bad as he is painted, he is being both politic and genuinely neurotic. In Wilde's play, his relationship with Herodias is alienated and irritable: they have a habit of quarrelling in public, largely it seems so that each can cast the blame for any past crimes upon the other, for the benefit of a court which is all ears.

We might conclude from the biblical narrative that Herod must fear political reprisals for John's death. This may be the most important explanation for a striking departure from the biblical story at the end of Wilde's play. As Salome indulges in a one-sided conversation with the head which is her trophy, Herod suddenly cries out, 'Kill that woman!', and his bodyguard crush her to death with their shields. Quite apart from the vengeful emotions driving Herod at this point in the play, we may deduce a signal political motive. By executing Salome, he may placate any political backlash. Fair enough: in this play she is sole instigator, for it is her idea, not her mother's, to dance for the Baptist's head, and Herod begs her to ask for an alternative prize.

The privatizing interpretation of the story as sexual fable actually depends on making Salome the sole bearer of guilt. According to Kate Millett, both Salome and John (here called Jokanaan) are not so much characters in the play as cardboard representatives of obsession: her sexual voracity, his opposing asceticism.¹⁸ For Wilde, Salome's sole motive is, indeed, that John has rejected her passion. However, she is so deluded that it only belatedly occurs to her that a severed head cannot respond to her passion in any case. Steven Berkoff, who produced the play in 1989 for Dublin and London, commented that at this moment anyone must feel pity for her.¹⁹ This view

18. Millett 1977: 152. Wilde objected to the fact that the Bible did not offer sole guilt for Salome, according to Ellmann 1987: 325.

19. Berkoff on Wilde 1989: x.

reminds one of Wilde's own comment on the death of Little Nell in Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*: one would have to have a heart of stone not to laugh.

Both Berkoff's and Millett's responses ignore the biblical narrative behind the play. Yet Wilde's own audience can be assumed to have known it well; his plotline is inserted into its *lacunae*. On the stage, it will have been Massenet's popular opera *Herodiade* (1881) that had prepared the Victorian audience for an extreme rewriting of the story, since his Salome and John are amorously involved. Wilde is more interested in obsession baulked so that it feeds upon itself. This one, too, is a Salome curiously blank in personality. She is certainly driven: her statements are usually both insistent and repetitive, as if she were an automaton with overriding needs, such as robot fuel. Like a greedy child or infantile adult, she presumes that she will always get what she wants simply by insisting for long enough. If the fact of death has not actually struck her till too late for her own desires, then she has barely achieved sentience before Herod has her executed. Her insentience is not innocent, though; Wilde, like other aesthetes, makes her knowing of her own sexual power, utterly selfish, and callous: she does not even notice when her unrequited lover, Nabarroth, stabs himself in despair. And whereas both Herodias and Herod are repulsive, venal and lubricious, Salome's absolute guilt in the play is a curiously ironic result of the tyro snubbing and overreaching the parents.

Explorations of the original narrative's familial dynamics tend to become imbricated with apportionments of guilt. Thus the nineteenth-century *Woman's Bible* not only contains angry reflections on ecclesiastics' misogynistic attitudes to the female figures, but one commentator is particularly concerned to exculpate the culturally sacred image of motherhood: 'Even [ancient authorities] do not bring any charge against [Herodias's] character as a mother'! The 1953 film, conversely, portrayed her as pimping her daughter. Other domestic possibilities are posited in the *New Statesman* parodies. Here Herodias and Salome have a modernized and updated dialogue, in the style of Bernard Shaw. For readers, this is intended to sound like 'just one of those mother-daughter arguments that happen all the time'. Salome insists that it was her mother who wanted 'that horrible thing'; 'You', she says, 'made me do that disgusting little-girl's dance in front of everybody ... when by rights I should be decently veiled!' This competitive adolescent wants to make the point that her mother is both 'using' her callously and perversely, and yet refusing to recognize her daughter's maturity. (All adolescents want to be grown-ups, as they say.) In both cases, she is denying her daughter dignity and denying her as a person. Salome accuses her mother of attempting, by this infantilisation, to conceal her own age. At the same time, though, this petulant adolescent does seem to be protesting too much. She is very determined that her mother should take the blame, and to

add an insult or two of her own to Herodias's already debauched reputation. This Salome is about as guilty as she is innocent. And the parody suggests, mischievously, that adolescent psychology might travel in Salome's direction easily enough.

Herodias's response is briskly and imperiously parental: 'Spank that youngster!'²⁰ The parody of Herod at the end of Wilde's play is bathetic indeed; yet, simultaneously, that Salome should be merely spanked when a man has been executed is as blackly, grotesquely comic as some moments in Wilde's original. The notion that had the girl's brattishness been prevented by parental discipline, none of this might have happened, has a certain persuasive naturalism. And the portrait of a 'dysfunctional family' is readily updated to a Fifties/Sixties preoccupation with 'the teenage generation'. In other words, gaps in the biblical narrative really can be interpreted in a domestic register, without disrupting that narrative at all.

In genre, there is a sense in which the biblical episode itself seems strangely different from its larger context in the New Testament narrative. This is a situation, and these are events, which might seem less surprising and unusual amongst the narratives of the Old Testament. It is highly colourful, a strikingly concentrated drama with an explosive finale. It is also, partly because of Herod's magnificent feast, emphatically exotic in mood—as all the highly aromatic Orientalist details in many later adaptations and depictions emphasized. In terms of the literary forms adopted in the structuring of the biblical narratives, this story seems to have something in common with the folkloric generic features often identified in the Old Testament by theologians and narratologists.²¹ We have already noticed its brevity and sparseness of detail, and the way in which, therefore, tiny differences between the two Gospel accounts loom so large in what we can interpret of these personages' joint history, motives, and actions. Herod's undertaking to Salome seems like an instance of the folkloric motif of 'the foolish promise' and its inexorable nemesis. Indeed, these can all be characteristics of some kinds of folk-tale, and of the folktale genre in literature. It is this very brevity, and that it is suggestive of various implications—some of them mutually exclusive—that have made the story so susceptible to adaptation, elaboration and alteration. Some of those alterations, like the Salome swiftly punished in Wilde's play, have been crucial. Here there is supposed to be some measure of 'poetic justice', in that what Herod has ordered once he can order twice. Equally, that repetitiveness is part of the intentionally rebarbative, hypnotic stylistics of Wilde's play; whereas the biblical story is brief and wastes no words. It is, indeed, in some ways mysterious, yet a

20. Cady Stanton 1988: 119-20; Marshall 1968: 31-32.

21. On folktale and the Old Testament see Propp 1968, Gaster 1969, and Gunkel 1987.

'complete' story that can easily be lifted out of the longer narrative of Jesus' biography and significance.

The modern history of this story is littered with ironies. Wilde's version was derivative, yet was instantly the most influential version. It derived from a curious French tradition of distorting the story for self-consciously 'modern' and decadent purposes. Although so derivative, Wilde's play came to be regarded by those unconscious of that fact as originary. That was a result of its role as a vehicle of popularization for the previous French redactions. After Strauss's opera had stolen that thunder, Wilde's version reverted to a deserved obscurity: it is the least able and effective of his works, and its *préciosité* and exaggerated hieratic tone make it almost unperformable on the modern stage. Yet, as a result of the 1990s fascination with the previous *fin de siècle*, and Wilde's election as a gay 'secular saint',²² the last years of the twentieth century saw a considerable international revival of Wilde's works on film and on stage. Similarly, the play's derivative 'reinvention' of the story had largely displaced the original: those who have never read the Bible, and those who are inattentive by nature, are convinced that the Wilde/Strauss plot of juvenile thwarted sexuality *is* the plot of the biblical original. This is profoundly simplistic by comparison to the religio-political complications which provide historical narrative for Flaubert, and which are so understated in Wilde that modern audiences largely miss them. It is also a significant example of how, in an age of receding literacy, a piece of defective literature can dislodge its much more intriguing original. The reason for the late twentieth-century fascination with this distortion of the story was simply to exploit religion as an all-purpose object of 'irreverent' sexual atmosphere. In that vein, everything in the film *Salome's Last Dance* was profoundly predictable.

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22. For an example of these end-century phenomena in literary studies, see especially Dollimore 1991.

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IMAGINING SALOME, OR HOW *LA SAUTERELLE*
BECAME *LA FEMME FATALE*

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona

Abstract

Images of women from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures have been read traditionally *as if* Christian artists created only stereotypes which vacillated between good and evil, rather than creating visual revisions reflecting changing cultural attitudes. As Salome journeyed from earliest Christian art into the High Middle Ages, she came to personify the evils of the flesh just as John symbolized the life of the Spirit. However, these ‘evils of the flesh’ were not overtly erotic or pornographic in their early presentations. In medieval art, she was depicted as a prepubescent girl dressed in a long and flowing robe; Salome contorts her body into an almost unimaginable backward bend as an element of her acrobatic ‘dance’, hence her identification by the Christian community in France as *la sauterelle*, or the grasshopper. High Renaissance and Baroque artists began the transition toward a visual conflation with her mother as Salome became a seductive adult female in her posture and costume, and was no longer an active dancer once dance was excised from Christian liturgy. The so-called ‘Salome craze’ of the late nineteenth century completed her transformation into *la femme fatale* as the dancing Salome was refashioned into the erotically-charged performer of the ‘dance of the seven veils’.

———— * * * ————

A mere ten lines are devoted to the story of an anonymous young girl whose dancing pleased a king and who in turn wanted to please her mother. Her status as one of the most embroidered personae among the women of the Bible is the result not of the scriptural text but of her ‘after-life’ in the arts—paintings, sculptures, illuminations, choreography, and most recently, cinema and television. Tracing Salome’s afterlife is like the solution to a puzzle-box—as one piece falls into place, another falls out. Her afterlife is the ideal candidate to examine using Emile Mâle’s mode of the ‘mutual illumination of the arts’.¹ One of the bases for this affinity among the arts is the human body. My investigations will focus on the

1. Mâle 1982: 17-20, 26-28, 106-11.

seeing of Salome's body, her apparel, and her actions in coordination with her visual metamorphosis from the medieval *sauterelle* (grasshopper) into the nineteenth-century *femme fatale*. These visual transformations correspond to the cultural (and ecclesiastical) attitudes toward women, and the history of liturgical dance.

The Bible can be said to be replete with women²—strong women, passive women, old women, young women, married women, single women, women with children, barren women, women beyond the age of childbearing, women of physical beauty, and women of spiritual strength—the question becomes how many, if any, of these scriptural women actually danced? The response is *very* few: notably Miriam and Jephthah's daughter in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the unnamed daughter of Herodias in the Christian Scriptures. The larger question becomes what is the meaning of dancing, especially of scriptural women dancing? This requires consideration outside of any single scriptural narrative in a larger cultural milieu.

In his analysis of the arts within Christianity, Gerardus van der Leeuw classified dance as the primary art, for, '[T]he art of the dance is even more primitive than verbal art. Here rhythm is all powerful; it rules the whole man and the whole world'.³ Given the fundamental human need to communicate, the initial path van der Leeuw indicated was through bodily postures and gestures, so that dance was the first human mode of connection with other human beings and with the gods. From its beginnings, dance was integral to religious worship. For primordial religious traditions, the cycle of the seasons corresponded to the human life cycle, and to the cycles of the female body. For van der Leeuw, then, the interconnections were clear as '[T]he erotic function of the dance borders on its more inclusive function as the awakener of fertility'.⁴ Dancing was a cognitive and embodied metaphor for the creation of life.

The dancer's body is the instrument of her art and for this particular discussion of the transformations of the unnamed daughter of Herodias into the sensual Salome, my attention is given over to the dancing female body.⁵ Religious dance morphed into liturgical dance in coordination with the medieval Passion plays and the visual depictions of the Passion narrative. This artistic coordination was primarily witnessed within Christian worship and signified the essential role of Mâle's 'mutual illumination of the arts' in the study of the afterlives of biblical figures. This coalition of the arts is clearly operative in the transformative afterlives of the anonymous young girl who became the grand seductress *par excellence*.

2. For example, see Bach 1997; Exum 1993; Exum 1996.

3. Leeuw 1963: 16.

4. Leeuw 1963: 21.

5. Kirk 1990: 134–49.

Two of the Bible's significant female dancers, Miriam and Salome, come to signify the traditional western Christian dichotomy of woman.⁶ A woman is either the chaste and pious virgin, who like the sister of Moses dances for the 'joy' elicited from her heart by God, or the beautiful and evil temptress like Salome, who dances to seduce, and potentially destroy, men.⁷ This latter image of both a woman and her body as evil predominates throughout western Christian culture.

Evil and erotic, at least as defined in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century perceptions, Salome comes to imbue dance with negative connotations, and yet the scriptural narrative itself is clear on her anonymity and, perhaps, her youthful innocence in what would become the most notorious dance in western cultural history.⁸ Ironically perhaps, the biblical narratives fail either to name 'the daughter of Herodias' or to describe her dancing other than that she pleased Herod.⁹ However, both Gospel writers are clear that the young girl went to her mother to inquire what she should garner from Herod's promise. As the first to identify Salome by name, the Jewish historian Josephus never mentions, let alone describes, her dance, as he places the blame for the death of John the Baptist squarely upon the shoulders of Herod.¹⁰ This is all that we know from the Gospels and contemporary Jewish history.¹¹ How Salome became Salome is not a question for biblical authors or commentators; rather, it is a question for artists, choreographers, composers, playwrights, and poets.¹²

Visual Transformations of the Anonymous Young Girl into the Medieval 'Sauterelle'

The fourth century was pivotal for the initial afterlife of Salome, for the establishment of Christianity as a legitimate religion led eventually to it becoming *the* religion of the Roman Empire. Thereby, the codification and significance of Christian liturgy and sacramental practice attracted attention, especially following Augustine's pronouncements on infant baptism. So interest in and the increasing status of the central scriptural figures associated first with the ceremony of baptism, and later with the narrative of John the Baptist, followed the path to the young dancer's door. Naturally, as his stature in Christian practice and theology became more significant, so did hers.

6. Apostolos-Cappadona 1990: 95-108.

7. Girard 1984: 311-24.

8. Joynes 2007: 145-63.

9. See Mt. 14.6-12, Mk 6.21-29, in the Douay-Rheims version.

10. Josephus 1996.

11. Gibson 2007: 17: 693.

12. Bayer 2007: 17: 694-95.

By the early Middle Ages, the anonymous daughter of Herodias was definitively identified by the name of Salome, and her place within the narrative of the Baptist led to her position in Christian art and drama. In these earliest renderings, she is depicted in episodes relating to Herod's banquet and the beheading sequence, and characterized as neither seductive nor culpable. Rather, the initial iconographic pattern for Salome is in the midst of the narrative in which she dances, appeals to her mother, or transports the Baptist's decapitated head on a platter. Three of the earliest, and perhaps most intriguing, medieval depictions of Salome set the tenor for the visualizing of her multiple personae as *la sauterelle*.



Fig. 1. Salome's Dance. Relief from the sculptured bronze column of Bishop Bernward, 993–1022. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

One of the earliest medieval images of Salome is found on the sculpted bronze column of Bishop Bernward, now located in St Mary's Cathedral, Hildesheim (Fig. 1). Known as the *Christus Pilar*, this work displays twenty-four episodes from the life of Christ, beginning with his baptism up to his entry into Jerusalem. Dating around 1020, this presentation characterizes Salome dancing between the flute player to our left and the banquet table of Herod on our right. Fully dressed in a contemporary loose and flowing garment, and with her hair modestly covered, nothing appears to be seductive or sexualized in this dancing daughter. She stands on her right foot as she elevates her left foot, thus creating a motion within her body that is

paralleled by the positions of her arms and hands. Her right palm is open to her audience as she gestures downward toward the left knee of her flautist and further to the scene below in which Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. Her upraised left hand, palm down, coordinates through gesture the banquet of Herod with the scene of Jesus preaching to his apostles. Similarly, there is an elevation on the left side of her upper body as her head tilts downward toward her right shoulder. The lines incised in her garment reveal both the embroidered trim at her neck and cuffs, signifying her social status, and the bodily flow of her dancing.

In little over a century, the carvers of the now famous 'chin chuck' scene between Herod and the young Salome on a twelfth-century Romanesque capital from the Cathedral of St Étienne, Toulouse made Salome synonymous with seduction. The 'chin chuck' was a medieval sign of sinful sensuality; of course, more careful study of this particular motif might clarify whether the 'sin' here was wrought by the youthful Salome or rather by a paedophile Herod. Nonetheless, the presentation of curvilinear lines in both the figures and garments of these two individuals provides a sense of movement within the scene, and clearly leads the viewer's eye to Herod's gesture of the 'chin chuck'. The elegant embroidered or embossed trim on both garments accentuates their physicality as Herod's bent left knee juts forth to signify his phallus positioned toward the inward swerving hips of the young girl he appears to pull forward with his left hand. Her long flowing hair would have signaled to contemporary viewers her virginal state, which is highlighted by her diminutive size and the budding breasts outlined by the circular flows of her bodice. This Salome stands with her legs crossed as if in the midst of a dance step.

The mid-twelfth-century tinted illustration from *The Littlemore Anselm* (Fig. 2) displays a dramatic new 'twist' in the presentation of Salome. Within the traditional narrative of the events leading to the decapitation of the Baptist, this youthful daughter of Herodias is presented center stage positioned upside down in the midst of two pairs of crossed swords. Her head rests precariously at the crossing point of the lower pair of swords which she holds in her hands, while the upper pair of swords ostensibly has no source of control; they rest suggestively as one pierces Salome's diaphragm and the other her lower back. This latter sword appears to be the support for her upraised lower legs, which bend rather dramatically at the knees as they turn to the right, acting as a connector between the banquet table and the illustration in the upper register of the illuminated letter S.

Garbed in a simple green garment with a white neckline, this sword dancer focuses her sight line on the object in Herod's outstretched left hand, perhaps a golden apple or a golden ball.¹³ Throughout this illustration as in the

13. The former referenced the Judgment of Paris that inaugurated the Trojan War, the latter signaled Salome's acrobatic skills.



Fig. 2. Dance of Salome with swords (MS. Auct. D.2.6 fol. 166v.), mid-12th century. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. Photo credit: With permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

earlier two works, the interplay of the curvilinear patterns is highlighted in both the costumes and gestures of all characters, giving clear directional signals for the audience. Hence this episode begins with the upraised right forefinger of the Baptist and follows the move across Herodias's shoulders to Herod's exaggerated gestures. Then the King's right hand points beyond the sword dancer to the double image in the illuminated letter depicting on the lower register the decapitation scene and on the upper register the obedient daughter's presentation of the severed head on a platter to her mother.

Some of the finest medieval depictions of Salome, like those on cathedral tympani and capitals, presented her within the context of the narrative episodes relating to Herod's banquet and the beheading of the Baptist. What remains significant is the artistic emphasis on the acrobatic nature of her dance. On the lesser north tympanum of Rouen Cathedral (1260), Salome balances herself on her left hand as her body arches back then upward; she curves forward dramatically at her knees so that her feet hover over her upraised head. It is likely that her right arm, now missing, extended

outward toward 'the audience' entering the cathedral; and given the previous scene in which she knelt before the banqueting table holding a ball in her right hand, her now missing extended right hand probably balanced a juggler's ball.

Typically this narrative was composed of three or four sequences. Usually it begins with the banquet scene in which Salome receives Herod's request to dance, followed by the scene of her 'dancing' as he watches her. Then there is a curious but almost consistent juxtaposition as Salome presents her mother with the Baptist's head on a platter in advance of the last scene that displays the actual moment of decapitation. Occasionally, as with the arrangement of narrative episodes on Bishop Bernward's column and the Rouen tympanum, the story of the final events of the Baptist's life are placed below a presentation of the Last Supper.

Salome's acrobatic posturing continues throughout the thirteenth and into the fourteenth centuries, as witnessed for example in a beautiful stained-glass roundel from La Sainte Chapelle, France (late thirteenth century) in which a blue-garbed young acrobat simulates the posture from the Rouen tympanum. However, those sharp sculpted angles are converted into softer, gentler curves as her elongated torso is presented parallel to the banquet table and her red-shod feet almost touch the ground. The acrobatic postures of the figure of Salome incorporated thrice on a misericord in Ely Cathedral, England (1338–40) continue this visual tradition of a fully-garbed female figure hingeing between childhood and adolescence. Perhaps to emphasize this fact, her physical size in relation to that of other actors in the scenes varies, so that in the initial banquet scene in which she performs a backward bend of almost impossible flexibility, she is perhaps the tallest person present. When she moves into the middle scene of the beheading which has already occurred she is so reduced in comparison to her platter that one cannot help but wonder how the enlarged severed head will fit on this platter, and how this 'little girl' will be able to lift the platter. In the final scene, she kneels before her enthroned mother to offer up the infamous platter and its contents.

One of the fourteenth-century wall mosaics in San Marco presents the banquet of Herod with the two moments of Salome's dance collapsed into one as she brings the platter to her mother (Fig. 3). Dressed now in a long red garment with bejeweled neckline and cuffs, the dancer's upraised arms, her right hand holding the platter over her own head and her left hand upraised in a gesture of blessing, are highlighted as the butterfly sleeves are trimmed with ermine. A third ermine trim denotes the space between her legs as she strides forward on her right leg tilting her body from side to side, thereby mimicking dance motion. She tilts her head to her right shoulder as her long blond hair cascades down both shoulders despite the bejeweled headband across her brow line.



Fig. 3. Salome dancing with the head of John the Baptist at the banquet of King Herod. San Marco, Venice, Italy. Photo credit: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice/Art Resource, New York.

A fourteenth-century Greek Psalter illustration shows Salome holding cymbals in her upraised hands that are highlighted by her sleeveless dress.¹⁴ Ostensibly positioned with her mature-looking mother in the background between herself and Herod, this Salome twists her head to her left in an almost impossible posture. She elevates her left foot off the ground as her right foot is captured in a moment of ambivalent motion: is she about to rise upward by jumping or is she about to land right foot first? As with her contemporaries and ancestresses, this Salome while standing with her back toward us nonetheless positions her head with a serious backward twist so that she sees her audience who stand outside the frame. Curiously, her foot patterns are emphasized by the most minimal of stringed sandals exposing her feet and toes. As feet were assigned the symbolism of bodily sensuality in classical and Christian art, such exposure would be a significant signal to the contemporary audience regarding the nature of Salome and her dance.

14. *Psalter of Paris*, MS. Graeca, 139, vol. 8, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

However, it is the beautiful motion of the fourteenth-century wood misericord from Cologne Cathedral, Germany that may be said to trump any medieval image of Salome. Simply a presentation of the dancer alone in the midst of her dance, she is postured upside down in the rhythmic flow of an exuberant somersault. Both her legs are turned upward but bend toward the left as her knees and feet jut out simultaneously, thereby creating a curving diagonal flow from her upraised feet past her head to her outstretched hands upon which she seems to float across the misericord. Her elegant female figure is once again fully clothed with no erotic or pornographic overtones except for her uncovered coiffure in which the upturned piles of her hair, equally distributed above each ear, curiously parallel the acorns resting on the leaf just above her head. The fluidity of her body, unnatural as it may appear, merges into a series of swirling oak leaves and acorns as if to suggest the initial pattern of a tree.

Early Renaissance artists retained the narrative formula of depicting Salome dancing within the context of the final episodes of the life of John the Baptist.¹⁵ Painters, like Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, Ghirlandaio, and Benozzo Gozzoli, maintained the iconography of a fully dressed adolescent girl dancing simply on one elevated foot with an upraised arm, on the same side of her body, after the fashion of court dance. Her hair, now regularly uncovered, varied between simple flowing tresses or an elegant coiffure.

Typical of this convention is Gozzoli's *The Dance of Salome* (1461–62), in which the dancer occupies the foreground of the painting. Balancing carefully on her left foot, the fluidity of her dance movement is highlighted by the swirling and twisting curves of her long skirt. She elevates her right arm, paralleling the movement of her right leg as much for bodily balance as for symbolic purpose, and opens her upraised palm toward Herod in a gesture of recognition. The artistic lighting of her upper right torso emphasized her youthful femininity so that her small high breasts are discerned, if not by all, at least by Herod whose sight line follows the diagonal formed by Salome's open right hand downward toward her body. Contrary to her beguiling gestures, her high-necked, low-waisted garment envelops her body as if to hide, not to display, it. The garments worn by her mother and their maidservant provide a stark contrast, with the decorative design defining their waists and necklines thereby accentuating their female attributes from 'the swell of the belly' to their breasts.

Several of these early Renaissance artists, like Gozzoli, followed the previously defined medieval pattern of representing Salome twice within the frame of a single canvas or serial panel. In such instances, the primary focus,

15. Identified as the patron saint of Florence, John the Baptist was popular with Florentine artists and their patrons.

noticeable from its placement in the composition, is the dance. However, the secondary motif confirmed the scriptural narrative in which she was the obedient daughter who presented her mother with the severed head of the Baptist on a platter. This contrast between the youthful Salome and her matronly mother, as reflected in their costumes, coiffure, and body types, set the artistic stage on which later artists, writers, composers, and choreographers would 'play'—the desperate fading beauty Herodias sending forth her sexually innocent but appealing daughter to beguile her stepfather. Thereby, Herodias was not simply culpable in the death of the Baptist but in the moral destruction of her own daughter, so that this mother became a lightning rod for later cultural perceptions of women as agents of consummate evil.

From these normative depictions of Salome and her dance in medieval and early Renaissance art, artists envisioned how the text, tradition, and medieval liturgical drama interpreted Herodias's daughter. Thereby, the Christian community came to understand that first the nature of her dance was acrobatic; second, that her youthful exuberance was emphasized, not her not-yet-existent female sexuality; and, third, that her mother, not Salome, was culpable for the beheading of John the Baptist. Further, artistic renderings of Salome conformed to and reflected the principles of both medieval theatre and dance, as practiced both as a courtly art and as liturgical dance.

With the advent of High Renaissance and Baroque art, the increasing conflation of biblical women and the cultural emphasis on the bifurcation of women's nature as either good or evil, the young dancer was transformed from a naïve acrobat into the model for youthful female beauty on the brink of female sensuality. As with several of her scriptural sisters, Salome became disassociated from the narrative of her scriptural identity to become an independent topic. Artistic presentations of her beauty, depicting her demure demeanor, contrasted sharply with the grotesque reality of the lifeless severed head of the Baptist resting at her side. Artists, such as Titian, Sebastiano del Piombo, and Guido Reni, no longer portrayed a dancing girl engaged in the narrative action of the life of John the Baptist. Rather, their female subject can only be identified as Salome because of the physical proximity of the decapitated head that either rests beside her or that she holds but always by means of the platter.¹⁶ Her mother, the dispenser of evil and sexuality, has also disappeared from the frame. Such paintings were created and/or commissioned during that time of religious and cultural turmoil identified with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. This was the age of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli in the Reformed countries when the larger cultural perception of women was clearly divided between the traditional

16. This iconographic motif distinguished Salome from the Jewish heroine Judith who held Holofernes's severed head by a lock of his hair; further see Apostolos-Cappadona 1987: 81-97; Apostolos-Cappadona 1996: 203, 326-27; Sine 1988: 9-29.

dichotomy of virtue and vice, i.e. the virgin and the whore. Due to these concerns with the negative potential of female sexuality and the concern for clerical weaknesses, liturgical dancing, especially in its congregational forms, was excised from both Roman Catholicism and the Reformed traditions. Therefore, it was appropriate that Salome no longer danced.

She followed the majority of her scriptural companions in this visual vanishing act for several centuries as the secularization of western cultures progressed and as religious themes in art were replaced by genre, still life, portraiture, and history. So the image of Salome waned as dance became more secularized and ballet developed into an art form. However, in the late nineteenth century with the evolution of the Symbolist movement, there was a revival of interest in images of scriptural women, especially those whose sexual nature could be characterized as ambiguous, in art, literature, music, and theatre. The topos of Salome, in particular, erupted into one of the most popular themes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, dance, literature, music, and theatre. With the development of the *femme fatale*, the classical figures of Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, and Medusa were rediscovered in conjunction with the apocryphal heroine Judith and the scriptural dancer Salome.¹⁷ The youthful acrobat of medieval art was transformed and fused with her otherwise evil and sexual mother, so that Salome became the personification of female evil as witnessed through the seduction, immorality, and overt sexuality of her dancing.

Visual Transformations of the Medieval 'Sauterelle' into a Nineteenth-Century 'Femme Fatale'

What might be termed the 'Salome craze' was ignited by Gustave Flaubert's 1877 novella, *Herodias*, which influenced Jules Massenet's 1881 opera *Hérodiade*. However, it was the Salome depicted in the art, literature, and music of the Symbolist movement who was like no Salome ever seen before. Without doubt she was *the* archetypal image of woman as that evil and destructive force whose sexuality, if not her very existence, threatened the lives of men. The Symbolists, like their Pre-Raphaelite predecessors, were intrigued by images of women, a visual form of Goethe's quest for the eternal feminine. However, unlike the Pre-Raphaelites, these late nineteenth-century artists and writers sought out those female figures that embodied those classical and literary values signifying perversity, lust, death, and esotericism. Symbolist artists visited and re-visited those women, especially biblical women, whose narratives were allegories for cruelty, and whose representations would not initially be deemed to be shocking by the public in the way that Gustave Courbet's paintings of otherwise 'anonymous' nude women were.

17. This transformation is a major theme throughout Dijkstra 1983.

One of the greatest Symbolist painters, Gustave Moreau, was obsessed with this artistic quest for the ‘disguised’ decadence that could be visually explored through the psyche and imagination of biblical women, especially Salome. He produced over one hundred images of this biblical dancer in which he subverted the traditional iconography of earlier art and sought rather to re-imagine Salome and her mother collapsed into one female embodiment of the desire to lure men to their destruction (Fig. 4). However, his approach was indirect, that is, to present Salome within a dreamlike context so that the unreality of the situation buffered the initial viewing of the work. The influence of his imagery and the dual safeguards of biblical identity and oneiric ambience combined to extend the influence of Moreau’s revisionist Salome imagery throughout successive generations of artists from Henri Regnault and Henry Ossawa Tanner into the worlds of theatre, music, and dance.



Fig. 4. Gustave Moreau. *Study for Salome*. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris/Art Resource, New York.

His masterpiece painting *Salome Dancing before Herod* (1876) is the presentation *par excellence* of the biblical acrobat turned *femme fatale*. Predicated on a series of studies (such as Fig. 4) for this first imaging of her ‘dance of the seven veils’, Moreau positioned Salome audience left in the foreground of the final painting so that the center stage is given over to the ‘empty’ space between the enthroned Herod and the frame. The opulence of the palace environs is highlighted by the classical, read pagan, ambience of the elevated throne that is surrounded by images of classical goddesses of fertility and sexuality. The architectural motifs displayed on the decorated pillars, archways, and ceilings display the decadence of the mysterious oriental harem. Like Herod’s female attendants, Salome is dressed both erotically and exotically in the sultry garments that westerners identified with the harem.

Her hair, as evident from the multiple sketches, drawings, and preliminary paintings (see Fig. 4), is elegantly coiffed in the traditional manner of the courtesan; however, to heighten the sexual drama of the so-called ‘seven veils’, Moreau drapes a heavily embroidered white veil over her head and upper left arm in the final painting. He strengthens Salome’s exoticism with the stem of white lotus blossoms that she holds in her right hand in the position that a woman might normally hold a mirror to see her reflection. The extension of her upraised left hand creates the path of her lurid sight line cutting a diagonal across Herod’s genitals (evident perhaps more overtly in the preliminary studies, see Fig. 4) toward the upright sword of his female attendant.

Like her medieval and early Renaissance ancestors, this Salome balances herself upon her *en pointe* right foot, which suggests her embodied dynamism in contrast to the otherwise static posturing of Herod and his attendants. The murky atmosphere of this interior setting is fractured only by the diagonal contour of the theatrical lighting that fully embraces only Salome. The environmental decadence harmonizes with the exotic costumes and postures to create one of the earliest Orientalist visions of Salome, thereby transforming *la sauterelle* into *la femme fatale* in a pattern that would be influential on successive artists in all media from painting to choreography to cinema.

Better known for his romantic paintings of beautifully attired society ladies, James Jacques Tissot focused his artistic attention on religious themes after a life-changing spiritual vision of Christ in the Eglise-Saint-Sulpice, Paris, in 1886. The premature death of his beloved companion, Kathleen Newton, in 1882, ushered in a four-year period of personal and spiritual crises that led to the creation of over 700 works, illustrating first *The Life of Christ* and then *The Hebrew Bible*. Popularly known as the ‘Tissot Bible’, these illustrations included oils, watercolors, gouaches, prints, and drawings, and were enormously popular with the public from

the initial presentation of 350 gouaches on the life of Christ at the Paris Salon of 1894.¹⁸ Among these images was *The Daughter of Herodias Dancing* (1886–94), in which Tissot fused the medieval *sauterelle* with Moreau's symbolist *femme fatale*.

Like the acrobat on the tympanum of Rouen Cathedral and the misericord of Cologne Cathedral, and the sword-dancer from *The Littlemore Anselm*, this Salome is fully dressed as she stands on both hands in mid-somersault with her upraised legs split in an ostensibly forward tumble toward a lascivious Herod. The exotic Orientalist setting and costumes are reminiscent of Moreau; however Tissot depicts a more active Herod who is positioned prone on his stomach between two lecherous companions and a larger male audience. All male eyes are attentive to the acrobatic Salome whose bodily posture, costume, and face-to-face encounter with Herod reek of an eroticism absent from the medieval images. In Tissot's version, the royal sight line clearly passes beyond the dancer's covered head directly to the parting of her legs, that is, the object of Herod's desire.

Within twenty years of Moreau's paintings, a series of theatrical, operatic, and dance productions were created around this newly sexualized narrative of the dancer and her dance. The most daring of these was Oscar Wilde's play that was initially banned in more countries than it was produced. The 1896 Paris production featured Sarah Bernhardt as Wilde's *femme fatale* who was no longer the obedient, prepubescent daughter seeking to please her mother, but a passionate woman tormented by her infatuation with the otherwise physically repulsive ascetic saint. The lascivious dance of the seven veils and the melodramatic destruction of Salome, who, after kissing the lips of the Baptist's severed head, was crushed to death under the shields of Herod's soldiers, left little to the imagination. Any residual doubts were erased by the forthright sexuality of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings for the program books and advertising posters.

When Richard Strauss adapted Wilde's play for his opera, *Salome*, he set off further controversy with the inclusion of the 'dance of the seven veils'. Premiered in Dresden on 9 December 1905, the opera was immediately controversial, and has remained so even up to the most recent 2008 production at Covent Garden starring Nadja Michael. Without question, Wilde's Salome was *the* female embodiment of consummate evil and destruction.

Dancers and choreographers were not to be outdone. Productions varied from the 1900 Comédie Parisienne program and the 1907 production of

18. Later expanded exhibitions from *The Life of Christ* were acclaimed in Paris (1896), London (1897), and then throughout the US until their public subscription for the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The multi-volume *The Life of Christ* was published in several languages in over 20 editions.

Florent Schmidt's *La tragédie de Salome*¹⁹ that featured Loïe Fuller to Margaretha Zelle's²⁰ scandalous 1906 Paris 'striptease', to Maud Allan's classic two-part *Dance of Salome* and *Vision of Salome* of 1910.²¹ Famed for her interpretation of the biblical dancer, Allan set her choreography to the music of Marcel Rémy. Although based upon Wilde's play, the Canadian-American dancer became identified as 'the Salome dancer' on account of her provocative costume and the seductive nature of the choreography of the 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. Finishing her dance, Salome '[who] stands panting, aghast, her hands pressed to her young breasts...sees upon her naked flesh'²² the blood of the Baptist. A flashback overtakes her and she realizes the consequences of her action as the severed head lies before her. Nonetheless, Salome is not responsible for her actions as she is a victim of her mother's misguided demands. 'It is', Allan wrote, 'the atonement for her mother's awful sin!'

Part of Allan's fame may be credited to the judgment against her from the legal proceedings in a criminal libel trial that resulted from her 1918 performance of Wilde's play on a London stage. The Lord Chamberlain added fuel to the conflagration of the dancer's rapidly declining career by banning any further public performances of *Salome* in Britain. From the original scriptural narrative to Allan's highly interpretive choreography, Salome was transformed from an anonymous youthful acrobat who pleased a king to being the victim of her own erotic desires. Without doubt, these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interpretations were colored by the multiple societal fears provoked by the emancipation of the Jews throughout Europe, and the emerging fascination with Freudian psychology as envisioned by the Bavarian painter, Franz von Stuck, in his variations on the Salome theme (Fig. 5). Here the darkest levels of male hysteria combined with the emerging interest in dream analysis and images of the scantily-clad Allan and Mata Hari in von Stuck's Orientalist visions of female eroticism, which clearly influenced the Salomes of the American artists, Paul Manship and Robert Henri.

Turning the earlier conflation of mother and daughter on its ear, Martha Graham's *Herodiade* (1944) takes its cue from Stéphane Mallarmé's poem. She restructures the focus of her dance from the young dancer to her mother who confesses, 'I await a thing unknown'. Graham's question for the audience becomes not what is it that Herodiade waits for, but

19. Schmidt, a student of Massenet, composed a work running over an hour, which Igor Stravinsky credited as anticipating and influencing his *Rite of Spring*.

20. Perhaps better known as by her alias 'Mata Hari'.

21. Koritz 1994: 63-78.

22. All quotations from Maud Allan's autobiography cited by Manor 1980: 60; see also Cherniavsky 1985: 1-50.



Fig. 5. Franz von Stuck. *Dancing Salome*. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Germany. Photo credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York.

what does she see in her mirror? The Japanese-American sculptor, Isamu Noguchi, created this set according to Graham's narration of the dance to him, 'the image of a woman, waiting and wandering within the landscape of her own psyche, her own bleached bones placed before the black mirror of her fate'.²³ The mirror Noguchi designed for *Herodiade* was com-

23. Graham 1989: H6.

posed of the bones of the dancer's own skeleton.²⁴ Taking the principle of his sculptural forms to the theater, these bones came to life in relationship with the dancers. So when Herodiade looked into the mirror of her bones, she saw more than her own reflection, for in the program notes Graham herself cited Paul Valéry, 'One day a woman looks into a mirror and sees her bones'.

Graham's choreography became a heuristic experience for each woman in the audience who recognized that one day she would look into her mirror and 'see her bones'. Alternatively, Graham's choreography was an extension of that late nineteenth-century re-interpretation of Salome as a *femme fatale*; here her mother, the ageing *femme fatale*, realizing that her physicality is fading, sends forth her youthful daughter to perform the necessary deed. Thereby, Graham dances out Allan's contention that Salome's destruction was 'the atonement for her mother's awful sin'. As the dancer's movements embodied the bones of the mirror upon which Herodiade's attention was fixed, Graham's choreography incorporated the genuflection and circular rotations of liturgical prayer and the medieval labyrinth dance. Choreographer and sculptor plumbed the psychological and religious depths of Salome's story.

Theda Bara starred in a 1918 filmed version credited to Flavius Josephus, while a blonde Alla Nazimova over-acted throughout the 1922 silent film made from Wilde's play. The cinematic productions from the mid-1950s featured the 'dance of the seven veils' performed by Rita Hayworth in the 1953 *Salome* and Yvonne de Carlo 'orientalized' the American west in the 1954 *Salome, Where She Danced*. The television series *Omnibus* produced a version of Strauss's opera featuring the African-American performer, Earth Kitt, as the dancing Salome in 1955. Perhaps no other afterlife of *la sauterelle* turned *femme fatale* was more poignant or telling than Norma Desmond's final close-up in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). As the ageing silent movie star imagined herself as Salome, she gestured provocatively as she walked into the camera having uttered that famous line, 'Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up'.

Coda for Salome

Salome represented the inappropriate dancer; she was evil and erotic, or so she was perceived by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century public. Medieval depictions of Salome are significant for the history of liturgical dance and of medieval theater. During the Reformation, liturgical dancing was banned from both the Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions. Appropriately, Salome no longer danced.

24. Noguchi 1979.

As the ballet developed into an art form and dance became more secularized, the image of Salome waned in religious art. However, the nineteenth-century Romantic movement revived interest in religious themes in art, literature, and music, although not always for spiritual purposes. By the end of the nineteenth century, the image of Salome erupted into one of the most popular secularized themes of religious art—in symbolist paintings and later performance arts as the dancing *femme fatale par excellence*.

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READING SALOME: CARAVAGGIO AND THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES

Ela Nutu

Abstract

Without even a name in the biblical accounts, the daughter of Herodias has become for many the quintessential *femme fatale*, whose ‘dance of many veils’ leads to one man’s infatuation and another man’s decapitation. This reading of Salome, however, has less to do with the brief note on the dance that one finds in the Bible and more to do with Salome’s artistic afterlives. By looking afresh at depictions of Salome that do not represent her within an erotic context, readers of the Bible can be challenged into re-assessing their own understanding of the story of the Baptist’s death and the role that the girl plays in it. This paper examines Caravaggio’s visual interpretations of the death of John the Baptist and thus his depictions of Herod’s stepdaughter in light of the biblical text.

———— * * * ————

A minor character in the biblical accounts, the daughter of Herodias has been described as ‘the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties...the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning’ (Huysmans 1959: 65-66). As part of an analysis not of the biblical text but rather of Gustave Moreau’s first Salome painting (1876), these comments reflect a popular understanding of the biblical woman seen as responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Salome has emerged as the epitome of the *femme fatale*, whose ‘dance of many veils’ leads to one man’s infatuation and another man’s decapitation. However, this understanding of Salome does not truly surface from the pages of the Bible, where she is barely mentioned, but rather from the many canvases that tell and re-tell her imagined story. When considering representations of Salome that are removed from the erotic, readers of the Bible are also challenged to read afresh the brief biblical accounts of the Baptist’s death and thus reconsider Salome’s role in it.

Although she remains unnamed in the records of both Mark and Matthew, who are the only Gospel writers to mention her, it is Josephus who introduces Salome by name in his *Antiquities* (18.5.4). According to Josephus,

she was the daughter of Herodias by her first husband, also called Herod (descendant of Herod the Great and half-brother to Herod Antipas, who is Herodias's husband in the Gospels). Salome only appears in Matthew (14.1-12) and Mark (6.14-29), in the context of the death of John the Baptist. Both Gospel writers explain that during one of Herod's banquets (possibly his birthday), the tetrarch promises to give the daughter of Herodias whatsoever she may desire, 'even half of my kingdom' (Mk 6.23), as a reward for her pleasing dance. Not knowing what to ask for, Salome seeks her mother's advice on the matter, and at her bidding Salome asks for the head of John the Baptist, who had already been imprisoned by Herod. Though grieved by the request, Herod orders the prophet's execution, because, the two Gospel writers explain, the king simply had to keep the promise, for he had made it openly in front of his many guests. When presented with John's severed head, Salome gives it to her mother. The End.

The biblical text unequivocally presents Herodias and not Salome as the party responsible for John's death. Mark even adds an editorial note that Herodias 'had a grudge against [John] and wanted to kill him, but she could not for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him' (Mk 6.19-20). Matthew, on the other hand, insists that it was Herod himself who wanted 'to put [John] to death but feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet' (Mt. 14.5). Interestingly, the latter betrays a side of Herod's character that is far more evident in the writings of Josephus, who saw him as a cruel and unprincipled ruler, certainly not one who would care about keeping his word, even when given in front of many witnesses. In Josephus's version of the story (which is dated later than both Matthew and Mark), it is Herod who bears the responsibility for the Baptist's death and not his wife; Herodias is not even mentioned in connection with it. If Josephus's version is true,¹ Herod's character is more plausible in Matthew.

What we have in the Gospels is the story of a talented, possibly pretty, girl who does as she is told. I say 'girl', because Salome is probably at the age of puberty in the narrative. The term used to describe her by both Matthew and Mark, κοράσιον (τὰ λιθά in Aramaic, as used in Mk 5.41), is the same term used for Jairus's daughter (Mt. 9.24/Mk 5.42), who is said to be twelve years old in Mk 5.42. Justin Martyr also understands Herod's niece to be a child, and he uses the term παῖς in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (49.4-5). And yet, despite her young age, and despite the clear assignation of guilt to either Herod or Herodias, Salome has become the epitome of

1. The whole story may have been a rewriting of a different story, namely that of the Roman senator Lucius Quinctius Flaminius, who lost his position in the Senate in 184 BCE. because he ordered the beheading of a condemned man at the request of a courtesan during a banquet. (See further Crossan 1994).

the *femme fatale*, both irresistible and deadly. How does this metamorphosis take place?

The answer may lie within the long and complex process of reception and representation of the biblical character, particularly during nineteenth-century and *fin-de-siècle* European art and literature. If for masters like Caravaggio (who is the focus of this study) the guilt of the young girl may be debatable, by the end of the nineteenth century the emerging Salome is very different.



Fig. 1. Lovis Corinth, *Salomé II* (1900). Photo credit: Museum der bildende Künste, Leipzig.

As an example of the time, Lovis Corinth's *Salome* (Fig. 1) is richly adorned—a jewel on every finger and more on her hair and around her neck, dangling above her naked breasts—and she inspects the lifeless head of John the Baptist shamelessly. Salome's interest is personal, her gesture defying. She is brutal and unfeeling. Adorned with *fleurs du mal*, Salome here not only takes possession of John's severed head—her skirts caught in the charger—but she also subjugates John by penetrating him, forcing open his dead eyes. A chilling gesture of perverse victory. In Oscar Wilde's

play, which may have reverberated in Corinth's imagination, Salome addresses the head, 'Why did you not look at me? If you had looked at me... I know you would have loved me, and the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death' (Wilde 1996: 35-36). Corinth's Salome makes sure that John's dead eyes look upon her. She offers him not her own eyes, which seem to wander off past the charger, but rather her breasts, her sexuality. Salome defies as she defiles him. Her red mouth alludes perhaps to the post-decapitation kiss—the most shocking element in Wilde's play—and its bitter, bloody aftertaste. Perhaps like Richard Strauss, responsible for the infamous 'dance of the seven veils' in his *Salome* opera (which used Wilde's play as libretto), Corinth, too, thinks that 'it's the shudder that counts' (Schmidgall 1977: 286). Expanding on the 'shudder' effect, Corinth places himself in the painting as the executioner. In his right hand the sword that took John's life is still wet with his blood.

The way Caravaggio (1571–1610) imagined the girl is quite different and indeed fascinating. It seems that Caravaggio could not decide whether Salome was responsible for the prophet's death. In order to understand the artist's approach, one would have to look at all of Caravaggio's works on the subject, all executed in exile. Why exile? Because Caravaggio was not only the most progressive painter of his time and one of the greatest painters of all time, but he was also a tenebrous soul, proud and violent, to the point of murder. Caravaggio had to flee Rome at the end of May 1606, because he killed a man, Ranuccio Tomassoni, in a street sword fight that followed a disputed call in a poorly played tennis match (Puglisi 1998: 257-58).²

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born near Milan and was named after the little town of Caravaggio, where he lived with his family, his father being a 'majordomo and architect to the Marchese of Caravaggio' (Mancini, Baglione and Bellori 2005: 25-38). Around the age of twenty, Michelangelo (or Michele) moved to Rome, where he was soon to secure the patronage of some influential people, because of his unique painting style. Caravaggio's choice of religious topics opened many doors and purses to him. While some critics and fellow artists liked him little and his work even less, many became fascinated by his shocking realism. Young artists and Caravaggio's patrons appreciated his focus on realistic depiction as well as his revolutionary

2. Records of the event are somewhat contradictory. It has been suggested that the fight between the two men was an organized duel, for the tennis courts had proved sufficiently secluded for that purpose. Tomassoni may have challenged Caravaggio, who had to accept in order to save his reputation. The two swordsmen arrived accompanied by three 'seconds', who were also armed. Tomassoni died, Caravaggio suffered a severe head wound, and one of Caravaggio's party was taken to jail in a critical condition. Some of the individuals involved managed to petition for pardons successfully. It has been suggested that Caravaggio's death sentence was not lifted because the Tomassoni family were an influential political presence in Rome at that time.

technique of using light and darkness, the *chiaroscuro* effect. Caravaggio's subjects came to life by emerging from the shadows, their presence illuminated by the very quality of their being. Yet, his critics said that Caravaggio relied too heavily on nature, that he 'imitated art without art'. In the words of Giovanni Pietro Bellori, a contemporary of Caravaggio, he

...lacked *invenzione*, decorum and *disegno*, or any knowledge of the science of painting. The moment the model was taken from him, his hand and his mind became empty... Caravaggio suppressed the dignity of art...and began the imitation of common and vulgar things, seeking filth and deformity... stockings, breeches and big caps...wrinkles, defects of the skin and exterior, depicting knotted fingers and limbs disfigured by disease (Mancini, Bagli-one and Bellori 2005: 89-90).

Caravaggio's reputation did not suffer, however, thanks in part to the very *succès de scandale* surrounding his work.



Fig. 2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin* (1601–1605/1606). Photo credit: © R.M.N./R.G. Ojeda. Musée de Louvre, Paris.

One of Caravaggio's most controversial paintings is *Death of the Virgin* (Fig. 2), commissioned for the Madonna della Scala in Trastevere. This

painting depicts Mary's wake. She is on a bed, clothed in a long red dress, her left arm stretched out limply across the pillow, her head peacefully tilting to her left, towards her arm. Mary is surrounded by her grief-struck entourage, most probably a number of saints, men and women. Apart from the clarity of the title, Mary's identity is further emphasized by a halo. This painting was criticized not only because, in the words of Baglione, '[Caravaggio] had portrayed the Virgin with little decorum, swollen and with bare legs' (Mancini, Baglione and Bellori 2005: 48), but also, and perhaps more importantly, because Caravaggio had used a prostitute as a model. It was perceived, therefore, that Caravaggio inexcusably tainted Mary's reputation by association. The danger was that some would have readily moved beyond the intended scope of the painting and thus understood it to depict the death of virginity.

Two weeks after Caravaggio exhibited the *Death of the Virgin* in the Academy of Painters, he had to flee Rome, never to return, for he had killed Tomassoni. Leaving his privileged lifestyle in the house of Cardinal del Monte must have been quite difficult for the painter. Naples, where Caravaggio stopped next, was very different from Rome. Modern and cosmopolitan, with a population three times as large as Rome, Naples was the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, part of the vast domains of the Spanish King Philip III, and ruled by a series of Spanish viceroys (Langdon 1999: 319). Yet, Caravaggio's influential friends had connections in Naples, and so protected by the Colonna family he became very successful there. However, Caravaggio longed for Rome, and, perhaps counselled by his friends and due to rumours that he may be forgiven and allowed to return soon, he left for Malta in the summer of 1607 with the purpose of achieving a knighthood and thus some status, to speed his return to Rome.

Once in Malta, Caravaggio was very well received by the Knights of the Order of St John, particularly their Grand Master, Alof de Wignacourt, whose portrait Michele completed very soon after his arrival. The Knights—who were generally members of the most distinguished, aristocratic families in Europe—were 'warriors who took the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and dedicated themselves to the defence of the Catholic faith against the infidel [the Ottomans] and to the protection of the ill and weak' (Langdon 1999: 340). It is perhaps surprising to learn that Caravaggio was received into the Order only one year after his arrival in Malta, as a Knight of Ubidienna, 'obedience' (Langdon 1999: 356).

Caravaggio is likely to have finished the first of his paintings dealing with the death of John the Baptist (Fig. 3) before he became a Knight, possibly as his *passaggio*, in lieu of the large sum of money usually paid when joining the Order. Meant for the Oratory of the Co-Cathedral of St John in Valletta, this is one of Caravaggio's most extraordinary works, for some his greatest masterpiece.

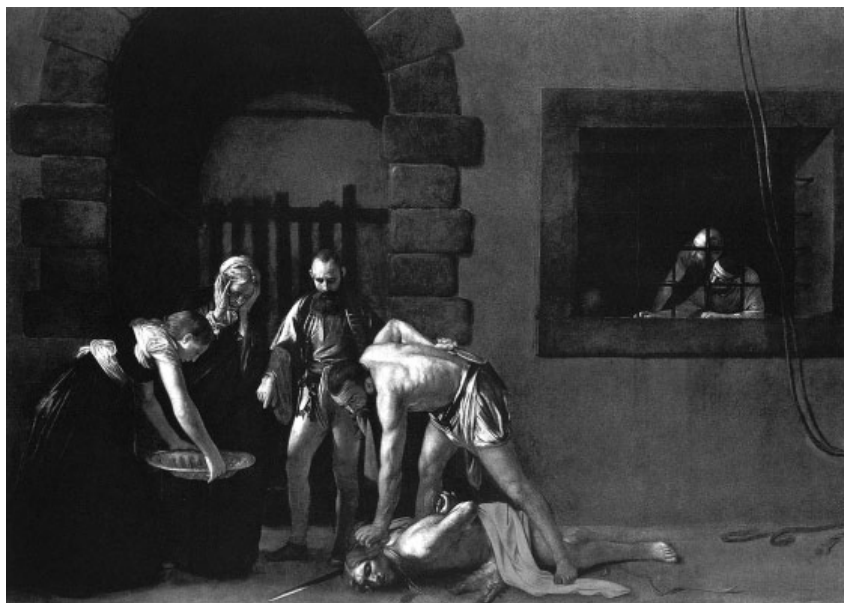


Fig. 3. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* (1608). 361 × 520 cm. Oil on canvas. Photo credit: Saint John Museum, La Valletta.

Built between 1602 and 1605, the Oratory was originally a rather sparse and austere room, used ‘for administering the sacraments, instructing novices, and carrying out other religious ceremonies and good works’ (Langdon 1999: 357), as well as criminal trials, perhaps a fitting place for Caravaggio’s *Beheading of St John*. An engraving by Wolfgang Kilian, a member of the printmaking tradition of Augsburg, is unique in showing Caravaggio’s painting *in situ*.³ Dated 1650, this engraving probably shows the original installation of the *Beheading*. It depicts a tall, narrow, windowless room. At its narrow end, in an arched alcove, hangs Caravaggio’s *Beheading*. Below it, a modest altar faces across the room the seat of the Grand Master. What Kilian makes clear in his engraving is that all criminal trials in the Oratory would always have *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* as a backdrop, a fact that Caravaggio is likely to have known and taken into consideration when creating his painting.

Kilian’s engraving further aids our understanding of Caravaggio’s inspiration for the *Beheading* through the inclusion of a lunette painting placed

3. Wolfgang Kilian, *The Criminal Tribunal of the Knights of Malta in the Oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato* (1650). Engraving. 12.7 × 7.5 cm. Catholic University of America, Washington.

above Caravaggio's own.⁴ The lunette is no longer there, for it has since been moved to Rabat. The very same is, however, recorded in a novella by the Maltese theologian Fra Fabrizio Cagliola, *Le disavventure marinaresche o sia Gabriello disavventurato*, in which the author assigns the subject of the lunette to the Great Siege of Malta in 1565. In a passage where the young protagonist of the story is given moral advice on how to become a chaplain of the Order, Cagliola writes,

[W]hen you get to Malta, [go] into the oratory of S. Giovanni Decollato, which was painted by the greatest of all painters Michelangelo di Caravaggio, and you will see depicted up above many knights, some decapitated, others with their chests ripped open strapped to timbers and thrown into the sea, others languishing from wounds in several parts of their bodies. Having taken Castel S. Elmo by storm, the Turks did not hesitate to practise every sort of cruelty on the knights they had captured, including two chaplains... who, after having fought proudly, were cut to pieces. Notwithstanding, Grand Master La Vallette, the great hero of our time, did not lose faith: indeed, he persuaded the other knights to emulate their comrades. And with a united voice they offered themselves victims to so welcome a sacrifice; and such was their valour with which they withstood the siege, that so long as there is a world they shall be remembered (Stone 1997: 161-70).

The lunette depicts the martyrdom of the Knights of Malta at the height of the Ottoman siege of St Elmo on 24 June, ironically the feast of the Knights' patron saint, John the Baptist. Above the massacre, the Madonna and the Christ Child look down with compassion from the clouds, while John the Baptist intercedes on behalf of the martyred knights. The painting depicts horrific yet historically accurate scenes of the massacre, including mutilations. According to the 1602 record of the Order's official historian, Giacomo Bosio,

All the cadavers which could be recognized as knights or men of importance were gathered up; and it was ordered that they be stripped nude, decapitated, and that their hands be severed. Then, out of disrespect of the Holy Cross and to make sport of the knights' military over-garments, on each corpse four huge incisions were made with scimitars, making the sign of the Cross on both the fronts and backs (Stone 1997: 167).

The graphic details of the painting are likely to have evoked a strong emotional response from the audience. The exalted character of the lunette is further emphasized by a Latin inscription added to the bottom of the canvas:

In the year of our Lord 1692 in the month of March was placed here this memorial vividly representing how the illustrious soldiers of Christ, girded with the armour of faith, protected with the shield and helmet of piety,

4. Anon. Maltese, *The Martyrdom of the Knights of Malta at the Siege of St Elmo on 23rd to 24th June 1565* (c. 1620–30). 275 × 590 cm. Refectory, Friary of the Franciscan Conventuals, Rabat.

suffered during the siege of this island of Malta. And so much bloodshed and so many types of martyrdoms did they endure, through which they brought glory to the Order and, with their heads, earned crowns of immortality.⁵

The lunette was painted later than Caravaggio's *Beheading*, but it embodies the moral ethos of the Knights of Malta, their devout character, their identification with the killed knights of St Elmo and thus their attitude to death and martyrdom, to self-sacrifice for the love of God. It served to instil all of the Knights' desired virtues in the novices, who, like Caravaggio, would have spent an entire year *in convento* before being received into the Order by accepting the Cross. While preceding the St Elmo painting, Caravaggio's *Beheading* would have encompassed the ethos of the Order, and his work would have served to prove to the Knights that he understood and emulated the virtues of the cross-bearing soldiers.

Depictions of the Baptist's death rarely show the actual execution, focusing instead on either the moments prior to the actual strike or the moments after, when the head is handed over to Salome. Caravaggio departs from tradition and chooses to represent the actual decapitation. With his hands tied behind his back, John has been pushed to the ground ignobly by his half-naked executioner, who now straddles him in one final attempt to finish John off, ready to deliver the *coup de grâce* with his knife. His sword lies next to John's body in parallel, its sharp and bloodied blade pointing out towards the viewer. Some light is falling from above, and all the characters in this work focus on the killing, even the two prisoners behind the bars of the window to the right. Next to the executioner, a soldier dressed in Turkish attire—a poignant choice for the Knights—looks and points down towards the golden charger offered by Salome. She bends forward, in a gesture that is almost reverent, while an old maid to her left grabs her face in sad horror, incapable, like all the others, of averting her eyes from the agonizing death of the prophet. Ignoring any of the erotic potential of the narrative, Caravaggio paints Salome as a paragon of modesty. She is unadorned here, dressed unassumingly in a plain black dress with white shawl and sash, her hair tied back simply. It is perhaps Caravaggio's intention that Salome does not stand out, that she not receive any of the thought here intended to belong fully to John.

The action takes place in what looks like a prison courtyard, yet its architectural characteristics resemble the Grand Master's palace at Valletta. While Caravaggio is renowned for his taste for realistic depictions, this is the only

5. 'Anno Domini 1692. De mense martio collocatvm fvit hic memoriale hoc in melitae fidei lorica praecinacti, scvto, at galea pietatis armati passi sint; /qvotque caedes, martyriorvmque genera perpepsi, qvibus religionem lvstravervnt, capitibvsque svvis coronam/immortalitatis mervervnt' (Stone 1997: 168).

painting that acknowledges his actual location. The reason behind this choice may lie in his desire to give a further tangible note to the Knights, by grounding the sacrifice of the Baptist within their day-to-day experience. On the other hand, Caravaggio may be expressing his hidden frustrations at being in exile and longing for his beloved Rome. For him, the Palace may well have served as prison. At the bottom of the *Beheading*, John's blood gathers in a little pool, perhaps emphasizing the sacramental value of the blood. Yet, Caravaggio signs his name in John's blood: 'f [*fecit* or *frater*] michelan...'. Is Caravaggio trying to show his penitence for having spilled blood himself? Or is he declaring himself to be a changed man, who has fully accepted the cross and thus Christ's blood sacrifice? We will never know.

Caravaggio here seems to have given up the 'aesthetic of exclamation', often present in his Roman works. Michele applies modesty to emotional expression, and the result is muted sadness. John is pinned to the ground, with his hands bound behind his back, almost naked but for his fur loin garment and a loose red veil, paralleling the trajectory of his blood. Yet John does not scream for help. He looks at no one for salvation. Instead, his eyes are almost fully closed in calm resignation. He is a willing sacrifice, a martyr. The viewer is meant to understand and appreciate this; indeed be willing to emulate the prophet's choice. Salome plays a marginal role—she is not important to Caravaggio's intended viewers, the Knights of Malta, and thus she is peripheral.

Caravaggio did not stop in Malta for very long. In 1608, Bellori states that 'because of his tormented nature, he lost his prosperity and the support of the Grand Master. On account of an ill-considered quarrel with a noble Knight, he was jailed and reduced to a state of misery and fear' (Langdon 1999: 360). Caravaggio broke out of jail by scaling down the prison walls at night, and then he fled to Sicily. In his absence, he was stripped of his knighthood, his habit (a surrogate) removed ceremoniously from a stool located, ironically, right in front of his *Beheading* painting in the Oratory, the very same *privato habitus* depicted in Kilian's engraving. Caravaggio's stay in Sicily was relatively short. He first went to Syracuse, where he still had friends, then to Messina, which he had to leave due to a quarrel with a schoolteacher; then to Palermo, after which he returned to Naples in the summer of 1609. Caravaggio continued to paint throughout, and at this point he was the most celebrated painter in Italy, and so he was full of hope in regards to his return to Rome. In Naples, Caravaggio got into another fight in an artists' tavern, and some sources indicate that he suffered a large degree of disfigurement at the hands of his attackers. While convalescing, Caravaggio painted his two *Salome* works and *David with the Head of Goliath*, which are not only masterfully executed but also examples of a new style. The viewer is presented with three-quarter-length characters, set against deep, endless, anonymous blackness.

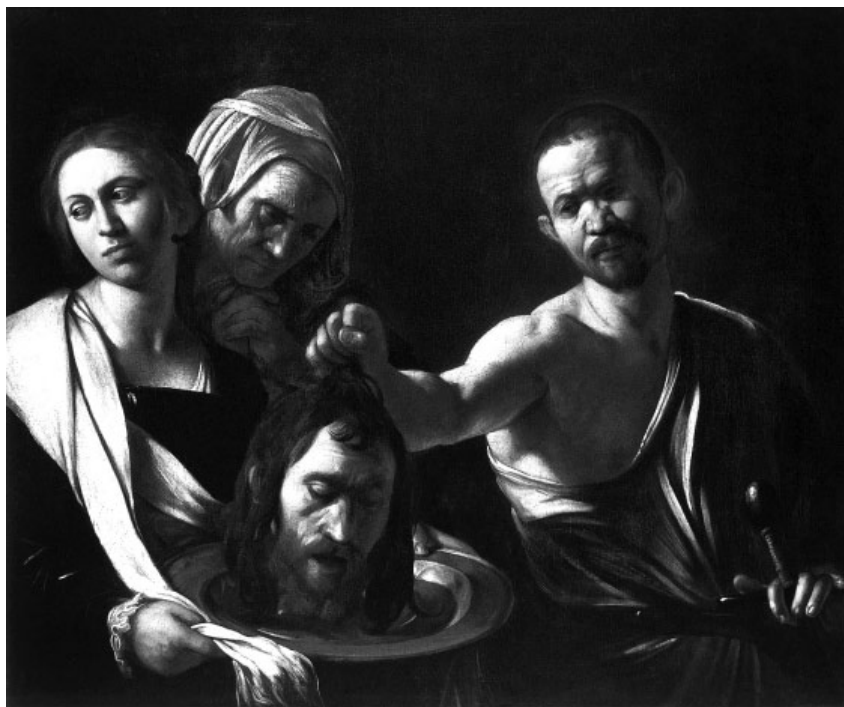


Fig. 4. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *Salome Receives the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (1607–1610). Photo credit: © The National Gallery, London.

In contrast to Caravaggio's earlier *Beheading*, Salome now steps out of the shadows and takes centre stage in the artist's paintings on the same theme, which portray the next frame in what feels like a 'moving picture' of John's horrible death. Caravaggio's two Salome paintings are quite similar. In the London version (Fig. 4), he portrays Salome holding a platter, on which the executioner places the head of John the Baptist. She looks away, in a self-distancing manner that may be warranted by the biblical text, which portrays Salome as a pawn in other people's game. Her demeanour is not seductive here; her hair is modestly bound, and her monochrome garments, reminiscent of the *Beheading*, cover her unassumingly. In the foreground, her right hand does not touch the platter directly. Rather, her white shawl (a sign of innocence) protects her from direct contact. Salome is not tainted by the murder. This evil deed is not hers to own.

From behind Salome, the seemingly disembodied head of an old woman springs eerily forth to look pensively at the decapitated head of the prophet, which it parallels. Is she Herodias, contemplating her victory, or perhaps experiencing guilt at the sight of the bloody head? Or is she a maid, and if so why is she there?

The brunt of the guilt is borne by the executioner here. In contrast to Salome, and even the old woman, the executioner behaves matter-of-factly, and he appears not to be affected by his deed. Not only does he look directly at his charge with a sense of indifference but he also grasps John's decapitated head by the hair irreverently, indeed demonstratively, with his right hand. His left rests in a gesture of calm ownership on his sword, which hangs at his side, a sign of violence and culpability. The prophet's head—here big, upright, and ashen, with eyes closed and mouth open—adds an element of horror to this composition.



Fig. 5. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* (c. 1609). Photo credit: © Patrimonio Nacional. Palacio Real, Madrid.

Caravaggio's second Salome is slightly different from his first. Here she holds the platter directly, with unprotected hands, and the head of John the Baptist is already on it. Salome looks directly at the audience, in an open gesture of acknowledgement. Her demeanour is not seductive, but her charms are more obvious than in the London version. Salome's modestly bound hair is unchanged, but her garments are no longer monochrome. She

wears a deep-red shawl and a green dress with a white blouse and peach lace. Her décolletage is deeper, too, and thus more revealing. While in the London version Salome does not appropriate the murder of the Baptist, here she does at least acknowledge her part in it. She is facing her audience, her witnesses, though her expression is not defiant but rather sad and regretful.

She shares this attitude with the executioner here. They are both pawns in a game played by superior forces. Saddened, the executioner turns his semi-naked torso away from the viewers, his head bowed in shame, his face in the shadows, eyes lingering remorsefully on his victim. The old woman's head is tilted slightly towards the man's, and this position locks them in a kind of intimate sorrow. John's head lies rather peacefully on the platter, with eyes and mouth closed.



In both paintings there is an interesting kind of symmetry. Diagonally Salome and the head of the old woman form a unit, while the executioner and John's head form another: two bodies and four heads. Horizontally, Salome is paired with the executioner, while the decapitated head of John is paired vertically with the disembodied head of the old woman. In their general positioning, the bodies of Salome and the executioner parallel each other, yet the effect is that of contrast. The exposed shoulder of the man contrasts directly with the doubly covered shoulder of Salome. In the London version, the executioner's right hand, with its direct, involved hold on John's head, contrasts with Salome's own right hand, which emerges doubly protected between her white cuff and her white shawl. Their heads are tilted by the same degree: she looks away while he looks on. She disowns the murder, he appropriates the guilt. In the Madrid version it is Salome who owns the gaze and the killing, while the executioner wishes to distance himself from it, but they are both locked in the same grid.

These are no longer the *tableaux vivants* of Caravaggio's Roman period—whose narrative power and startling immediacy arrest the viewer's attention—but rather they are more contemplative, their subjects are death and the evils of human nature. These paintings, together with *David*, were most

likely gifts meant to placate the powers in Rome so that Caravaggio could return to live there. They are pleas for mercy and signs of repentance.



Fig. 6. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. *David with the Head of Goliath* (1609–1610). 125 × 101 cm. Oil on canvas. Photo credit: Galleria Borghese, Rome.

Caravaggio's *David* is part of the gift-pack, and is very revealing (Fig. 6). In Caravaggio's interpretation of the narrative (1 Sam. 17), David is not jubilant in his victory. He appears remorseful, looking at the large head of Goliath swinging in his grip with compassion. As in the biblical text, David wears no armour, and his naked left shoulder and thin chest further emphasize his vulnerability. Caravaggio does not show David's sling here, but rather Goliath's sword, which David still holds in his right hand, pointing towards the bottom right corner of the painting, where Goliath's body would have been had it still been attached to his head. The most striking element of this composition is the dark, big, blood-dripping head of Goliath, which is in fact a self-portrait of Caravaggio.⁶ The fact that the sword is not

6. This is not an isolated incident. Caravaggio also models Holofernes on himself in his *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c. 1600) at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica a Palazzo Barberini, Rome (Nutu 2007: 117–44).

raised and that the usual phallic knot in David's shirt here falls limply over his trousers furthers the point that the artist wishes to portray his own penitence yet again. The message of the painting is that, like David, Caravaggio regrets killing a man; and like Goliath, the monstrous part of himself is slain, defeated by the power of God, never to emerge again.

In his Salome paintings all four characters embody different aspects of Caravaggio's psychology. He is the executioner, who has lived by the sword and killed a man, an evil he does not deny but rather acknowledges openly (in the London painting), though he wishes to turn away from that life-style now (as in the Madrid version). He is Salome and the maid, the two-headed model for the two 'ages of humanity': youth with its innocence (London) and passion (Madrid), embroiled in some awful deeds like this one, the death of a good man; deeds to be regretted in old age—here represented by the maid—when wisdom settles on a penitent heart. He is the victim, John, wise and dead; dead to his past, his head presented to his would-be executioners on a platter in exchange for the hope of a life to come. All these characters invite contemplation. Brought together by death, all the same height, all different aspects of real human nature.

Sadly, Caravaggio never had a chance to prove that he was a changed man. Assured of his pardon, he began his return voyage to Rome with a 'safe conduct' from Cardinal Ferdinando Gonzaga. When he disembarked at Palo (close to Civitavecchia), Caravaggio was arrested, either because his credentials came under question or as a matter of mistaken identity, which is Bellori's opinion (Langdon 1999: 388). Caravaggio bribed his way out of prison, but his boat had gone ahead without him, with all his paintings on board. Desperate and alone, Caravaggio decided to continue his journey, some of it on foot. He was 100 kilometres from Rome. Baglione's record states, 'In desperation he started out along the beach under the fierce heat of the July sun, trying to catch sight of the vessel that had his belongings. Finally, he came to a place where he was put to bed with a raging fever; and so, without the aid of God or man...he died, as miserably as he had lived' (Langdon 1999: 389). His death was received with sadness in Rome, and poets wrote eulogies. The paintings meant as gifts for Scipione Borghese returned to Naples on board the fated felucca and became the subject of a number of claims, some from the Knights of Malta.

Caravaggio's interpretations of the death of John the Baptist are late reflections on his own sinful, turbulent past, his tenebrous soul. He forgives Salome as he forgives the executioner, whose hand directly strikes the deadly blow. He forgives them as he himself would like to be forgiven. Whether manipulated into it or directly responsible for John's killing—Caravaggio does not seem to be able to decide—Salome emerges not as the *femme fatale par excellence* that she later becomes in European Decadent art. Rather she is a flawed human being, just like her artist

reader. Caravaggio's imagination seems to have afforded her the element of innocence that the Gospel writers allow in their own accounts of John's death.

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WOMBS AND TOMBS: THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF MARK 16.1-20

Christine E. Joynes

Abstract

This essay explores the reception history of the women who come to the tomb, as recounted in Mark's Gospel, to see what insights it may offer for interpretation of the text. After examining a selection of patristic interpretations (Peter Chrysologus, Gregory the Great and Pseudo-Jerome) I then compare these with some artistic interpretations of the women. Significant similarities emerge between the textual and material evidence: the women at the tomb come to be associated with baptism, and baptism is portrayed as entering the womb of the Church. In addition, I identify some distinctive features from Mark's narrative in the visual tradition of the women's visit to the tomb, such as their purchase of spices (Mk 16.1) and flight from the tomb in fear and trembling after receiving the angel's message (Mk 16.8). The literary tradition is also indebted to the Markan account, as illustrated by the influence of the *Quem quaeritis* trope on the subsequent development of European drama. Thus the rich reception history of Mark 16 enlarges our interpretative horizons, revealing insights that challenge a narrow focus upon the women's silence in 16.8.

———— * * * ————

The ending of Mark's Gospel at 16.8 is widely regarded as one of the Gospel's most distinctive features, with the women fleeing from the tomb and saying nothing to anyone because of their fear. Opinion then divides about whether the women are to be regarded as fallible followers,¹ providing encouragement to Mark's community of struggling disciples, or whether they are portrayed much more negatively as failures, whose response of fear and silence is reprehensible.² My aim in this essay is to explore the reception history of the women who come to the tomb in Mark, to see what insights we can discover from earlier interpretations of the Gospel's final chapter. I should clarify at the outset that my interest is in representations of

1. See for example Malbon 1983: 43-45.

2. Munro 1982: 237-39 adopts this approach.

the women who come to the empty tomb, and not discussion about where Mark's Gospel actually ends. After sampling a selection of patristic interpretations I then compare these with some artistic interpretations of the women, thereby raising issues about the role of artists as biblical interpreters. The examples discussed, ranging from baptismal fonts to medieval Easter dramas, highlight the significant influence of Mark 16 in a wide variety of contexts.

We should note, by way of preliminaries, that whilst there is widespread scholarly consensus that 16.8 is where Mark's Gospel finishes, the authenticity of the longer ending (16.9-20) was rarely questioned until the nineteenth century. I do not intend to rehearse here the reasons why scholars have concluded that 16.9-20 are secondary additions to the Gospel.³ I simply note that acceptance of the longer ending, or variations thereon, clearly affects how commentators through the centuries have interpreted Mk 16.1-8, since they do not regard this as Mark's conclusion. I therefore include 16.9-20 in my title to underline this factor.

1. *Textual Reception:*

Some Patristic Readings of the Women at the Empty Tomb

There is notable ambiguity amongst patristic commentators concerning the Markan presentation of the women at the empty tomb. Key features in the Markan account which are often commented upon include (i) the significance of the women's intention to anoint Jesus' dead body; (ii) their interaction with the *neaniskos* figure—the 'young man' at the tomb; (iii) the women's fearful response to the news of resurrection. For reasons of brevity, I have selected three figures to illustrate some of the interpretative approaches adopted by the church fathers: Peter Chrysologus, Gregory the Great and Pseudo-Jerome.

1.1. *Peter Chrysologus (c. 400–450)*

Peter Chrysologus, the fifth-century bishop of Ravenna, produced eighteen sermons on Mark's Gospel which are extant.⁴ He preached his Sermon (82) on Mk 16.1-12 at Easter.⁵ He does not look favourably upon the women who visit the empty tomb, commenting:

3. For a good summary of these reasons see Kelhoffer 2000.

4. These sermons focus on the following texts: Mk 2.14-17; 3.1-10; 4.35-38; 5.3-12; 5.22-29; 5.30-33; 6.1-3; 6.6-7; 6.14-28; 6.21-25; 7.2; 7.19-21; 7.24-28; 8.22-26; 9.14-24; 9.17-25; 16.1-12; 16.14-18.

5. Whilst this Easter context is unsurprising, Chrysologus was particularly fond of preaching on the theme of resurrection. For an analysis of this theme throughout his sermons see Speigl 1982: 140-53.

In this text [Mk 16.1-12] the women hasten with feminine devotion; they bring to the tomb not faith in One who is alive, but ointments for one who is dead; and they prepare for the duties of mourning for one who is buried instead of preparing for the joys of divine triumphs for One who is risen.⁶

Similarly he interprets the women's question, 'Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?', as a symbol of their lack of faith, responding:

From the entrance of the tomb or of your heart? From the tomb or from your eyes? Women, your heart has been bolted, your eyes have been shut, and so you do not see the glory of the opened tomb. If you wish to see, pour the oil not now on the Lord's body, but to illumine your heart, so that there may be made visible by the light of faith what is concealed in the darkness of unbelief.⁷

Chrysologus regards the Markan detail that the women *entered* the tomb as significant, suggesting that 'they entered the tomb so that having been buried together with Christ they might rise from the tomb with Christ'.⁸ He uses this to urge his audience to, 'Pray, brothers, that we also may die to the vices and be buried to temporal vanities, so that we may rise to eternity in Christ'.

Chrysologus's interpretation here illustrates the close association that emerged between baptism and resurrection (cf. Romans 6), with the women's actions interpreted as a symbol of baptism. Elsewhere Chrysologus interprets the tomb as the 'womb of Resurrection', suggesting that the Christ 'who had been brought forth from the womb of flesh would be born a second time from the tomb of faith; and so that the sealed tomb would render to eternal life him whom the sealed womb of the Virgin had brought forth into the present life'.⁹ As illustrated in what follows, this association of womb and tomb is a recurring motif amongst interpreters of Mark's conclusion.

In his Easter sermon, Chrysologus singles out the women's fear in Mk 16.8 for particular comment:

An angel sits inside the tomb, the women flee from the tomb, because he has confidence from his heavenly substance, but they are in a panic from their earthly condition. The one who is unable to die is incapable of fearing the tomb. But the women both tremble because of what has happened, and as mortals they still have a mortal fear of the tomb.¹⁰

6. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 82 (PL 52: 430C; English translation Palardy 2005: 44).

7. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 82 (PL 52: 431B; English translation Palardy 2005: 45).

8. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 82 (PL 52: 431C; English translation Palardy 2005: 46).

Cited by Aquinas in his *Catena aurea*. See Newman 1997: 336-37.

9. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 75 (PL 52: 412C; English translation Palardy 2005: 17).

10. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 82 (PL 52: 432B; English translation Palardy 2005: 47).

He also comments on the silence of the women in 16.8, suggesting that “‘they said nothing to anyone’...because women are allowed to listen, but not to speak; they are allowed to learn, but not to teach’;¹¹ he cites in support here 1 Cor. 14.34. He then has difficulty when interpreting Mk 16.10—where Mary Magdalene passes on the news of the resurrection—suggesting that here Mary speaks not in the role of a woman but of the Church, ‘so that just as she is to be silent, on the one hand as a woman, she is to give the message and speak, on the other hand, as the Church’.¹²

Chrysologus appears to be particularly troubled by the women receiving the news of resurrection ahead of the apostles. He explains this as ‘mystical’, asserting ‘the apostles are not ranked behind the women, but they are kept for greater things’:

The women take up reverent service to Christ, the apostles take up the sufferings of Christ; the former bear spices, the latter stripes; the former enter the tomb, the latter the prison; ...the women pour oil, the apostles shed their blood; the former are astounded at death, the latter accept death.¹³

On the basis of our survey of Chrysologus’s interpretation of the women at the empty tomb, it seems unlikely then that the bishop is here seeking to demonstrate how ‘both sexes participated in the earliest celebration of the Lord’s death and resurrection’ as Oden and Hall propose.¹⁴ Rather, he appears to use the women as foils, exhorting his congregation to exhibit greater faith.

1.2. *Gregory the Great (c. 540–604)*

We turn now to examine the interpretation of Gregory the Great, who assumes a much more positive stance towards the women who visit the tomb. Gregory’s accession to the Papacy in 590 CE gave him extensive political influence, yet his *Homilies* reveal a strong pastoral concern. In his twenty-first *Homily* (on Mk 16.1-7),¹⁵ Gregory urges his audience to follow the example of these women, who had ‘loved [the Lord] when he was alive and showed him their eager tenderheartedness even when he was dead’:

11. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 82 (PL 52: 432B; English translation Palardy 2005: 47).

12. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 82 (PL 52: 432B; English translation Palardy 2005: 47). Cf. Sermons 75 and 76 where Chrysologus also speaks of the women who visit the tomb as types of the Church.

13. Chrysologus, *Sermon* 79 (PL 52: 423B; English translation Palardy 2005: 36-37). Contrast with Myers (1988: 396) who inverts this contrast, suggesting that the three women at the tomb replace Jesus’ inner circle of three followers as true disciples.

14. Oden and Hall 1998: 241 n. 3.

15. Hurst (1990: 1) suggests that Gregory preached this sermon during the early years of his pontificate (591–592 CE).

We too, who believe in him who died, approach his sepulchre with spices if we are strengthened with the sweet smell of the virtues, and if we seek the Lord with a reputation for good works.¹⁶

Gregory continues his positive interpretation, commenting, 'The women who came with spices saw angels; since those who advance toward God through their holy desires, accompanied by the sweet smell of the virtues, behold the citizens from on high'.¹⁷

Gregory elaborates on the theme of fear in Mk 16.6, and interprets the angel's message to the women to mean, 'Let them be frightened who do not love the coming of those who live on high; let those be afraid who are weighed down by bodily desires and despair of being able to belong to their fellowship: but why are you who see your fellow citizens afraid?'.¹⁸ The concluding exhortation in the homily aptly summarizes Gregory's overall interpretation of the passage: 'Let us pass from vice to virtue, so that we may be worthy to see our Redeemer in Galilee'.¹⁹

Gregory's interpretation of Mark 16 is adopted by Bede (c. 673–735) in his *Commentary on Mark*, where again the actions of the women at the tomb are attributed to the 'great fervency of their love'.²⁰ Bede regards the mystical sense of the text to be 'an example...given to us, that with a shining face, and shaking off the darkness of wickedness, we may be careful to offer the fragrance of good works and the sweetness of prayer to the Lord'.²¹ And both Gregory and Bede's interpretations are subsequently cited by Thomas Aquinas in his *Catena aurea*. So again we see here a dominant interpretative approach to the Markan text, where the primary aim is to encourage spiritual growth in one's audience.

1.3. *Pseudo-Jerome (early seventh century)*

The author whom I shall refer to as Pseudo-Jerome produced the first full-length commentary on Mark's Gospel. Because of its attribution to Jerome, the commentary was widely copied and influential until its authenticity was questioned by Renaissance scholars. I follow the dating

16. Gregory the Great, *Homily 21* (PL 76: 1170C; English translation Hurst 1990: 158).

17. Gregory the Great, *Homily 21* (PL 76: 1170C; English translation Hurst 1990: 158). Cited by Aquinas in his *Catena aurea*; see Newman 1997: 336.

18. Gregory the Great, *Homily 21* (PL 76: 1171B; English translation Hurst 1990: 159).

19. Gregory the Great, *Homily 21* (PL 76: 1174A; English translation Hurst 1990: 163).

20. Bede, *In Marc.* 4.45 (CCSL 120: 1129).

21. Bede, *In Marc.* 4.45 (CCSL 120: 1130). Also cited in Aquinas's *Catena aurea*; see Newman 1997: 335.

of the commentary offered by Michael Cahill, who locates it in the early seventh century.²²

Pseudo-Jerome commences his interpretation of Mark 16 by encouraging his audience to 'sprinkle our book, and the compartment of our mind, with scent-giving spices, in union with the bride and the young folk who run after her'.²³ The Song of Songs features prominently in the language he uses to describe the resurrection. The author's custom throughout is to quote apt texts which he regards as relevant to the Markan narrative. He allegorizes the stone closing the tomb to represent 'the law of death'. He also goes on to interpret the astonishment of the women in 16.5 canonically, relating it to 1 Cor. 2.9 ('eye has not seen nor ear has heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those that love him').²⁴

The 'young man's' message of reassurance to the troubled women, is interpreted by appealing to 1 Jn 4.8 ('God is love') and 1 Jn 4.18 ('there is no fear in God's love'). Somewhat surprisingly, in view of the empty tomb, Pseudo-Jerome comments, 'What should they fear, they who have found the one they sought?'.²⁵ He suggests that the clear pointer to the 'place where Jesus was laid' is significant because it should 'elicit [from mortals] due thanksgiving. This is so that we may understand what we were, and that we might know what we will be'.²⁶

Pseudo-Jerome picks up on the significance of the women as messengers of good news, a prominent motif amongst early church writers: 'The women are told to inform the apostles. Because death was announced through a woman, so through a woman, the news of resurrection life'.²⁷ He reconciles this interpretation with Mk 16.8 by reading the latter allegorically: thus the reference to the women's flight 'refers to the *future* life. And sorrow and groaning will flee (Isa. 35.10). Before the resurrection of all, the women portray what they do after the resurrection—they flee death and terror'.²⁸ Here again the women are regarded as typifying the resurrection faith of the church.

The author suggests that the women said nothing to anyone, 'Because they alone see the mystery of the resurrection who themselves have deserved to see it'.²⁹ But he then goes on to cite John's account where Peter got up and ran to the tomb so that he might see for himself what he had heard. This

22. Cahill 1998: 6-7.

23. Cahill 1998: 127.

24. Cahill 1998: 128.

25. Cahill 1998: 129.

26. Cahill 1998: 129.

27. Cahill 1998: 129. This comparison between the women who come to the tomb and Eve is common amongst the church fathers; cf. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, who refers to women as 'the devil's gateway'.

28. Cahill 1998: 129 (my emphasis).

29. Cahill 1998: 130.

illustrates another typical approach to Mk 16.8, namely the assumption that the women did not really remain silent.

2. The Visual Tradition of Mark 16.1-20

I want now to take a different approach and focus in the remainder of this essay on the impact of Mark 16 in art, music and literature. As I hope to demonstrate in what follows, reading the Gospels through the arts is a dynamic process, offering fresh modes of encounter with the biblical texts, and enlarging our interpretative horizons.³⁰ Moreover, significant similarities emerge between the textual evidence considered above and the material evidence to which we now turn.

2.1. *Wombs and Tombs: The Place of Mark 16 in Baptism*

One of the themes to emerge in the interpretations of the church fathers was the association between Mark 16 and baptism, with the women portrayed as symbols of dying and rising with Christ. So it should come as no surprise to see portrayals of the women finding the empty tomb on baptismal fonts. Indeed the oldest extant depiction of the women at the empty tomb can be found in the (badly preserved) third-century fresco from the *baptistery* of Dura Europos (c. 250 CE).³¹ The rectangular shape of the Dura baptistery is probably intended to suggest the shape of a tomb.³² However, in a recent article, Robin Jensen has argued that the baptismal font was also frequently regarded as a womb by early church writers, symbolizing the converts' birth from the fertile womb of the mother Church.³³ Thus the women who approach the tomb may also symbolize the life-giving womb when they are depicted on baptismal fonts.

The tradition of representing the women at the empty tomb on baptismal fonts continues into the twelfth century, where examples can be found at Lenton (Nottingham, England) and Loderup (Skane, Sweden).³⁴ Interestingly, the former representation of the women portrays them with haloes, indicating that they are unequivocally to be regarded positively.³⁵ Another

30. See further Joynes 2007: 145-63.

31. Schiller 1971: 18 (my emphasis).

32. So Jensen 2005: 139.

33. Jensen 2008: 138. See also Jensen 2000: 173. On the womb-like aspects of the font Jensen cites Justin Martyr, *I Apol.* 61; Tertullian, *De bapt.* 3; Cyprian, *Ep.* 73; and Zeno of Verona, *Inv. ad font.* 1 and 7. She also provides physical examples of womb-shaped fonts, such as the fifth-century baptismal font from Sufetula (modern day Sbeitla) in Tunisia.

34. These are illustrated in the *Baptisteria Sacra Index*, which Harriet Sonne de Torrens kindly drew to my attention.

35. I am grateful to Professor Hurtado at the University of Edinburgh for this observation.

twelfth-century representation of the women can be found on the baptismal font from Modena cathedral, which depicts the rarer image of the women buying spices prior to their visit to the tomb to anoint Jesus (Fig. 1). This peculiar Markan detail concerning the women's purchase of spices is a feature to which we shall return when we consider the literary tradition of Mark 16 below.³⁶



Fig. 1. Women buying spices. 12th century. Baptismal font, Modena Cathedral. Photo credit: Archivio fotografico del Museo Civico d'Arte di Modena (photo Vincenzo Negro 1989).

2.2. The Women at the Tomb as the Dominant Image for the Resurrection

It is also important to note at this point that the earliest imagery of the resurrection was not of Jesus emerging from the tomb, but rather of the women finding the empty tomb.³⁷ As Schiller points out, portrayals of Christ rising from the tomb only slowly begin to appear in the eleventh century.³⁸ When examining the visual tradition of the women who visit the tomb, one encounters a significant variety of media on which the episode appears: baptismal fonts; ivories; oil lamps; altar pieces; book covers;

36. Its representation in the visual tradition can be found elsewhere, for example on the façade of Saint-Gilles-du-Gard, France.

37. Schiller 1971: 17.

38. Schiller 1971: 17. Other representations of the resurrection theme are of course apparent, illustrated for example by the raising of Lazarus. For an overview of the range of symbols used see Jensen 2000: 156-82.

illuminated manuscripts; etc.³⁹ This illustrates the widespread influence of the passage.

The number of women represented varies between two and three. One could argue that since Mark's account mentions three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome) that the representations of three women are based on the Markan narrative.⁴⁰ However, as I have argued elsewhere, artistic representations more usually harmonize elements from different Gospel accounts.⁴¹ Typically the women are portrayed encountering an angel and clutching spices; their demeanour is apprehensive or fearful. Very occasionally they are depicted in flight from the tomb. An example of the women's impending flight can be found on the eleventh- or twelfth-century silver reliquary cover reproduced in Figure 2. One woman's foot turns outwards, as she looks back towards the angel, in her anxiety clinging to her companion. Citations from the Gospels are distributed on the surface of the silver cover: over the angel it reads: 'Come and see (*Deute ide*) the place where they laid the Lord' and above the women is written 'They were overcome with trembling and shock (*tromos kai ekstasis*)', peculiarly Markan terms (Mk 16.8). On the edge of the cover stands the text of a Greek hymn:

In what glory appeared the angel to the women
From far away one sees the splendour of his innate dignity
And the purity of his immaterial transcendence
His beauty proclaims the splendour of the resurrection
He calls loudly: the Lord is risen.⁴²

This example demonstrates the impact of combining text and image, with the words of the Greek hymn influencing how we interpret the visual depiction of the women. It clearly suggests that the Markan references to the women's trembling and astonishment are to be understood in response to epiphany, an encounter with the divine.⁴³

39. This is clearly demonstrated by the large variety of images listed in Schiller 1971.

40. This is in contrast to the Matthean account (Mt. 28.2), which mentions only two women (Mary Magdalene and the other Mary), and Luke's version (Lk. 24.10) which mentions a larger group (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women with them).

41. Joyes 2006: 26.

42. Schiller 1971: 28 (my translation).

43. Cf. Yarbro Collins 2007: 800, who interprets the women's flight in fear and trembling as a response to epiphany. This interpretation has been suggested previously (for example Catchpole 1977) but has not gained widespread acceptance. See for example Lincoln (1989: 286) who rejects this reading of the text.



Fig. 2. Women at the empty tomb. Silver reliquary cover. 11th/12th century. St-Denis, Paris. Photo credit: Hirmer Verlag, München.

2.4. *Reading Mark 16 Canonically*

A further point to note concerning the visual tradition of Mark 16 is the tendency to interpret the text canonically, that is placing it alongside other biblical texts. This again affects how the Markan narrative is regarded. So for example, a ninth-century silver container from the Vatican (Fig. 3), clearly represents the women running away from the angel at the tomb. Their feet are turned in flight as they respond in fear and trembling to the angel's message (Schiller 1971: 22). However, since the depiction of Mk 16.8 is juxtaposed with representations of the road to Emmaus and

John and Peter's visit to the empty tomb, fear and silence is clearly not regarded as the end of the story on this artifact.⁴⁴



Fig. 3. Women fleeing from the tomb; Road to Emmaus; Peter and John's visit to the tomb. Silver container. c. 820. Museo Sacro, Vatican. Photo credit: By permission of the Vatican Museums.

My second example of a canonical reading of Mark 16 is the so-called Reidersche Panel, an ivory carving, probably produced in Italy in c. 400 CE and now in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich. It illustrates the women's visit to the tomb alongside Christ's ascension (Fig. 4).⁴⁵ Very unusually, we see here a *wingless* angel, sitting on a small rocky hill before the tomb. The ivory captures well Mark's ambiguity concerning the angelic identity of the *neaniskos* figure whom the women encounter. The women's approach to the tomb is (typically) apprehensive. But in contrast to other early Christian representations, in the Munich ivory the entrance to the tomb is closed. Since the ascent to heaven is represented, no visual proof of an empty tomb is required, and instead the closed door emphasizes the resurrection miracle.⁴⁶ The picture composition draws the viewer's attention to the diagonal movement: on a steep hill Christ steps upwards with wide swinging steps, his outstretched right hand grasped by the right hand of God. Two disciples witness Christ's ascent: one covers his face as though blinded, the other looks above with gestures of awe. In contrast, the two guards remain unaware of the ascension: one sleeps standing, whilst the other looks past the tomb to the women. Behind the tomb two birds pick at

44. Equally, it might also be argued that this artifact elevates the significance of the women's encounter with the angel at the tomb to the same level as the resurrection appearances with which it is juxtaposed.

45. See further Telesko 1999. The early date of this ivory is particularly significant.

46. Schiller 1971: 25.

the fruit of a tree, a widespread motif in early Christian art for the participation of the believer in eternal life. The composite nature of this image thus directs our gaze away from the women's encounter with the wingless angel to focus instead on the ascent motif.

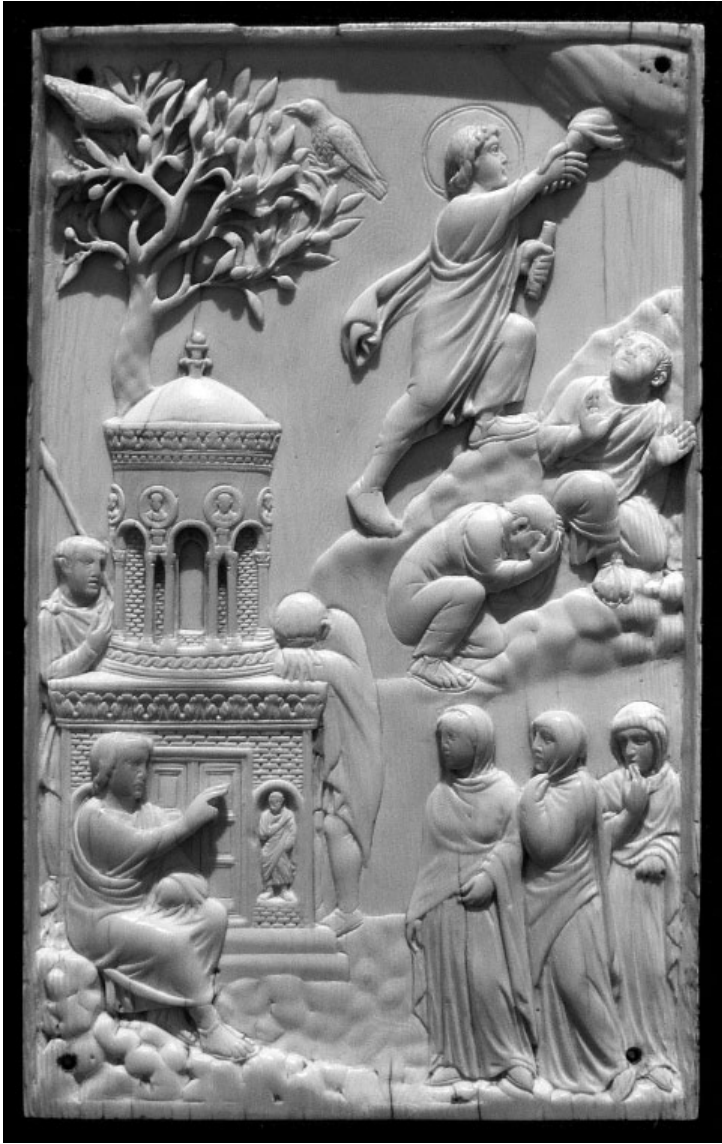


Fig. 4. Reidersche Panel. c. 400 CE. 18.7 × 11.5 cm. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich. Photo credit: Andreas Praefcke.

Other episodes with which our narrative is visually juxtaposed include the crucifixion,⁴⁷ different resurrection appearances, such as the appearance to Thomas,⁴⁸ and also the birth of Christ.⁴⁹ This latter juxtaposition is particularly noteworthy, since it highlights a striking parallelism between the women bringing spices and the magi bearing gifts, and again emphasizes the close connections between death and life, wombs and tombs.

As we have seen then, there is a well established visual tradition of the women's visit to the tomb, with some key features from Mark's narrative, such as the women's purchase of spices and their flight from the tomb in fear and trembling after receiving the angel's message, being represented. We turn now to examine the influence of our Markan text upon literature and music.

3. *The Literary and Musical Tradition of Mark 16.1-20*

3.1. *The Quem Quaeritis Trope*

The account of the women's visit to the empty tomb has played a significant role in both liturgical and vernacular drama. The earliest extant Easter dramas, known as *Visitatio sepulchri*, appeared in the ninth century.⁵⁰ They include a brief dialogue between the Angel and the Women, which was probably originally sung antiphonally:

- Angel: Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, O Christicole?
[Whom do you seek in the tomb, O Christians?]
- Women: Jesum Nazarenum, O celicole
[Jesus of Nazareth, O heaven dwellers]
- Angel: Non est hic, surrexit sicut predixerat; ite nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro
[He is not here; he is risen just as he foretold; go announce that he is risen from the sepulchre]

This dialogue, known as the *Quem quaeritis* trope on account of its opening words, was initially performed prior to the Introit for the Easter Mass or at Matins on Easter morning, though its liturgical positioning shifted in the eleventh century to just after Matins.

Evidence that Mark 16 was the basis for this trope can be found in Amalarius, Bishop of Metz (?780–850), where his description and interpretation of the Easter night Mass explicitly notes Mk 16.1-8 as the reading which

47. See, for example, the Rabbula Gospels.

48. Schiller 1971: 325, pl. 41.

49. Schiller 1971: 324, pl. 40.

50. The complex relationship between the *Quem quaeritis* and the *Visitatio sepulchri* is clearly summarized by Bjork 1980: 46-69.

supplies the majority of the *Quem quaeritis*.⁵¹ Indeed some examples of the *Quem quaeritis*, such as the following one from Klosterneuberg,⁵² quite clearly reflect the Markan text, where special reference is made to Peter (Mk 16.7; cf. Mt. 28.7):

Angel: Quem quaeritis o tremule mulieres, in hoc tumulto plorantes
[Whom do you seek, O trembling women in this tomb lamenting?]

Women: Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum quaerimus
[We seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified]

Angel: Non est hic quem quaeritis, sed cito euntes nunciate discipulis eius et Petro quia surrexit Jesus.
[He is not here whom you seek, but go quickly and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus has risen.]

In its original monastic setting, men played the role of the women at the tomb, dramatically re-enacting the events of Mark 16. Thus the tenth-century *Regularis concordia* (Agreement of the Rule), ordered by King Edgar as part of the restoration of Benedictine monasticism after the Viking invasions, notes:

While the third lesson is being read, four of the brethren shall vest... One of them, wearing an alb and carrying a palm goes to the place of the sepulchre while during the third respond [following the lesson] three others vested in copes and holding thuribles in their hands shall advance as though searching for something. Now these things are done in imitation of the angel seated at the tomb and of the women coming with perfumes to anoint the body of Jesus (Muir 1995: 15).

As David Bjork points out, the purpose of this practice was ‘above all to make dramatically clear the manner in which past time is rendered present again in cultic acts’ (Bjork 1980: 50). The audience is encouraged to identify with the women approaching the tomb, hearing the news of resurrection afresh. We should also note at this point that the *Quem quaeritis* trope combines both music and literature, since it originated in chant form, with an associated text.

A transition takes place from the monastic setting of *Quem quaeritis* to its broader impact on vernacular drama with the growth in popularity of the mystery plays. More than 1,000 surviving manuscripts of *Visitatio*

51. Amalarii Episcopi, *Liber officialis* I.I, 31, 160-61. Cited by Schildgen 1999: 74.

52. Reproduced in Smoldon 1946: 10. Smoldon notes the absence in the Klosterneuberg version of ‘Christicolae’ and ‘celicolae’, suggesting that the latter (‘heaven-dwellers’) appeared in the plural elsewhere for rhyming purposes, but caused difficulties when a *single* angel was employed. Smoldon’s comment is pertinent when assessing the relationship of the *Quem quaeritis* to Mark, since the evangelist mentions only one heavenly messenger at the tomb.

plays exist from all parts of Europe. Many are devoted almost entirely to laments of Mary Magdalene and her companions. As Peter Loewen notes above, 'they lament on their way to the tomb, and, finding it empty, Mary Magdalene usually launches into dramatic monody where she reminisces over the events and emotions of the Passion and Crucifixion'.

An addition to the *Visitatio* play emerges in the early twelfth century, when a Mercator (merchant, sometimes also called Unguentarius) who sells the Marys their spices before they go to sepulchre, appears.⁵³ He was to play a major role in later Easter plays, both Latin and vernacular, acquiring a wife, son and an apprentice in various embellishments upon the biblical account.⁵⁴ As noted above with reference to the representation of this motif in the visual tradition, it is striking that the women's visit to a merchant to buy spices developed such a colourful afterlife.

The popularity of the *Visitatio*, which reached its height in the thirteenth century,⁵⁵ is well-summarized by William Smoldon, who concludes that the *Quem quaeritis* trope is the 'germ of all European drama'.⁵⁶ This indicates the far-reaching impact of our Markan text and also its transition from a musical context to a literary one. Its ongoing influence upon the musical tradition is apparent, however, as illustrated by Johann Sebastian Bach's *Cantatas* which reflect many of the themes identified in the early period on which this essay focuses.⁵⁷ Thus Cantata BWV 31 'Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde jubiliert' (The heavens laugh, the earth exults in gladness) refers to the tomb as a womb, and interprets the visit to the tomb as a challenge to purge vice and put on virtue, with the exhortation to 'spiritually rise and leave the tombs of sin, if you are a member of Christ'. So in this *Cantata* Bach also portrays the women's flight from the tomb symbolically.

Conclusions

To conclude, my purpose has been to highlight just *some* examples from the extensive reception history of the women who come to the empty tomb as

53. Muir 1995: 140 notes, by way of example, the significance of the Mercator figure in manuscripts from Ripoll, Donaueschingen, Eger, Delft, Origny, Tours, Gréban and Rouergue.

54. Smoldon 1946: 14; Muir 1995: 140.

55. Smoldon cites two notable examples: from Origny-St-Benoît and Barking Abbeys. The former includes, besides the *Quem quaeritis* dialogue, the visit of Peter and John to the tomb (Jn 20.2-8) and the scene between Christ and Mary Magdalene (Jn 20.11-28). Here again we see the Markan text being read canonically in the light of other scriptural narratives.

56. Smoldon 1946: 2.

57. Mention should also be made here of contemporary musical versions of the *Visitatio sepulchri*, such as James MacMillan's piece, first performed in 1993.

narrated by Mark, in an attempt to cast light on their role. Four key points emerge from this survey. Firstly, modern disagreements amongst commentators about whether to interpret the women's actions positively or negatively have a long history. Contrasting the positive reading of Gregory the Great with Peter Chrysologus's criticism of the women's lack of faith, reveals the interpretative pluralism which has persisted throughout the centuries. Whilst many scholars dismiss the contribution of patristic writers to contemporary hermeneutical debate, we would do well to heed the observation of Ulrich Luz, who points out that 'Working out the existential significance of the biblical text was an important concern of allegorical interpretation' (Luz 2005: 602).

Secondly, I have suggested that a dominant interpretative approach to Mk 16.1-8 focused upon the association between wombs and tombs. The women's entry into the tomb was regarded as a symbolic reference to dying and rising with Christ, with resurrection depicted in terms of new birth. This was reflected in the visual tradition through representations of the women at the tomb on baptismal fonts and also through the association of these women with the birth of Christ.

The above survey also highlighted that the Markan text was often read canonically. Even in those instances where 16.8 is clearly to the fore (such as depictions of the women's flight from tomb), other Gospel passages are then brought into dialogue with Mark's narrative. The reception history of Mk 16.1-8 therefore reminds us that from a very early stage the Gospels came to be harmonized, and read in the light of each other.

Finally, instead of concentrating solely on key figures within Church tradition, I adopted a different approach, suggesting that we might read the Gospel through the arts. As I have emphasized, the visual tradition of a text can often highlight neglected features, such as the parallelism between the women at the empty tomb and the magi. And apparently incidental details in the Markan account, such as the women's purchase of spices, come to play an important role in the narrative's afterlife, prompting the reader to interpret the text with an enlarged vision. Reading Mark 16 through the arts reveals the significant cultural impact of our Gospel text, and also the different contexts in which it was used. By placing the Gospel narrative in these settings we glimpse something of the ongoing influence and meaning of the biblical account.

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SIBLING RIVALRY: MARTHA AND MARY OF BETHANY

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Abstract

In the history of Christian art, the biblical sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany seem to suffer various cases of mistaken identity. Mary gets confused with an unnamed sinner, a woman taken into adultery, and later becomes indistinguishable from Mary Magdalene, an interpretation that can be traced back to the writings of the early church fathers. Martha is most often depicted simply as the personification of the Active Life, a counterpart to Mary's Contemplative Life, illustrating an allegory embraced by early Alexandrine thought. These and other examples analyzed in this essay—through specific works of art spanning the period from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries—show that it is later Christian writings, rather than the text of the Bible itself, that have an enduring legacy in art and help mold the history of artistic representation.

———— * * * ————

The sisters Martha and Mary are the heroines of three distinct Gospel stories. In the Gospel of Luke (10.38-42) they host Jesus at their house in an unnamed village in Galilee. As Jesus and his disciples pass through the village, Martha initiates the visit ('opened her house to him'); she serves the meal and otherwise busies herself to ensure that Jesus is properly taken care of. Mary sits idle at his feet, listening to his teachings, oblivious to whether her sister may need help with any chores. Irritated, Martha complains, expecting Jesus to scold Mary for not helping her. Yet his response is 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her'.¹ As quite often in an instance of sibling rivalry, complaining does not accomplish a great deal.

The second episode featuring the sisters also involves an action by Mary that causes complaints, although this time not her sister's. In the Gospel

1. All Bible quotations are from the New International Version (International Bible Society; copyright 1973, 1978, 1984).

of John (12.1-8), the sisters, who now live in Bethany and have a brother Lazarus, again host Jesus. While Martha again serves the meal, Mary brings in a jar of very expensive nard and uses it to anoint Jesus' feet, which she then wipes with her hair. This leads one of the apostles to complain about the usage of so expensive a perfume, which instead could be sold and the money given to the poor. Again, Jesus' reply startles its recipient: 'Leave her alone. It was intended that she should have this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me'.

The third episode, also in John (Jn 11.1-5, 17-32), tells the story of the death of Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother. The sisters sent for Jesus when Lazarus was taken ill, but by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, their brother had been dead for four days. Martha again takes the initiative and goes out of the house to meet Jesus, while Mary stays behind. Martha's initial complaint, 'If you had been here, my brother would not have died' gives way to the acknowledgment 'I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask'. Her later affirmation, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world' is one of the most direct statements of faith by any of Christ's followers. No response from Jesus is needed, so 'after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary'. Mary greets Jesus in a similarly reproachful way, telling him that if he had been there he could have prevented her brother's death. Unlike her sister, though, she falls at his feet and weeps. And then Jesus, touched and weeping himself, has the stone removed from the tomb and proceeds to bring Lazarus back to life (Jn 11.38-44).

From these stories Martha emerges as a woman of action, careful always to fulfill her duties (albeit begrudgingly at times), and not afraid to speak her mind. At the same time, though, her interaction with Jesus in the latter account defines her as an enlightened follower or even disciple of Christ.² Her sister Mary is the quiet one, a listener and an introvert (except when overwhelmed by the pain of losing her brother). She, too, expresses her faith in Christ but not with words: instead, she anoints his feet with expensive ointments and uses her own hair to dry them. This is all that the Bible tells us about the sisters Mary and Martha. When comparing the accounts in Luke and John, the only uncertainties about them are whether they lived in Bethany or in another, unnamed, village, and whether they had a brother named Lazarus.

By contrast, in later literary history, from early church fathers to late medieval mystics and popular legend, Mary of Bethany's fate gets mistaken for and combined with that of a number of other female characters from the Gospels. The confusion was created by the many Marys

2. A point made by Esler and Piper 2006: 157.

mentioned—but not clearly distinguished—in the Gospels, together with the even more numerous unnamed women whose stories often overlap, as well as by the existence of a number of quite similar anointing stories. Some of these stories take place in Bethany but feature different characters (Mt. 26.6-13 and Mk 14.3-9); others involve a sinful woman (Lk. 7.36-38).

Two different aspects of early Christian thought on the Bethany sisters are of interest here by virtue of their direct impact on the arts. First is the conflation of Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene (and also with the unnamed sinner, and the woman taken into adultery) present in the writings of several Church Fathers.³ An early pictorial example of such a *mélange* is found in a miniature representing *Christ in the House of Simon* in the early-twelfth-century St Albans Psalter, now in Hildesheim, Germany (Fig. 1).⁴ The anointing scene taking place in the house of Simon the Leper (Mt. 26.6-13; Mk 14.3-9) describes an unnamed woman bringing forth a jar of expensive ointment and pouring it on Christ's head; here, however, the woman is kneeling at Christ's feet and wiping them with her hair (thus consistent with Jn 12.1-8, the story of the Bethany dinner and Mary, sister of Martha, as the anointer). At the same time, the narrative context of the other illustrations identifies the protagonist as the Magdalene: a Mary Magdalene who, contrary to the biblical text, is a sinner and lives in Bethany with her sister Martha. This conflation, aptly named by one historian 'the muddle of Marys', remains a constant throughout the history of western art.⁵

The second aspect of early literature on the sisters which had a lasting impact on the arts was the fact that it emphasized the contrast in their behavior toward Jesus. Indeed, as early as the second and third centuries, Alexandrine thought (Origen, followed by Cyril of Alexandria) allegorized Mary and Martha as embodiments of the contemplative and active life, respectively. This approach was taken on and further refined by the Latin Church Fathers. By and large, they argued for the superiority of the contemplative life, as indicated by Christ himself in Lk. 10.42: 'Mary has chosen what is better'. Yet many of the Latin Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries also acknowledged that the roles of the two sisters overlap somewhat (St Ambrose); that the life of action is a stepping stone for the contemplative

3. Apostolos-Cappadona 2002: 11; Constable 1995: 5-8. Medieval legend sometimes conflated Martha too with the woman with the issue of blood, yet this does not become the predominant tradition, as in the case of her sister Mary. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, II: 24.

4. Carrasco 1999: 67-80.

5. Warner 1983: 344-45. In the Eastern Church, by comparison, the conflation of Mary of Bethany and the Magdalene does not occur; see Apostolos-Cappadona 2002: 14.

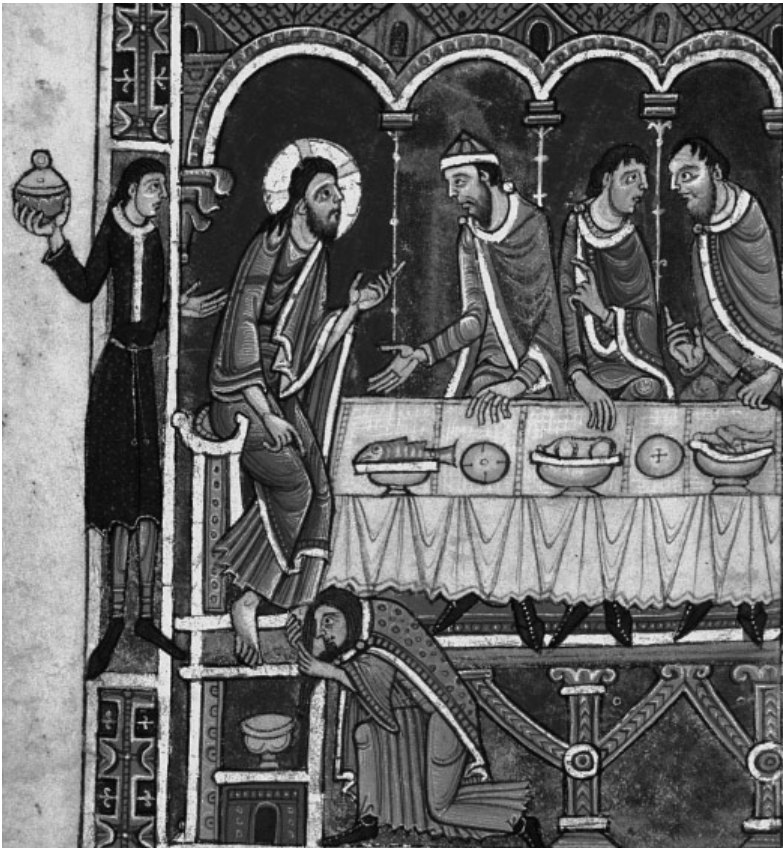


Fig. 1. *Christ in the House of Simon*. St Albans Psalter. 12th century. Hildesheim. Photo credit: Dombibliothek, Hildesheim.

life (St Augustine); and hence that the active life (which is good) constitutes life on earth, while the contemplative (which is better) symbolizes eternal life in heaven (St Gregory the Great).⁶

Interestingly, the attention given to the duality of active/contemplative in patristic literature is not matched by a similar interest in the visual arts early on: the representation of the *Dinner in the House of Martha and Mary* is not depicted at all in early Christian art, and only infrequently during the Middle Ages. *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, by contrast, appears in art much more frequently. Indeed, Christ's miracles seem to have been among artists' favorite subjects throughout the ages, and among the earliest narratives

6. Constable 1995: 14-20; Apostolos-Cappadona 2002: 14.

depicted in Christian art.⁷ Yet the earliest representations of *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, such as the fresco in the Catacomb of Callixtus (mid third century), did not include Mary and Martha. This is consistent with most early representations of miracles, which are performed without an audience: Christ himself and the recipient of the miracle are the only protagonists.⁸ It is only in the Middle Ages that the scene is expanded to include other characters: not only the sisters, but often a large group of other witnesses—Christ's disciples and mourners from the village who joined Mary in welcoming Jesus, according to Jn 11.33.

This expanded iconography is brilliantly illustrated by the *Raising of Lazarus* on the fourteenth-century predella of Duccio's *Maestà* (Fig. 2). Christ is shown in the middle of a relatively large crowd, with his disciples behind him and local onlookers between him and the tomb from which Lazarus has already risen. Closest to Christ in that group are the sisters: Martha, standing directly in front of him, and Mary, kneeling at his feet. Mary is cloaked in the scarlet mantle which in the previous century had become a common attribute and one of her identifiers as Mary Magdalene.⁹ Compositionally they both command similar attention: Martha looking Christ in the eye, her raised hand overlapping with Christ's which gestures toward her brother; and Mary, in the foreground, the only figure not standing, the color of her garment similar to Christ's tunic. Among the crowd, and other than Christ himself and Lazarus (who dominates the right-hand side of the composition), they are clearly the protagonists of the story. Yet there is something unusual about Martha in Duccio's rendition. Her standing posture, her proximity to Christ, her gesture affirming the miracle she is witnessing are all unusual in the art of the time. The more common composition, with a long pedigree in Byzantine art and illustrated, among others, by Duccio's contemporary Giotto in the frescoes of the Arena Chapel in Padua, has both sisters prostrate at the feet of Christ.¹⁰ Yet Duccio's version is a more faithful rendition of the biblical text. In John's narrative, Mary greets Jesus by falling to his feet (Jn 11.32) while Martha remains standing (Jn 11.20-21). Moreover, while in Luke's story of the dinner at their house Mary clearly emerges as the one closest to Christ, the one who made the right choice, in John's Raising of Lazarus Martha is not only the first one to welcome Christ but also the one who affirms his divinity as the Son of God: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world' (Jn 11.27).

7. In the Middle Ages, scenes from the Infancy and the Passion of Christ will replace miracles as the largest group of subjects in art; see Mathews 1999: 59.

8. See Esler and Piper 2006: 134-35.

9. Sullivan 1985: 44.

10. Sullivan (1988: 376-77) provides other examples of the more traditional composition.

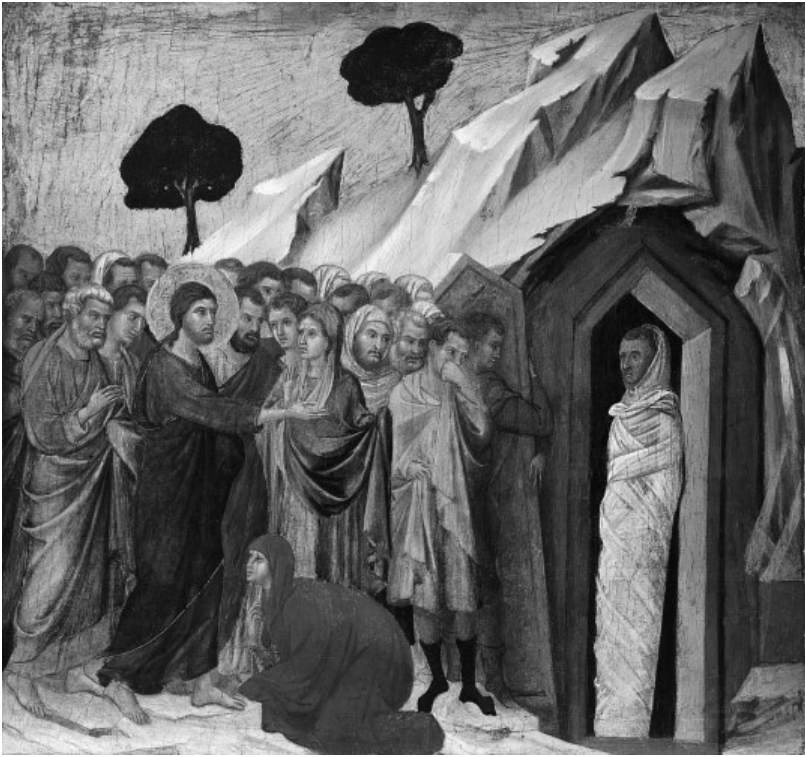


Fig. 2. Duccio di Buoninsegna. *The Raising of Lazarus*, detail from *Maestà*. 1308–1311. 43.5 × 46.4 cm. Tempera and gold on panel. Photo credit: Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas / Art Resource, New York.

It is tempting to speculate that Martha's prominence in works such as Duccio's may relate to her growing cult (separate from her sister's) starting in the twelfth century.¹¹ In art, this is witnessed by representations of Martha as an independent figure, outside of the three biblical narratives in which she shares the limelight with her sister. Sometimes she is represented carrying myrrh (Autun Cathedral, France, twelfth century); other times she carries a scourge and one of her attributes, a dragon (Old Warden Abbey, Bedfordshire, England, fourteenth century). Her burial is also occasionally depicted (as illustrated, among others, in a mid-fourteenth-century manuscript from the Franciscan House of Bamberg or a fifteenth-century *predella* panel by Sano di Pietro).¹² Textual sources confirm the

11. See Constable 1995: 44 on the emergence of two distinctive cults, and a new positive emphasis on Martha's role of action.

12. Constable 1995: 122–23; Gaillard 1922: 237–39.

raising cult of Martha in the later Middle Ages. A late twelfth-century *Vita* of Mary Magdalene, whose author was deeply influenced by Saint Bernard's spirituality, dedicates ten chapters to the miracles and death of the 'blessed Martha', independently of the narrative involving her role in her sister's life.¹³ Her miracles, incidentally, are prominently described in the *Vita* while none of her sister's are even mentioned; it has been argued that this may be the result of Martha's role as a symbol of active life.¹⁴ Martha's miracles involved conquering the dragon Tarascus, a 'terrible dragon of unbelievable length and great bulk' who 'breathed out poisonous fumes, shot sulfurous flames from its eyes, and emitted fierce hissing with its mouth' and who terrorized the area between Arles and Avignon (later to be known as Tarascon after the name of the beast).¹⁵ Other miracles followed quite literally in Christ's footsteps, involving reviving the dead and turning water into wine. Interestingly, these rather engaging stories are not often represented in art.

Compared to the *Resurrection of Lazarus*, representations of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (both the anointing in John and the meal in Luke) are scarcer in art, and do not appear with much frequency until the sixteenth century and the Counter-Reformation. One of the earliest representations of the anointing dates from the late ninth century, in the Byzantine Homilies of St Gregory Nazianzen.¹⁶ In western art early representations include a group of Ottonian manuscripts dating from the late tenth through the late twelfth century, as well as the aforementioned St Albans Psalter (see Fig. 1). They all depict Christ gesturing toward Martha, a gesture whose significance is hard to establish with any degree of certainty but which has been interpreted, consistent with the literature devoted to comparing the active and contemplative lives, as a mark of disapproval.¹⁷ A rare instance where Christ's preference for Mary's choice of prayer and learning is spelled out visually is the Evangelary of St Martin (twelfth century, now in the Royal Library in Brussels), where of the two sisters only Mary is given a halo.¹⁸ As noted for the scene of the *Resurrection of Lazarus*, in most of these

13. *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of her Sister Saint Martha: A Medieval Biography* (1989: 99-105, 108-15).

14. *Life of Saint Mary Magdalene* (1989: 21).

15. *Life of Saint Mary Magdalene* (1989: 99ff.).

16. Nersessian 1962: 195-228.

17. Examples are, among others: the Gospel Books of Otto III and Henry II (late 10th century); Lectionary of Henry III (mid 11th century); Gospels of Henry the Lion (late 12th century), see Constable 1995: 32-35; also Caviness 1998: 153. The opposition between the sisters' choices, with visible preference accorded to Mary's actions, is also illustrated in many of the moralized Bibles of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; see Constable 1995: 103.

18. Bibl. Royale, Mss 466 (9222), fol. 150v.

representations Mary is depicted as the Magdalene, characterized by her scarlet mantle and later her equally fiery red hair.¹⁹

Many late medieval representations of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* appear in the context of a growing cult of Mary Magdalene. Under Franciscan patronage, a new emphasis is placed on the glorification of a life of penitence and contemplation, both embodied by the figure of the Magdalene.²⁰ Martha's cult never quite equals that of Mary, and yet both sisters are, at least in one significant instance, used to illustrate the qualities of the friars of St Francis. At the General Council of Lyon in 1274, Pope Gregory X extolled the friars for performing 'at the same time the roles of Mary and Martha. Like Mary they sit at the feet of the Lord, and like Martha they do everything in their power to serve him'.²¹ Thus in some Franciscan-commissioned examples of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, the older sister acquires a new visual prominence. The mid-fifteenth-century frescoes in the female convent of Franciscan tertiaries, Sant'Anna in Foligno, provide an interesting example. The lunettes of the refectory depict various Christological meals: *The Marriage at Cana*, *The Last Supper*, and *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. The last scene is continued in the fourth lunette with an extremely rare representation of Martha in her kitchen (Fig. 3).²² Martha is preparing the meal that would be served to Christ (interestingly, in the scene of the meal, the table is set but the food has not yet been served) by expertly scaling a fish with a large knife; more fish are seen in a large bowl at her feet. She is surrounded by several jugs and large dishes, and a large cauldron is cooking over the fire. This unusual prominence given to Martha has been connected with the particular patronage of these frescoes: the female tertiaries, who lived an uncloistered life dedicated to teaching and good works, may have purposefully indicated their preference between the contemplative and active lives.²³ More generally though, Martha is connected in Franciscan thought with secular brothers and sisters, and in particular with friars that have an administrative role in the community: St Francis himself referred to senior brothers in small communities as '*Marthas*' or mothers.²⁴ In female communities, the *maestra* who gave permission to take communion was always named *Martha*.²⁵

19. Sullivan 1985: 40-41 points out that the more popular the cult of the Magdalene becomes, the redder the color of her hair.

20. Schwartz 1991: 32-36.

21. Schwartz 1991: 33, quoting from J. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order from its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford 1968): 177-78.

22. Rigaux 1992: 94 considers this representation unique in all Italian art of the late Middle Ages.

23. Rigaux 1992: 95.

24. Constable 1995: 123.

25. Rigaux 1992: 95.



Fig. 3. *Saint Martha in her Kitchen*. Sant'Anna, Foligno (after 1430). From Dominique Rigaux, 'The Franciscan Tertiaries at the Convent of Sant'Anna of Foligno', *Gesta* 31.2 (1992: 97). Photo used with permission.

A similar representation is found in the Rinuccini chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence (another Franciscan establishment). The frescoes, dated to around 1365 and attributed to Giovanni da Milano, depict the Lives of the Virgin Mary and of Mary Magdalene. On the south wall of the chapel, the middle register pairs the *Raising of Lazarus* with *Christ in Martha and Mary's House* (Fig. 4).²⁶ On the left the composition opens onto an adjacent room, the kitchen, where a female figure kneels in front of the fireplace.²⁷ This could be an earlier instance of Martha in the kitchen, similar to the double representation at Foligno. Yet this figure could also be Martha's servant Marcella.²⁸ The *Vita* of Mary Magdalene mentions Marcella in passing, the faithful servant who follows Martha on her journey from home to the area around Avignon. *The Golden Legend* further develops the character of Marcella (or Martilla) and gives her credit for writing Martha's own *Vita* and for continuing the ministry after her mistress's death by going to Slovenia and preaching the gospel there.²⁹

26. Berti 1967: 320.

27. Constable 1995: 114.

28. Casal 2000: 301.

29. Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, II: 23-26.

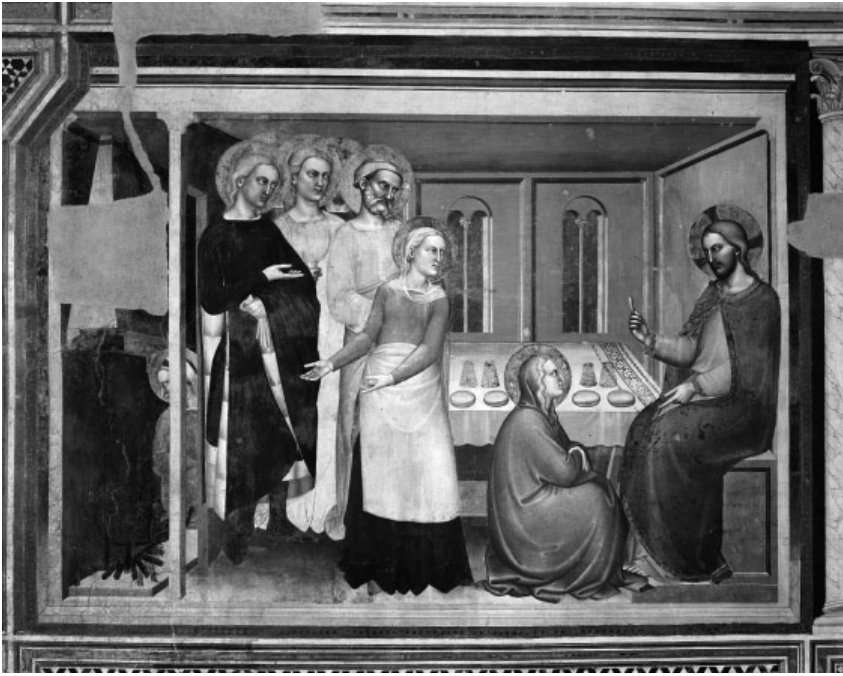


Fig. 4. Giovanni da Milano. *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. c. 1365. Rinucini Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence. Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

Starting in the late sixteenth century, the scene of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* appears with increased frequency in the art of Europe, while also undergoing iconographic changes. The renewed interest in the scene, illustrative of the duality between active and contemplative lives, is to be linked to the Counter-Reformation emphasis on spiritual life.³⁰ Iconographically the composition starts taking on elements of a genre scene. This evolution is evident either in the greater number of participants at the gathering, or in the addition of details unrelated to the biblical story.

The first type is beautifully illustrated by Tintoretto's rendition, painted c. 1570–75 for a Dominican church in Augsburg (Fig. 5), where nine other figures join Jesus, Martha and Mary. A male figure is seated opposite Jesus, possibly the women's brother Lazarus; another male figure is standing behind the table, engaged in conversation with a woman and gesturing with one hand. In the background, outside the house and seen through the open door, five more male figures are present. All dressed in light-colored flowing robes, they are probably the apostles traveling with Christ (but who, according to the Bible,

30. Réau 1957: 328.

were not present at the meal). The man standing inside the house also wears a cloak, and thus could be another one of the disciples. The man sitting at the table is singled out by his dress (he wears a different type of tunic), a detail which supports his identification as Lazarus. In this case, the painting is an instance of combining two different episodes from the Gospels: John 12, the dinner in the house of Lazarus (including additional guests), and Luke 10, where Martha complains to Jesus about her sister's passive attitude. This is evident in Martha's body language: she leans slightly over her sister (who is seated on the floor at Jesus' feet) and points with her finger, while Jesus is leaning toward Mary, his gaze focused on her as a silent acknowledgment of what Luke characterizes as the 'better choice'. In the right background, another female figure, probably Martha's servant Marcella, stirs the pot over the fire, getting the meal ready to be served.



Fig. 5. Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto. *Christ with Martha and Mary*. c. 1580. 200 × 132 cm. Oil on canvas. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, New York.

Tintoretto's painting is different from earlier representations of the subject not only in the number of figures included, but also in the details of the setting. The interior is that of a rich sixteenth-century Venetian household, its walls covered with sumptuous draperies and embellished with glass and ceramic detail. Both Mary and Martha are dressed in contemporary noblewomen's finery, delicate lace covering their shoulders and jewels adorning their hair and gowns. Martha's especially elaborate headdress, a fine veil held up by a bejeweled tiara, makes one wonder how she would have taken an active role in the kitchen. More to the point, the painting firmly places the biblical scene into a sixteenth-century Venetian palazzo interior, its inhabitants playing hosts. The attention to recognizable detail betrays both the naturalism of the Renaissance and the new interest in landscape and interiors, the attention lavished on their rich furnishing competing with that commanded by the protagonists of the story. It also makes the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, the worlds where the contemplative and the active respectively dwell, so much more poignant.

It is however in northern paintings of the same period that this dichotomy acquires an irresistible prominence. In a number of predominantly Dutch and Flemish works, the biblical narrative becomes almost a pretext for a genre scene.³¹ Pieter Aertsen's *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* is representative of this group (Fig. 6). A cluster of tables occupy the foreground of the painting, filled with fruit, vegetables, and other food items in pots and baskets, on trays and in bundles on the table. At the center a graceful vase holds flowers, a tall stem of white lilies (symbol of purity and of the Virgin Mary) among them. Around this veritable still life, whose foreground display invites us into the painting, figures form two separate groups. On the left, a man and two women; on the right, in front of the fireplace, another three men and two women are eating, drinking, and talking to one another. Further back still, there is an opening onto a different space, framed by classicizing architecture: a façade with three semicircular arches resting on polychrome marble columns, and reliefs on the upper walls, reminiscent of Palladian motifs. Through the side arches, a distant landscape is visible; in the center there is a group of figures: a seated man flanked by a seated woman to his right and two standing figures on his left. In front of him, two more women are sitting on the floor, while another man is standing nearby. This scene has been identified as *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, with Martha standing on Christ's left and Mary seated on plump pillows in front of him. Similar to Tintoretto's rendition, the main protagonists are surrounded by ancillary characters who, in this case, repeat the postures and gestures of Christ and the sisters.

31. Constable 1995: 133 mentions a list of over 100 such paintings, mostly Dutch and Flemish but also some Italian.



Fig. 6. Pieter Aertsen. *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. 1553. Photo courtesy of the Boyman-van-Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam.

Compositionally, the symbolic emphasis of the painting is inverted: the main narrative, which gives the painting its name, is depicted in the background, while the foreground is populated by seemingly unrelated figures and still-life displays. Interpretations of this unusual composition have explained it either as a genre scene, the artist having used the biblical narrative simply as an excuse at a time when genre painting had not yet acquired prominence (and acceptance), or as a new and powerful depiction of the dichotomy between material things (lavishly and attractively detailed in the foreground) and the spiritual message and significance of the religious scene in the background.³² Indeed, the prominent foreground still life and other lively characters impose their presence and may be read as a commentary upon the pre-eminence of, and exaggerated concern with, material things in contemporary society.

Iconographically, the presence of figures other than the biblical protagonists was relatively common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as also illustrated in the Tintoretto painting. One contemporary text offers a possible source for artists, or at least confirms the fact that the presence of these other characters, usually some of the apostles, in the scene of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* was assumed in the knowledge of the

32. Moxey 1971: 335.

period. The text is Erasmus's 1526 treatise on marriage and is a condemnation of the way in which some contemporary artists represent sacred scenes in an unacceptable manner:

As for example, when they portray Mary and Martha receiving Our Lord to supper, the Lord speaking with Mary and John as a youth talking secretly with Martha, while Peter drinks a tankard. Or again, at the feast, Martha standing behind with John, with one arm over his shoulders, while with the other she seems to mock at Christ, [who is] unaware of all this. Or again, Peter already rubicund with wine, yet holding the goblet to his lips.

In Aertsen's painting, the figures surrounding Christ in the background do not drink or otherwise behave inappropriately, but the seated man in the right foreground, dressed in a robe similar to those worn by Christ and his followers, and whose wavy hair and beard could identify him as Peter, is clearly having a good time, touching one of the women and holding a jug of wine in his other hand.³³ He may have had too much to drink already, as his posture is a bit reclined, and he seems to attempt to keep his balance by holding on to a stool in front of him with one of his feet. This impropriety when in the same space with Christ and the oversized importance given to foodstuffs and other inconsequential objects that fill our lives may well be some of the traits that had attracted Erasmus's ire. Yet paintings of this particular type can also be connected with the humanistic thinking of Erasmus on a different level, as a reflection of the philosopher's belief that the key to understanding complex concepts is to represent them within the framework of everyday, familiar things.³⁴ In this interpretation, the presence of fruit, vegetables and other food items in familiar pots and pans, as well as interior details to which people could have related, brought the concept of materiality (and its inherent inferiority to things spiritual) into the realm of everyday life, that is the realm of the concrete and comprehensible.

While in Aertsen's painting the biblical scene still forms the focus of the composition by virtue of its placement and luminous framing, about a century later the Spanish artist Diego Velazquez brings the process of compositional inversion to new heights. In *Kitchen Scene with Christ's Visit to Martha and Mary*, painted in 1618, Velazquez creates a completely original composition which continues to puzzle art lovers and historians to this day (Fig. 7).³⁵ He is clearly continuing the tradition of subordinating the

33. The passage from Erasmus is quoted in Moxey 1971: 336, who connects it with the painting and also identifies the male figure in the right foreground as Peter.

34. Jordan and Cherry 1995: 40.

35. It should be noted that the current title, which emphasizes the ancillary kitchen scene, is modern; as late as the end of the nineteenth century, the painting was

biblical narrative to a genre scene illustrated by earlier Flemish works, a tradition which in Spain also attracted the criticism of religious-minded contemporaries.³⁶ Velazquez's painting depicts in the foreground a kitchen scene: a young and rather disgruntled woman is crushing garlic in a mortar while an old woman behind her points with her right index finger. On the table, besides the mortar, garlic cloves, a hot pepper, fish and eggs laid out on plates, and a ceramic jug create a well-balanced still life composition while also giving us a clue about the menu. In the upper right-hand side corner, Christ is seated in an armchair (not at the table), with Mary seated on the floor in front of him, and Martha standing behind her, gesturing. As in the Flemish compositions which Velazquez may have known through prints circulating in Spain, the main narrative—the one containing the moral and symbolic message—is relegated to the background. Yet here the spatial relationship between the two scenes is far more complicated, and became a matter of art historical debate. Some consider the biblical scene a painting on the wall or a vision; others see it as a mirror reflection; others still see it happening in an adjacent space to the kitchen, visible through an opening in the wall.³⁷ The pros and cons of these various interpretations are beyond the scope of this paper; what is of interest here is what they all agree upon: that the message lies in the connection between the contemporary still life kitchen scene (a genre named in Velazquez's time *bodegon*, after the Spanish word for a humble eatery) and the biblical narrative. The painting, named by one critic a 'moralizing *bodegon*', directs our attention to the figures in the foreground by asking us to think about them in terms of the biblical example in the background.³⁸ The young woman is, like Martha, unhappy with her chores; the older woman reminds her of the important things in life by pointing to the biblical scene. This shows us that in seventeenth-century Spain, just like in sixteenth-century Holland or fourteenth-century Italy, the story from Luke 10 continued to be used as a moral lesson for the young.

recorded in auction records simply as *Christ with Martha and Mary*; see Boyd and Esler 2004: 15.

36. Vincente Carducho in his 1633 treatise on *The Excellence of Painting* decries 'devotional pictures painted with such profanity and lack of respect that [the subject] is hardly recognizable', illustrating his complaint with a painting of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (not Velazquez's); in Casal 2000: 296.

37. For the first interpretation see Boyd and Esler 2004: 59-60; for the third, see Brown 1986: 16-17. The interpretation of the biblical scene as happening in an adjacent space was also supported by the restoration of the painting in the 1960s, which made the aperture in the wall (with its perspectival rendition) much clearer. See also López-Rey 1979: 190.

38. Jordan and Cherry 1995: 39-40.



Fig. 7. Diego Velázquez, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. 1618. 60 × 103.5 cm. Oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London. Photo credit: © The National Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.

More generally, the biblical story (or stories, told separately, together or conflated) continue to capture artistic imagination, each period contributing its own emphasis to the iconography and the messages conveyed. While the *Resurrection of Lazarus* remains a favorite representation through centuries of Christian art (its details and overall iconography, however, getting richer with time), *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*'s fortunes parallel evolutions in both Christian writing (the conflation of various stories, and various Gospel characters, found in the writings of the Church Fathers and later literature) and history (the emphasis on meditation and contemplation in the context of the Counter-Reformation). In this respect, the scene becomes an exemplar of biblical art in its widest definition: art inspired by a biblical story, enriched by later writings, religious and secular alike, and by lived history and tradition.³⁹ Finally, when analyzing the history of representing Martha and Mary in art, an interesting puzzle is offered by the slight irony that, of the two sisters, it is Mary—the personification of contemplative life, the better choice according to Jesus himself and most patristic literature—who gets mixed up with other biblical characters, most particularly Mary Magdalene, in whose guise she acquires a long-lasting art historical life.

39. My research on exploring the definition(s) of biblical art is in progress; some of it was included in a lecture I gave at MOBIA in April 2008; the file can be downloaded from http://www.mobia.org/programs/ena_heller_4-17-08.mp3.

Martha may have been rebuked by Jesus and her life may have captured less the artistic (and literary) imagination through the centuries, but at least she retained her biblical persona. The case of Martha and Mary of Bethany seems to be, still, a case of unresolved sibling rivalry.

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‘CRUMB TRAILS AND PUPPY-DOG TALES’: READING AFTERLIVES OF A CANAANITE WOMAN

Louise J. Lawrence

Abstract

Myriad readings of the Canaanite woman, from the church fathers to contemporary feminist, disability and post-colonial interpreters are charted here. Throughout the patristic period, in Reformation sermons and even in modern historical readings of the Canaanite woman certain elements tend to be recycled: the woman is representative of a faithful ‘Christian’ disposition (in contrast to the Jewish leaders who are subject to vitriolic critique in Matthew [see especially Matthew 23]) and she is part of a reconstituted people of God. In contemporary advocacy readings, parts of this unified interpretation are destabilized and commentators’ voices sing out discordantly against the mainstream understanding.

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The afterlives of the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15.21-28) are as rich as the feast that adorns the children’s table. Peering over boundaries of land, ethnicity, gender and religion, her interpretive history is marked by polarity (for some she represents a heroic transgressor of boundaries, for others a violated and oppressed victim) but also paradoxically marked by a certain amount of continuity; many of the themes within the diverse interpretations (her exemplary Christian demeanour and her embodiment of a transformed people of God) replicate themselves throughout the centuries. Whilst paying lip service to these dominant trends, we would do well to also heed Ulrich Luz’s timely warning that interpreters must not be seduced into blindly following familiar patterns of interpretation of this story focused on ethnic and salvation-historical concerns alone. Indeed he contends that this reading lost its transformative power once the Gentile church was solidly established. Such an interpretation ‘no longer demonstrated the power of God’s love that bursts the borders of Israel’ but rather ‘almost exclusively justified the legitimacy of the church’s status quo in history. It no longer opened new doors; it merely injured the Jews who were not present in the church’ (Luz 2001: 341). Luz wonders what an interpretation that asked the

Christian community to identify with the Pharisees and scribes from whose territory Jesus withdrew would look like, in contrast to those more common interpretations that exclusively identify the church with the Canaanite woman and/or her daughter? With the advent of reader-orientated and advocacy perspectives (feminist, disability and postcolonial readings etc.) many interpreters have done just this and revisited monologic crumb trails in the history of interpretation to purposefully expose the anomalous and ambiguous within the tradition. These dialogical projects allow different voices to jarringly sing or, to use an evocative image from our story, 'bark' back at those gone before.

1. 'Fathers of the Church' Meet 'A Mother of the Gentiles'

The Canaanite woman as representative of a redefined people of God is a dominant thread within the church fathers' readings. The Canaanite's 'Gentile' status is also emphasized as this fits neatly with the broad interests of what Deidre Good describes as 'the scriptural ratification of the election of the Gentiles' and the understanding that 'the Church had been substituted for the Jewish people' (Good 1991: 169).¹ Her status as 'mother' is also central to patristic interpretation.

In the third century, Origen of Alexandria for example, comments upon her status as 'mother' when he connects the Pauline images of Jerusalem above 'which is free' (Gal. 4.26) with the Canaanite woman. He contrasts her status with the Jewish children, 'the nobler race', who should have had 'clear vision' and understanding but actually in the end do not exhibit the faith in Jesus that the Canaanite woman does. They therefore embody earthly, unredeemed, Jerusalem. For Origen, the Canaanite woman's demon-possessed daughter is 'a symbol of one whose soul is possessed by a demon' (Good 1991: 171). Origen's reading of the passage in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*² views the Canaanite woman as representative of humanity. He therefore allegorizes the region of Tyre and Sidon as representative of the universal human condition marked by 'vice, torment and sin'. For Origen this went beyond the 'bodily' literal meaning of the story to its deeper 'spiritual' import. He thus reads the Canaanite mother's approach to Jesus as a human bid to leave the borders of evil and embrace salvation. Through her initiative she is changed from a 'dog' in need of repentance to a 'child' who is forgiven, accordingly Jesus 'gave as

1. In Good's article the Canaanite woman's afterlife is explored in readings of Origen, The Clementine Homilies, Tertullian and the Gospel of Philip. She focuses in parts on eucharistic imagery and the sanctioning of outsiders to participate in table fellowship (Good 1991: 177).

2. Origen's *Commentary on Matthew* featured in this section is translated by Menzies 1986: 444-47.

to a child the bread of the children [the Jews]' (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* XI). Universalizing the significance of the story Origen continues, 'And we must suppose that each of us when he sins is in the borders of Tyre or Sidon or of Pharaoh and Egypt, or some one of those which are outside the allotted inheritance of God; but when he changes from wickedness to virtue he goes out from the borders of evil and comes to the borders of the portion of God' (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* XI).

Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers (300–368 CE), in his [*Commentary*] *On Matthew* mentions the demonic possession of the Canaanite woman's daughter and links it with the Gentile people as a whole.³ He views the Canaanite mother as a proselyte who has come out from the Gentiles to join a 'community of neighbouring people'. This accounts for her very Jewish address, 'Son of David'. He likewise emphasizes the importance of her plea as a 'mother' to all Gentiles.⁴ In the early sixth century Epiphanius the Latin (historically probably Bishop of Benevento or Seville) also sees the Canaanite woman's 'coming out of Tyre and Sidon' as a salvific move. He, like Hilary of Poitiers, imagines the woman as 'a mother of demon-possessed Gentiles' who suffer terribly from demon possession having been 'led astray by idolatry and sin' and thus are nothing more than 'dogs who worship idols' and 'bark at God' (*Interpretation of the Gospels* 58). As a result of this salvation-historical reading, the faithless Jews are cast as diametrically opposed to the faithful Canaanite mother: 'He left the Jews behind... what they had lost, she found. The one who they had denied in the law, she professed in faith' (Epiphanius the Latin, *Interpretation of the Gospels* 58). Furthermore, the troubling epithet of 'dog' is eventually transferred to the Jewish 'children' who, Epiphanius the Latin spits, crucified the Christ: 'The unreceptive Jews were made loathsome dogs out of children, as the Lord himself said in his passion through the prophet: "Many dogs surround me; a company of evildoers encircle me"' (*Interpretation of the Gospels* 58).

The Canaanite woman's 'motherly' status is also transferred to the non-Jewish church in Theodore of Mopsuestia's 'Antiochene' logic: 'With his accolades he honoured her as presenting a type of the church that is from the Gentiles' (*Fragment* 83). This is echoed in Epiphanius the Latin's statement that 'this woman besought the Lord on behalf of her daughter, *the church of the Gentiles*' (my italics, *Interpretation of the Gospels* 57).

Whether as representative mother of the Jerusalem above, of the idol-worshipping Gentiles who are in need of conversion, or of the entire

3. Translations of texts from Hilary of Poitiers, Epiphanius the Latin, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Augustine featured in this essay can be found in Simonetti 2002: 26–31.

4. 'She was appealing on behalf of her daughter, who was a type for all Gentile people' (Hilary of Poitiers, *On Matthew* 15.3).

Gentile church, these selected fathers view this Canaanite 'mother' positively in salvation-historical terms, and frequently use her as a foil to the obtuseness and non-receptivity of the Jewish 'children'. The comparison between these two races is further emphasized, as we will see, by their respective dispositions: Jewish pride as opposed to the Canaanite's humility.

2. *The Fathers' 'Prescriptions'*

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354–430 CE), is the main architect of reading this story as a 'prescription' for a proper Christian disposition, though it should be said that he is also possibly trying to explain the problem of Jesus' apparent rudeness in this encounter. Augustine's sermon introduces the medicinal metaphor, and in Mary Poppins-like tones he sings that spoonfuls of humility help the medicine go down. Augustine wished his listeners to increase in Christian virtue: 'faith in God, hope in God, and love of God' (Yarchin 2004: 61). Accordingly, Augustine sees the initial rejection of the Canaanite woman by Jesus and the disciples as enkindling such virtue and bolstering faith: 'But she was ignored, not that mercy might be denied but that desire might be enkindled; not only that desire might be enkindled but, as I said before, that humility might be praised' (*Sermon* 77.1). Following Origen's logic, he connects the humility of the woman's approach with Christ's self-emptying in the incarnation. Her acceptance of the title 'dog' and her words about the 'masters' at the table (in contrast to Jesus' use of the word 'children') all serve to emphasize her self-deprecation and heighten, for Augustine, the contrast with the self-righteousness of the Jewish people portrayed throughout Matthew's Gospel: 'They (the Jews) were broken because of pride; the wild olive shoot (the Gentiles) was grafted in because of humility. The woman manifested this humility, saying 'Yes Lord, I am a dog, I desire crumbs' (*Sermon* 77.11–12).

This logic is also present in the fourth-century Bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom's argument. He sees that the meekness of the Canaanite is to be contrasted with the puffed up character of the Jews.⁵ Epiphanius the Latin's argument similarly spells out that 'it was not that the Lord was unwilling to heal her but that he might reveal her great humility' (Epiphanius the Latin, *Interpretation of the Gospels* 57). Theodore of Mopsuestia joins the refrain when he comments that the woman's meekness and Jesus' postponed reply are part of a divine discipline which makes her cry aloud and proves her to be 'worthy of a thousand crowns' (*Fragment* 83). Her swallowing of pride (the medicine of humility) signifies for Augustine that this Canaanite mother is not just mother of the Gentiles, or Gentile church,

5. Chrysostom, *The Gospel of Matthew, Homily* 52.3.

but representative of the entire church.⁶ Building on and echoing the above trends in interpretation (the woman as seeker of salvation and embodiment of humility) in Reformation sermons she is likewise hailed as a Christian example, but now perhaps inevitably, of faith.⁷

3. *The Reformers Preach A Paradigm of Faith*

In the sixteenth century, as Luther and Calvin take to the pulpit, the Canaanite woman is held up as a 'true example of perfect faith' (Luther 1984: 148). For Luther, Christ is portrayed as a hunter chasing 'faith in his followers in order that it may become strong and firm' (Luther 1984: 149). God's ways (and grace) are 'high and deep' and, whilst acknowledging that the woman could have lost heart, Luther praises her for, like a good reformer, she 'clings alone to God's bare word'.⁸ He applauds her determination and begs others likewise to possess her courage and faith (Luther 1984: 150). He also expounds the salvific import of the dog designation: 'She is a condemned and an outcast person, who is not to be reckoned among God's chosen ones', yet 'Christ now completely opens his heart to her and yields to her will, so that she is now no dog, but even a child of Israel' (Luther 1984: 152).

Calvin likewise concedes that the woman is a 'remarkable picture of faith' (Calvin 1949: 264). Following the supersessionist threads in earlier readings, Calvin instructs us by means of contrast, that the Jews were reasonably dispossessed of salvation 'since their impiety was so shameful' (Calvin 1949: 264). The reformers also have an interesting viewpoint on the initial approach of the Canaanite woman to the disciples. Earlier interpreters had tried to give the disciples' initial brush-off a more positive spin, translating their response as 'free her' or 'do as she asks' (see Luz 2001: 339) rather than flat rejection. Consequently the story had for some been seen as an example of the intercession of the saints. Both Luther and Calvin unsurprisingly reject this reading. They argue that the disciples are not dead (like the intercessory saints) but rather living in this particular story. They also point out that her request to the disciples is to no avail (Luz 2001: 339). Thus 'papist' belief in intercessory prayers of saints, is excised by the reformers in their sermons on this passage. This aside, in large part Luther and Calvin agree on the substance of earlier interpretations of the passage that reinforce salvation-historical interpretations and see the Canaanite as a virtuous example of Christian disposition.

6. Augustine, *Sermon* 77: 11-12.

7. On Reformation theology and the centrality of faith see Gray 2003: 20-39, 45-49.

8. Luther 1984: 154.

4. *A Historical Reading: Matthew Redacts Mark*

In the twentieth century the cultural world of the text and the editorial development of biblical documents became central. The cleavage between historical events and biblical portrayals of them was spotlighted. Source and redaction critics pondered over the relationships between the synoptic Gospels, and the social and religious environments in which the Gospels were produced took centre stage. The quest to hear the texts as original hearers would have heard them became the predominant concern. In this enterprise 'traditional authorities, such as the church fathers became less reliable sources for pursuing modern questions about the Bible' (Yarchin 2004: xxiv). Luz bemoans the fact that 'nowadays the Church Fathers are, *de facto*, virtually without significance in Western Exegesis' (Luz 2005: 290) on account of enlightenment principles in which the 'original sense of a text' is 'the measure of its correct interpretation' (Luz 2005: 294). However, with this story at least, trends within the history of interpretation are also variously repeated, if for different reasons, by modern historical voices.

For the historical critic the Canaanite woman is re-born in Mt. 15.21-28 as a heavily redacted version of her former Markan self (Mk 7.24-30); many elements of the Matthean version are consequently dismissed as 'inauthentic' in terms of their likely historicity. However, for the evangelist, the increased racial polemic is seen to serve an anti-Pharisaic agenda within Matthew's community, reflecting the parting of the ways between Jewish and Christian communities.⁹

Mark's 'Syro-Phoenician' (Mk 7.26) now re-appears as 'Canaanite' (Mt. 15.22), 'a people dispossessed by Israel's occupation' (Carter 2000: 321), 'bitter biblical enemies of Israel' (Keener 1999: 414). Her originally narrated plea (Mk 7.26) is now spoken directly: 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession' (Mt. 15.22). Despite her direct voice her approach is rejected not once (as in Mark) but twice, by Jesus *and* the disciples (Mt. 15.23-24) and the diminutive *kunarion* ('dog')—even 'puppy' or 'house dog' as in those translations which manoeuvre 'potential insult' to 'term of endearment'—still, 'doggedly', remains (Mt. 15.26) (see Luz 2001: 340). The fruits of her double persistence are ultimately given, with a verbal commendation by Matthew's Jesus that forms the punchline of the entire episode: "'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish". And her daughter was healed instantly' (Mt. 15.28).

9. For example, Saldarini sees the Matthean community as 'an active deviant association and sect' (Saldarini 1994: 84, 86). See also Overman (1996); Stanton (1992); Balch (1991).

It is not only the specifics of the episode that emerge differently from Matthew's mind, but also the structural location of the episode within the plot of the Gospel. The Canaanite woman now stands towards the centre-point of the account (chapter 15 out of 28 chapters) and accordingly acts as axis and watershed for the plot she inhabits. Hereafter, the Matthean Jesus' mission will not be (as it has been up to this point) exclusively to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' but also to those Gentiles who, like the Canaanite woman, eat crumbs from under the children's table. This Rahab *redivivus*¹⁰ sets the pace for the 'universal finish' at chapter 28, which boldly declares the mission to 'all nations' and the call to baptize everyone, regardless of race, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹¹ Most historical commentators seem to agree that Matthew's redaction of the episode increases the initial rejection of Jesus and the racial polemic of Mark's account. In the passage immediately preceding this story that documents the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding the law (Mt. 15.6-8) the obtuse Jewish leaders almost become pantomime 'boo' characters, straw men when compared with the virtue of the Canaanite woman. The story also serves to comment on Matthew's reconstituted salvation history; his Gospel 'begins and ends with the Jewish-Gentile debate, and at the heart of both the issue and the Gospel is the story of the Canaanite woman' (Jackson 2002: 58).

5. *Dominant Grooves in Interpretation*

The readings documented so far, though different in methodology, aims and outlooks, find some common ground on the main thrust of the meanings of the passage. Whilst Calvin may be irked by some of the allegorical connections made by earlier interpreters, he along with the modern historical critic would still view this text as having something to say on the reconstitution of the people of God, true Christian disposition exemplified by a Gentile and anti-Jewish polemic. These 'anthems' tend to present the Canaanite woman's story as monologic—one-voiced—moreover, 'by telling a story that ends conclusively with God's assertion of the love for the gentiles, it circumscribes us in the familiar, and it makes us feel safe

10. Many commentators make much of the fact that no other character in the New Testament is referred to as Canaanite. However, Matthew's genealogy mentions women, including Rahab (see Keener 1999: 415). Perkinson suggests 'the erasure of the Canaanite presence in Israelite history was part of the mode of constructing the national identity. But here, the erased begins to reappear like a palimpsest' (Perkinson 1996: 79). Bauckham follows this pattern when he numbers the Canaanite woman among the 'Gentile Foremothers of the Messiah' (Bauckham 2002: 46).

11. Thus Carter (2000: 321) argues, 'the scene locates Jesus in a world of ethnic, cultural, economic, political and religious barriers... God's reign, responsible for wholeness and plenty breaks them down'.

in a way that resonates with salvation as security, safety, being safe and sound' (Sherwood 2000: 185).

Luz however, as mentioned above, contends that mainstream interpretations focused on salvation-historical concerns actually lost their transformative power once the Gentile church was solidly established and wonders what the outcome would be if the church identified with the Pharisaic leadership as opposed to the Canaanite within this story. Luz also opines that the Reformation focus on faith in mainstream readings eventually solidified into doctrine. An example of this could be the repetition of the Canaanite's faithful refrain in the prayer of humble access in preparation to partake of the Eucharist: 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table'.¹² Luz laments, 'What a loss of reality and experience there is when this story is reduced to doctrine! If the text here suggests to us a way of getting at its meaning—at odds with a dominant trait of its history of interpretation and in a sense also at odds with the Matthean redaction—it is to take seriously again its shape as story' (Luz 2001: 342).

A number of contemporary reader-orientated interpretations have revisited the monologic crumb trails within the history of interpretation to do just this; they have drawn attention to how certain grooves within interpretation have served to bolster power and prejudice within society, church and politics. Such interpretations 'are no longer restricted to understanding the world that created the Bible, the quest now extends more broadly to unlock the world that the Bible [itself] has created' (Yarchin 2004: xxix).

Among those questioning monolithic 'afterlives' of biblical characters are those who link such 'repetitions' with hegemonic moves to suppress alternative and plural voices. Laura Donaldson, a postcolonial critic, urges biblical scholars to promote alternative 'encounters' with characters that can assault our interpretive senses. The following selected readings from feminist, disability and postcolonial discourses will adopt certain elements that first 'echo' threads of the dominant salvation-historical readings outlined thus far, but in other areas 'bark' back at established grooves within the history of interpretation and question hegemonic trends.

6. *Echoes and Barks: A Feminist Reading*

Elaine Wainwright contributed the essay on Matthew's Gospel in Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's celebrated feminist commentary, *Searching the Scriptures* (1994). Unsurprisingly the main echo of mainstream interpretations within Wainwright's reading re-aligns the salvation-historical reading of the story not solely along racial but also gender lines. Matthew's Jesus 'subverts patriarchy and shapes a vision of an inclusive basileia' (Wainwright

12. Church of England 2000: 181.

1994: 677). The 'politics of "otherness" in relation to Judaism' is now recast in gender terms to include 'women in the life of the community' (Wainwright 1994: 634). Like the Gentile church demanding teaching from the table of the Gospel so here 'a woman within the Christian community, claims the right to learn and to scrutinise the scriptures and the teachings of Jesus as a benefit not reserved solely for the male members of the community but available to all from the table of the Lord' (Wainwright 1994: 672). Wainwright makes much of the reconstruction of the encounter in Matthew within a public place (the domain of men) as opposed to Mark's house. This she believes had 'profound implications for [Matthew's] house-churches' namely 'women's participation in the liturgical and theological life of the community' (Wainwright 1994: 673).

Following the logic of many previous interpreters Wainwright also sees the self-imposed humility of the woman as a subversive and prophetic sign that [patriarchal] boundaries are being demolished. Like Dickens' *Oliver* meekly asking for more, so the Canaanite woman in Wainwright's opinion 'courageously crosses the barriers placed before her asking for crumbs from the master's table' (Wainwright 1994: 653). Along with many other feminist critics, Wainwright also follows a lead, first explicated by Luther, that this woman teaches Jesus a lesson: 'His granting of her request indicates recognition of his own call beyond traditional gender and racial boundaries' (Wainwright 1994: 653). In other work Wainwright has been keen to identify different streams of readers within Matthean house churches (Wainwright 1991: 343-44).

Of course there is resistance to mainstream readings as well. Wainwright barks that 'the canon which has been controlled by a monopoly is now beginning to be repossessed' (Wainwright 1994: 637). Using feminist tools of deconstruction, 'a hermeneutics of suspicion' and 'remembrance', Wainwright accordingly adopts the name 'Justa' given to the Canaanite in the so-called Clementine Epistles (also known as Pseudo-Clementine Homilies). Jackson notes that these texts are usually given third or fourth century dating, but the sources for them could have originated far earlier (Jackson 2002: 4). The adoption of the name 'Justa' is presumably part of Wainwright's hermeneutics of 'remembrance' and 'creative actualisation'. However, the story as it appears in this source, perhaps sits rather anomalously with the salvation-historical reading which envisages the people of God as reconstituted and now inclusive of the 'outsider'.

Good reveals that in the Clementine Epistles the woman begs to eat the crumbs from the table, as she will convert to being a Jew. In this way, 'the passage had been understood in the opposite way' from the more standard readings encountered thus far. In these non-canonical texts, 'Rather than being a passage reflecting the possibility of a successful mission amongst the Gentiles, Mt. 15.21-28 described the conversion of a non-Jew to a form

of Jewish Christianity' (Good 1991: 173). Good suggests this is due to the link between the Clementine Epistles and Jewish Christianity (the epistles critique Paul's Gospel to the Gentiles).

The text goes on to tell how Justa's husband, who does not approve of the conversion, subsequently divorces her and how she lives out her days according to the law. The true import of the adoption of the name Justa, thus sits uncomfortably with the rest of Wainwright's 'liberating' and 'inclusive' argument. Wainwright is more sensitive, however, in respect to other oppressive trends within the interpretive history of this story. She writes 'the designation of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba as sinners by Jerome and as outsiders and foreigners by Luther raises the question of the extent to which cultural ideologies present in the interpreter's own reading situation have influenced particular interpretations' (Wainwright 1994: 638).

In another essay, 'Only to the Lost Sheep or to All the Nations' (2002) Wainwright submits that even within feminist biblical interpretation it is possible 'to create elites and marginals in readings of the Matthew text shaped by the focus of each particular scholar' (2002). She cites Amy-Jill Levine's Jewish critique of her own work, to illustrate these sorts of blind spots, namely the marginality on account of her femaleness and the interpretation of Jewish law. Levine as a Jew, unlike the dominant reading perspective outlined thus far, does not identify with the Canaanite woman but with the children at the table. She challenges the mainstream Christian supersessionist logic, which maligns and marginalizes Jewish characters and denies Matthew's church as a 'prophetic movement within formative or emerging Judaism' (Levine cited in Wainwright 2002). Levine protests violently against the anachronistic portrayal of Judaism in light of the Christ event. In contrast, for Levine:

The good and bad, the saved and the damned, are not categorized according to social status, gender, or ethnic group... The issue is not who one is; the point for Matthew is what one does. (Levine cited in Wainwright 2002.)¹³

Wainwright concedes that Levine has rightly questioned her neat categorizations of 'elite' and 'marginal' along 'gender' and 'racial' lines in interpretations of the Canaanite woman's story. Thus whilst the salvation-historical reading based on gender as assumed in Wainwright's argument to a certain extent recycles elements in the earlier history of interpretation, other voices have vocalized the tensions and misguided assumptions within the dominant tradition. Similar dynamics are found within disability readings of the story, to which I now turn.

13. Dube (2000: 178) voices a similar criticism: 'Wainwright's feminist hermeneutics of suspicion are overcome by her reconstructive agenda of including women'.

7. *Echoes and Barks: Disability Readings*

Donald Senior echoes the salvation-historical rationale to champion the Canaanite woman as a paradigmatic crosser of boundaries; now not race or gender, but definitions of the 'able' (and consequently 'dis-abled') come to the fore. Like the ancient interpreters' preoccupation with the Jew-Gentile question, now 'disability touches directly on the question of a community's identity, on the meaning of transformation and redemption, indeed on the very image we have of God' (Senior 1995: 4). Senior identifies healing narratives as particular sites of conflict surrounding definitions of the normal: 'In the chronic tensions between cultic self-definition and prophetic critique, Jesus' healings become flashpoints on the frontier' (Senior 1995: 9). He sees Jesus' ministry at these points challenging cultic and religious definitions which literally 'dis-abled' certain individuals from full participation in Jewish religious life and Temple service. These Gentile healings therefore 'represent profound crossing of boundaries through which the Gospels begin to redefine the scope of Jesus' ministry and thereby to redefine the borders of the rule of God' (Senior 1995: 10). Senior, echoing strong trends within the history of interpretation, views the Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus as a move towards inclusion:

The challenge for the church ultimately is not so much to learn how to minister to disabled people but to be open to being ministered to and ultimately healed by them. Or, put in gospel language: beware of the Canaanite woman and her daughter (Senior 1995: 26).

Resistant readers could of course protest that the woman and her daughter are 'en-abled' through this encounter only by being 'normalized'—transformed from 'in-valid' to 'mainstream'. The daughter is cured of her possession; the mother starts to speak like a (proselyte?) Jew: 'Son of David, have mercy on me'.¹⁴

Developing resistant lines, Donaldson classifies the daughter as a 'ghostly' figure who neither speaks nor acts, who is in effect *absent*, a passive site invaded by demon powers and eventually released from her infirmity by Jesus. In the grooves of the history of interpretation outlined thus far, we have variously seen this character represent the Gentiles, lost dogs that worship idols and lost souls. 'Barking' at such readings, Donaldson focuses our attention on this 'absent' figure, whose story is not only left untold, but also silenced by 'ghost-busting' authors, editors and interpreters. Donaldson in effect questions the whole trend of viewing the daughter as 'ill' or 'disabled'. In sharp contrast to Senior, Donaldson unpicks the dominant reading that

14. On models of disability (medical, social, cultural) and their representation in selected biblical texts see Avalos, Melcher and Schipper (2007).

physical disability equals personal misfortune and thus demands liberation and release. Quoting Thompson, and in contrast to Senior, she contends that 'disability is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do' (Thompson cited in Donaldson 2005: 99). This echoes the contention that the disabled are denigrated within the biblical tradition, or constantly portrayed as sites of divine action (Donaldson 2005: 101). Donaldson warns that passivity of the daughter's silent witness 'insistently calls the able to investigate rigorously their own complicity in oppressively naturalized ideologies of health' (Donaldson 2005: 101). Postcolonial dynamics chastise the history of interpretation for 'robbing' this daughter of her indigenous power. Rather creatively Donaldson probes the idea that 'rather than evoking the illness pejoratively identified in the Christian text as demon possession, the daughter might instead signify a trace of the indigenous; and rather than manifesting a deviance subject to the regimes of coercive (Christian) curing, she might be experiencing the initial stages of a vocation known to indigenous people for millennia as shamanism' (Donaldson 2005: 105). She submits that the daughter's 'social and symbolic ancestor is the Ghost wife, or medium of Endor' in 1 Sam. 28.3-25 (Donaldson 2005: 98). In effect Donaldson has tried to produce a counter-memory, or hidden transcript from the dominant 'Christian Testament' that involves the 'colonization of the Canaanite daughter as demon possessed' (Donaldson 2005: 109). This 'haunting' she believes 'interrupts the hegemonic through hallucinatory confrontations with other histories' (Donaldson 2005: 98).

8. *Echoes and Barks: A Postcolonial Reading*

Warren Carter in his postcolonial reading of Matthew and empire sees the Gospel as a work of resistance which challenges dominant cultural structures of Roman and synagogal control (Carter 2000: 1). In his reading of our story, Carter echoes dominant trends within the history of interpretation when he pictures the Canaanite woman as representative of 'believing Gentiles...included in God's purposes' and a peaceful 'ethnically mixed community' (Carter 2000: 321). Though a Canaanite, one of those dispossessed by Israel's occupation, she nonetheless openly challenges exclusionary ideology. Carter (2000: 325), again following a dominant groove in the history of interpretation, pictures the Canaanite's faith in contrast to both the disciples and Jewish leaders. Christian disposition is exemplified by a Gentile in contrast to the dominant leadership. In a different vein, and echoing little of the dominant themes in the history of interpretation, is the African postcolonial feminist, Musa Dube. Through a reading strategy she entitles 'Rahab's reading prism' she identifies colonization and patriarchy and consciously seeks to 'decolonise white Western readings' and by default

oppressive trends in the history of interpretation (Dube 2000: 157-95). Reading against the grain of the dominant interpretations outlined, here the Canaanite woman is not heroine or faithful example, but rather oppressed and violated victim: 'one who must be invaded, conquered, annihilated', or 'if she is to survive, she must parrot the superiority of her subjugators and betray her own people and land. Basically she must survive only as a colonized mind, a subjugated and domesticated subject' (Dube 2000: 147).¹⁵ In stark contrast to the dominant reading pattern, Dube sees not the church but her own native sub-Saharan Africa figured within the Canaanite mother and pictures the encounter as a 'land possession scene' bracketed by entry into and away from ideologically laden territories. The Canaanite woman accordingly 'parrots' her subjugator's designation of 'dog'. The story as such is not a healing text that breaks down barriers but rather stamps out difference on an anvil inscribed with the words 'make Christians just like us'. For Africa and other colonized nations such projects amount to 'a mission as subjugation of difference' rather than 'a relationship of liberating interdependence between nations, races and genders' (Dube 2000: 150). Dube 'barks' violently not only at the text, but also at the lack of sensitivity to imperialism in the majority of the history of interpretation. She also critiques the construction of the daughter as 'severely possessed' as representative of those [Christian missionaries] that see foreigners as evil and dangerous: 'This of course paves the way for the ideology of those who are in desperate need of divine redeemers and justifies travel and entrance into foreign nations' (Dube 2000: 148). In order to provide an alternative reading Dube initiated contextual Bible study readings among women in the African Independent Church. From this she constructs an alternative 'Semoya' (of the spirit) reading strategy that 'resists discrimination and articulates a reading of healing ... by underlining the interconnections of things and people rather than their disconnectedness' (Dube 2000: 192). In the women's readings supersessionist logic is excised and the interdependence of Israel and Canaan is noted:

Israel has become an all-inclusive category for those who believe in God. But Canaan too is a rich land of faith, sought by all Israelites...decolonising *Semoya* readings are a transgression of boundaries that seek healing by seeing interdependence of cultures rather than emphasising exclusive oppositions (Dube 2000: 193).

Dube also identifies how the women started to integrate their own indigenous religious traditions within their interpretation. By speaking about Moya, the ancestral spirit, within interpretation they start to integrate

15. It should be noted however that 'parroting' the subjugators could in some circumstances be itself a work of resistance to imperial ideology, especially if one is able to attain one's aim (in this instance healing of the daughter) as a result.

African religion with Christian theology. Interestingly the majority of the group felt that the 'dog' designation was not referring to her ethnic status, but rather the demons that invaded her daughter (Dube 2000: 189). Dube concludes with the striking words of one respondent—'God never opened the Bible'—to illustrate the fact that God is active and dynamic not contained in particular directives from biblical texts. Dube accordingly celebrates the 'resurrected Rahabs who refuse to reproduce stories that were written about them' but rather 'weave their own stories of healing and empowerment' (Dube 2000: 195).

9. *Crumb Trails and Puppy-Dog Tales*

When crumbs fall from tables they often appear to follow certain patterns. The history of interpretation of the Canaanite woman's story likewise has involved the recycling, retelling and reprocessing of certain patterns, namely a salvation-historical reading and picturing the Canaanite woman as an exemplar of humble Christian faith and disposition. We have also seen that many advocacy readings adopt the basic framework of the dominant grooves of interpretation, but import their own particular interest (feminism, disability, resistance to empire) within the picture of the reconstituted people of God. However other advocacy interpreters resist the straitjacket of the history of interpretation and boldly 'bark' at oppressive elements within it. It is alternative voices (or barks) such as these that have inspired others to resurrect the Canaanite woman to speak to contemporary political issues. For example, a recent U2 track pictures the Canaanite woman as Africa pleading against the injustices perpetrated by first world governments that literally consume her.¹⁶

This chorus of some of the dominant and more hidden interpretive transcripts illustrate that just as for some the Canaanite is a 'paradigm of persistent faith' for others this 'uppity woman' (Ringe 1985: 6) is edgy, explosive and politically subversive. More jarringly those used to grovelling on hands and knees at the table of oppression see themselves in this *Canine*-ite (dog woman), who is invaded. They urge her, bewildered and weak though she may be, to get on her feet, first to whisper but eventually to bark back, not only at the Christ that calls her 'dog', but also the myriad disciples, missionaries and interpreters that stand in his wake. For puppy-dog tales and their afterlives are not limited to words on a page but ultimately are stimulants to human agency, for good and ill, within the world.

16. 'With a mouth full of teeth, you ate all your friends... *I'm waiting on the crumbs from your table*' (U2, 2004).

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‘JUNIAM—*NOMEN VIRI EST*’: ON
EARLY MODERN READINGS OF PAUL’S
GREETINGS TO THE ROMAN CHURCH

Charlotte Methuen

Abstract

This paper investigates the translations and comments on Romans 16, Paul’s greetings to the Roman Church, in the work of Lefèvre d’Étaples, Erasmus and of the Reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin and Peter Martyr Vermigli. It argues that although there is little explicit discussion, sixteenth-century commentaries and glosses on Romans 16 hint at a controversy about the gender of those whom Paul greets. This did not focus on the question of whether in Rom. 16.7 Paul greets a female *Junia* or a male *Junias* but was related to a wider question of women’s contribution to the ministry of the gospel. Rather, it centred on Paul’s commendation of Phoebe and his reference to her as a deacon, which becomes the key for understanding the presence of other women in the list of Paul’s greetings.

———— * * * ————

¹ I commend to you our sister *Phoebe*, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, ²so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. ³Greet *Prisca* and *Aquila*, who work with me in Christ Jesus, ⁴and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. ⁵Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved *Epaenetus*, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. ⁶Greet *Mary*, who has worked very hard among you. ⁷Greet *Andronicus* and *Junia*, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. ⁸Greet *Ampliatius*, my beloved in the Lord. ⁹Greet *Urbanus*, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved *Stachys*. ¹⁰Greet *Apelles*, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of *Aristobulus*. ¹¹Greet my relative *Herodion*. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of *Narcissus*. ¹²Greet those workers in the Lord, *Tryphaena* and *Tryphosa*. Greet the beloved *Persis*, who has worked hard in the Lord. ¹³Greet *Rufus*, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother—a mother to me also. ¹⁴Greet *Asyncritus*, *Phlegon*, *Hermes*, *Patrobas*, *Hermas*, and the brothers and sisters who are

with them. ¹⁵Greet *Philologus*, ***Julia***, *Nereus* and his sister, and ***Olympas***, and all the saints who are with them. ¹⁶Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

In the final chapter of Romans, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Paul commends the deacon Phoebe, the bearer of the letter, to the congregation in Rome, sending greetings to eighteen named men and eight named women—Prisca, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia and Olympas—and to two further anonymous women—the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus.¹ English translations of this text have not always seen it this way: the Revised Standard Version (RSV) describes Phoebe as a ‘deaconess’ and ‘helper’ rather than ‘deacon’ and ‘benefactress’. Moreover, for the RSV translators, the name of Andronicus’ associate is not the feminine *Junia* but the masculine *Junias*:

Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.

Whereas the NRSV has Paul greeting a man and a woman, Andronicus and Junia, prominent apostles, the RSV sees that greeting as directed at two men, Andronicus and Junias, ‘of note amongst the apostles’.

Bernadette Brooten paved the way for the NRSV translation in her brief but groundbreaking article on Junia(s) (Brooten 1977). Most recent commentators argue that Paul greets a woman, Ἰουνία, rather than a man, Ἰουνίας.² Richard Bauckham suggests Ἰουνία as a Greek version of Johanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, mentioned by Luke as one of the followers of Jesus (8.3) and one of the witnesses of the resurrection (24.10) (Bauckham 2002: 165-86). A second discussion, seen also in the difference between the RSV and NRSV translations, relates to the question of the translation of ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις: are Andronicus and Junia(s) *renowned* or *outstanding apostles*, or are they not apostles themselves, but *well known to the apostles*? The RSV’s translation seems carefully ambiguous on this point, although a majority of commentators now view Andronicus and Junia as famous apostles.³ If Bauckham’s reading is correct, then Junia/Johanna, like Mary Magdalene, could be regarded as an apostle by virtue of her having witnessed the resurrection.

This article surveys recent findings on the patristic and medieval readings of Rom. 16.7 before turning to consider early-modern discussions of Junia(s) against the wider context of their treatment of Phoebe and the

1. Men’s names are in italics; women’s in bold italics.

2. See Fitzmyer 1993; Thorley 1996; Belleville 2005. Epp 2005 summarizes the literature. Piper and Grudem 1991 argue for the masculine Junias, although they have largely been refuted.

3. Brooten 1977, Fitzmyer 1993, Belleville 2005 and Epp 2005 take Junia to be an outstanding apostle; a counter-argument is offered by Burer and Wallace 2000.

others to whom Paul sends greetings in Romans 16. The current consensus on early-modern usage follows Brooten (1997: 142) in suggesting that the Romans commentary upon which Luther relied, that by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (Jacobus Faber Stapulensis; 1450/55–1536), 'took the accusative 'IOUNIAN to be *Junias* (m.)', and that Martin Luther (1483–1546) followed this reading. Epp (2005: 36) suggests that Erasmus (1466/69–1536) read Rom. 16.7 to refer to *Junia*; '(like Erasmus) Lefèvre preferred the Greek ἰουνίαν, but (unlike Erasmus in his *Annotationes*), Lefèvre explicitly took the accusative *Juniam* as if from the masculine nominative *Junias* (just as for him, in Rom. 16.15 the 'Julia' of 'Philologus and Julia' became 'Julian')'. This article examines the early-modern readings cited by Epp and Brooten in more detail, together with those of John Calvin (1509–64) and Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), placing discussions of Junia(s) in the wider context of interpretations of Romans 16.

Modern English Translations of Romans 16.7

The focus of this article is on early-modern continental scholarship. However, a preliminary note on English translations may be helpful. The RSV's translation of Rom. 16.7 follows the Revised Version (RV): 'Salute Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles'. Until the NRSV, most twentieth-century English Bible translations followed the RV and referred to *Junias*.⁴ The NRSV and other recent translations have consequently received some criticism for introducing an 'innovation'.

Such criticism overlooks the fact that the RV was itself an innovation amongst English translation. The Authorised Version (1611; AV) has *Junia*, although she and Andronicus are referred to as 'kinsmen':

⁷Salute Andronicus and *Junia*, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

Epp (2005: 65–66) observes that English translations from the mid-nineteenth century until about 1970 generally have *Junias*, while the dominant English translations between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, the AV and the Rheims Bible, both have *Junia*.

4. Paul greets, in the *Jerusalem Bible*, 'those outstanding apostles Andronicus and Junias, my compatriots and fellow prisoners...'; in the *New Jerusalem Bible*, 'those outstanding apostles Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and fellow-prisoners...'; and in the *New International Version*, 'Andronicus and Junias, my relatives ... outstanding amongst the apostles'. The *New English Bible* has the name as Junias; the *Revised English Bible* as Junia. Compare Epp 2005: 65–68.

ἰουνίαν and ἰουνιᾶν

Modern interpretations of the gender of Junia(s) tend to hang on the accenting of the Greek. If it is a feminine name, ἰουνία, the accusative would be accented ἰουνίαν, whilst in the case of a masculine name, ἰουνιᾶς, the accusative would be accented ἰουνιᾶν. Epp (2005) finds that with the exception of Henry Alford's 1849–61 Greek New Testament, all editions of the Greek New Testament from Erasmus up to the thirteenth Nestlé edition (1927) give ἰουνίαν. The reading ἰουνιᾶν is attested by no early manuscripts, although the apparatus of some recent editions includes the earliest unaccented manuscripts as evidence for it. The earliest accented manuscripts have ἰουνίαν, and the earliest translations, into Old Latin, Coptic, Syriac, and Jerome's Vulgate, appear to take the name as feminine (Thorley 1996: 26–28; Belleville 2005: 238–39).⁵ Thorley (1996: 27) comments that 'the reading ἰουνιᾶν at Rom. 16.7 could well be the only case in the 1993 edition of the G[reek] N[ew] T[estament] which has no manuscript support whatsoever'.

Fitzmyer (1993: 738) notes that 'ninth-century miniscule manuscripts of Romans 16, fitted with accents, already bear the masculine form *Iouniân* and never the feminine form *Iounían*'. However, a note of caution is in order here. Epp (2005: 25–27) cites several nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars who regard ἰουνίαν as a legitimate accenting of the masculine name. Probably this was generally the case for scholars of an earlier era. It was Richard Bentley (1652–1742) who 'proposed that the accentuation should be ἰουνιᾶν (in order, of course, to create a clearly masculine name)' (Ellis 1862: 31); Henry Alford followed this lead in his 1861 New Testament, although he noted 'ἰουνιᾶν may be fem. (ἰουνίαν), from ἰουνία (Junia), in which case she may be the wife of Andronicus' (Thorley 1996: 26 n. 23). Lightfoot (1871: 179), however, commented: 'It seems probable that we should render the name ἰουνίαν, one of Paul's kinsfolk, who was "noted among the apostles", by Junias (i.e. Junianus), not Junia'. As Thorley (1996: 26) remarks:

the Revised Version of 1881 was the first English translation to read 'Junias', though a footnote read 'or Junia', but the Greek text which purported to be the basis for the Revised Version and which was published by the Oxford Press the same year still read ἰουνίαν without any comment, on the assumption that this reading might be interpreted as a masculine name, which appears to have been also the assumption of continental translators.

Before the twentieth century, therefore, the accenting of ἰουνιᾶν/ἰουνιᾶν cannot be regarded as a reliable guide to the editor's view of the gender of Junia(s).

5. Translations into Latin present a problem since both the feminine *Iunia* and the masculine *Iunias* have the same accusative: *Iuniam*.

Finally, we should note that the only significant early textual variant is ἰουλίαν, the accusative of Julia, a woman's name which occurs also in Rom. 16.15 (Belleville 2005: 238). Moreover, while the feminine *Junia* is a common name in Latin and ἰουνία not infrequent in Greek, a masculine name ἰουνιᾶς/*Junias* is nowhere attested (Thorley 1996; Belleville 2005).

Patristic and Medieval Renderings of Romans 16.7

John Chrysostom clearly believes that Paul is greeting a female apostle: 'How great is the wisdom of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle' (*Hom. Ep. Paul. ad Rom.* 31.2). The vast majority of patristic and medieval authors follow Chrysostom in seeing Junia as a woman, although some take her name to be Julia. Like Chrysostom, Origen, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Theodoret, and John Damascene understand Paul's greeting to refer to a woman (Fitzmyer 1993: 738-39). In the Greek tradition, Oecumenius, writing in the sixth century, and Theophylact, in the eleventh, draw on Chrysostom's homily: 'both pay tribute to the fact that a woman is not only named "an apostle" (μέγα μὲν καὶ τὸ εἶναι ἀποστόλους) but also "notable among them" (τὸ δὲ καὶ ἐπίσημος ἐν αὐτοῖς, μέγιστον [*maximum vero inter hos esse insignes*])' (Belleville 2005: 236). Belleville observes (2005: 236):

the unbroken tradition among the Latin fathers from Ambrose in the fourth century through to Lombard in the twelfth century of a female *Julia* (Ambrose, Jerome, Rabanus Maurus, Hatto of Vercelli, Bruno of Querfurt, Peter Abelard) or *Junia* (Jerome, Primasius, Sedulius-Scotus, Claudius of Turin, Rabanus Maurus, Haymo, Lanfranc, Bruno of Querfurt, Peter Lombard, Guillelmus Abbas, Herveus Burgidolensis) who was 'notable among the apostles' (*insignes* or *nobiles in apostolis*).

There appears to be an overwhelming consensus in patristic and medieval authors in favour of a feminine reading, whether Junia or Julia.

Only two exceptions have been found. The first is a mention of a masculine *Junias* found in Rufinus' translation of Origen. Epp (2005: 33-34) suggests, however, that this is a twelfth-century misreading; certainly it is not found in Caroline Bammel's edition of Origen's text. The second is in the *Index apostolorum discipulorumque*, attributed to Epiphanius, which asserts that Paul 'makes mention of' *Iounias*, an apostle who later became bishop of Apamea in Syria, and *Priscas*, 'who later became bishop of Colophonos' (Piper and Grudem 1991: 479 n. 19; cf. Epp 2005: 34). However, Prisca, or Priscilla, is indubitably Aquila's wife (Acts 18.2); indeed they are 'the best attested *mixed* missionary couple of the New Testament' (Kurek-Chomycz 2006: 107).⁶ As Burrus (1991: 241-43) has shown, Epiphanius

6. Prisca and Aquila are described in Acts 18.2-3 and Acts 18.18 as Paul's

was notoriously negative about women's authority in the church, regarding groups which practised it as automatically heretical; his masculinization of Prisca, who was clearly a woman, means that his treatment of Junia(s) is not reliable evidence that she was viewed as male by Epiphanius' contemporaries (Epp 2005: 34-35).

Until the late thirteenth century, then, readers of Romans 16 seem to have understood Paul to be greeting a woman, Junia or Julia, widely thought to be a famous apostle. The masculine reading emerges in the Western Church with Giles of Rome (Aegidius Romanus; 1243/47–1316), who read the name as *Juliam*, which he took to be the accusative of the masculine *Julias*. According to Giles, Paul's greeting was addressed to 'Andronicus and Julias, those honourable men (*viri*)' (Brooten 1977: 141-42; Fitzmyer 1993: 738).

Two Humanist Readings: Lefèvre d'Étaples and Erasmus

Early modern readings suggest that some commentators followed Giles of Rome and read the Vulgate's *Juniam* to refer to Junias, a man, while others followed Peter Lombard and took it to refer to Junia, a woman. Lefèvre's commentary on Rom. 16.3-16 remarks that Paul 'greet[s] twenty holy men by name and eight women' (Lefèvre 1512: 104^v), a count which he achieves by reading both *Juniam* (Rom. 16.7), which he accents Ἰουνίαν, and *Juliam* (Rom. 16.15) as male. His list of eight women greeted by Paul is made up of 'Prisca, the wife of Acyla [*sic*], whom several codices call Priscilla, Maria, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Olympa, the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus' (Lefèvre 1512: 104^v). Andronicus and Junias are *insignes in apostolis*, that is, 'outstanding amongst the apostles', and are of the same birth or race as Paul: the Vulgate's *cognatos* in Lefèvre's opinion should rather be *cogeneos* (Lefèvre 1512: 104^v, 105^r).

Although Lefèvre omits Junia(s) and Julia(s) from his list, he does note the significant number of women greeted by Paul (Lefèvre 1512: 104^v). In particular he comments on Paul's commendation of Phoebe: 'a faithful woman, secretary of his writings from Corinth and a minister of the church which was in the port of Corinth' [i.e. Cenchrea]; she is 'faithful and obedient towards the servants of Christ', and 'her humanity was not pretended or perfunctory but truthful'. He emphasizes that *Phoebe erat ministra*—'was a minister' (Lefèvre 1512: 105^r). Paul's list of greetings is intended to indicate to the Church of Rome 'those whom he knows to be fervent in the love of Christ, so that the Romans should know to whom they should listen and to whom they should entrust themselves safely and

co-workers. Paul mentions them in 1 Cor. 16.19 and Rom. 16.3-5a; they appear also in the pseudo-epigraphical 2 Tim. 4.19.

in faith'. Lefèvre does not imply that Phoebe or the women greeted by Paul are unworthy of that trust.

Erasmus (1535: 434-35) follows Lefèvre in reading different names in Rom. 16.7 and Rom. 16.15: the Latin names (in the accusative) should read *Juniam* in the former case and *Iuliam* in the latter. Like Lefèvre, he accents the name Junia(s) as ἰουνίαν, but unlike Lefèvre, he does not comment on the gender of Andronicus's partner. On the reading '*Andronicum & Juliam*' in Rom. 16.7, Erasmus (1535: 434) comments 'ἰουνίαν. id est, Iuniam. Nam Iuliam posterius suo loco refert. Consentiebat cum Graecis uetustissimus codex è Constantia praebitus'.⁷ Of the description of Andronicus and Junia, '*Qui sunt nobiles*', he notes (1535: 434) 'ἐπίσημοι. id est, Insignes. Ne quis eum de genere loqui putet'.⁸ Since both the *Annotationes* and the New Testament (Erasmus 1516: 3, 178) give *Juniam* only in the accusative, it is not possible to determine with certainty which gender Erasmus thought Junia(s) to have. However, given that he is here correcting the variant *Juliam*, which would normally be accepted as feminine, the lack of an explicit explanation that he was referring to masculine Junias and Julias seems surprising if he took them to be so. In fact, Lefèvre's New Testament offers indirect evidence that Erasmus did view these names as feminine.

In the case of Phoebe, whom the Vulgate describes as being *in ministerio ecclesiae*—'in the service of the church'—Erasmus (1535: 434) follows Lefèvre: 'οὐσαν διάκονον. id est, quae est ministra'; 'that is, who is a minister'. He also includes a note on Olympas (1535: 435): '*Olympiadem.*) Graece ὀλυμπᾶν, Olympam. Apparet enim uiros esse, non mulieres, è duobus articulis Graecis αὐτοῦ et σὺν αὐτοῖς. At ex Olympiade non potes virum facere'.⁹ Erasmus prefers the reading Olympas, but his comment suggests that he, like Lefèvre, thought that the name was indeed that of a woman.¹⁰

7. 'ἰουνίαν. that is, *Iuniam*. Now he refers to *Iuliam* later, in her place. This is in accordance with the oldest Greek codex from Constantia'. The facsimile edition here differs from the reading cited by Epp (2005: 28), which is based on the English translation given in the *Collected Works* (Erasmus 1535a: 427): 'ἰουνίαν, that is, "Iunia" [Paul] gives Julia her own place further on'. The English translation gives the nominative of Ampliam as Amplia and Apellam as Apella (428). Neither seem to be justified by Erasmus's text.

8. 'ἐπίσημοι. That is, famous. This may not be taken to speak of rank'.

9. '*Olympiadem.*) Greek ὀλυμπᾶν, *Olympam*. They appear to be men and not women, from the two Greek articles αὐτοῦ and σὺν αὐτοῖς. But you cannot make a man out of Olympiade'.

10. Against Brown's commentary on Erasmus's New Testament (Erasmus 1516: 3, 180). Fitzmyer (1993: 742) renders Rom. 16.15 as: 'Greetings to Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, Olympas', suggesting that Olympas and her brother Nereus may be the children of Philologus and Julia.

By the time Lefèvre translated the New Testament into French, he had changed his mind about the gender of Junia(s) and Julia(s). His translation of Rom. 16.7 reads: 'Saluez Andronique et Junie ... qui sont nobles entre les Apostres', and in Rom. 16.15 he gives 'Saluez Philologue et Julie/Neree et sa seur/et Olympiade...' (Lefèvre 1523: xxiii^v-xxv^v). Lefèvre's translation was followed in the earliest French Reformed translation by Olivetan (1535).¹¹ However, by the time of the 1669 edition of *La Sainte Bible de Genève*, *Junie* had been replaced by *Junias*, although *Julie* and *Olympe* were retained. This latter pattern seems to have become standard in subsequent French translations.¹²

'These are the names of men': Luther's Reading of Romans 16

Luther lectured on Romans in 1515/16. The *scholae* or interpretative comments of Luther's 1515/1516 lecture on Romans stop at the end of Romans 15, but his *glossae*, or textual comments, continue for Romans 16.¹³ These indicate that, like Lefèvre, whose Romans commentary Luther knew, and Erasmus, Luther was correcting the Vulgate text. However, his conclusions differ from both.

For Luther (1517a: 148), the Vulgate's description of Phoebe as *in ministerio ecclesiae* meant simply that Phoebe was *fideliū*, that is, one of the faithful; Paul calls her his sister 'because of her faith and religion, not because she was his sister in the flesh'. Turning to the list of greetings, Luther comments on several names with disputed gender (1517a: 149-51; Luther's glosses are in italics):

[16.3] Salutate Priscam et Aquilam [*gloss: Acylas de quibus Act. 18*] ... [6] Salutate Mariam: que multum laboravit in nobis. [7] Salutate Andronicum [*gloss: 'virilis'*] et Iuniam [*gloss: Iunias*] cognatos [*gloss: i.e. de genere Iudeorum*] et concaptivos meos: qui sunt nobiles in apostolis: qui et ante

11. Compare also the 1538 edition of Olivetan's New Testament, which also refers to Junie, Julie and Olympe (Olivetan 1538: 453).

12. For the 1669 Bible, see <http://www.biblegeneve.com/nt1669/index.htm> (accessed 14.06.2008). This translation seems to reflect Luther's usage. It probably forms the basis of Belleville's assertion that 'French translations were consistently masculine' (Belleville 2005: 237 n. 24), which does not hold for the earliest French translations. Modern French translations have 'Junias' rather than 'Junie'; but tend to retain 'Julie' (although 'Julius' also occurs) and 'Olympas'. [Comparison of Bible en français courant, Nouvelle Bible Segond (2002), la Colombe (Segond révisée 1978), Traduction œcuménique de la Bible, and Parole de Vie accessed via <http://lire.la-bible.net/index.php> (14.06.2008).]

13. There are two editions of Luther's *scholae* and *glossae* on Romans: the first, found in WA 56 (Luther 1517a), is based on an autograph manuscript; the second, the *Nachschrift*, found in WA 57 (Luther 1517b), brings together five sets of manuscript notes taken by students in Luther's lectures (Schmidt-Lauber 1994: 9-11).

me fuerunt in Christo Ihesu. [8] Salutate Ampliam [gloss: *Amplias*] dilectissimum [gloss: {dilec}tum 'agapetum'] mihi in domino... [10] Salutate Appellem [gloss: *Apelles*] probum in Christo... [12] Salutate Triphaenam et Tryphosam: quae laborant in domino. Salutate Persidem charissimam [gloss: *agapetam, dilectam*] que multum laborauit in domino... [14] Salutate Asyncritum [gloss: 'incomparabilis'] et Phlegontem [gloss: {Phleg}on 'comburens'] Herman [gloss: {Herm}as] Patrobam [gloss: {Patro}bas] Herman: [gloss: {Herm}es] et qui cum eis sunt fratres. [15] Salutate Philologum et Iuliam [gloss: {Iuli}as] Nereum et sororem eius et Olimpam [gloss: *Olympam*] et omnes qui cum eis sunt sanctos.

Luther opts for *Junias*, *Julias* and *Olympam*. The *Nachschrift* indicates that he was quite explicit about the implications for their gender (Luther 1517b: 125-26):

[16.7] Salutate Andronicum [Gloss: *quod dicitur 'virilis'*] et Iuniam [Gloss: *nomen viri est*]... [8] Salutate Ampliam [Gloss: *nomen viri*] est dilectissimum mihi in domino... [12] Salutate Triphaenam et Tryphosam [Gloss: *mulieres*]... Salutate Persidem charissimam... [14] Salutate Asyncritum [Gloss: 'incomparabilis'] et Phlegontem [Gloss: *vel Phlegonta*], Herman, Patrobam, Herman, et qui cum eis sunt fratres. [Gloss: *nomina virorum*] [15] Salutate Philologum et Iuliam [Gloss: *nomen viri*], Nereum et sororem eius/et Olimpam [Gloss: *videtur esse nomen viri, quamquam Stapulensis mulierem numerat*] et omnes qui cum eis sunt sanctos.

Luther apparently felt the need to emphasize the gender of some names in the list—'Andronicus [*who is called "manly"*] and Junias [*it is the name of a man*]... Amplias [*it is a man's name*]... Triphena and Tryphosa [*women*]... Iulias [*it is the name of a man*]... Olimpam [*although Stapulensis numbers it amongst the women, this seems to be the name of a man*]'—including some which seem generally not to have been controversial.

Luther's view of the gender of those being addressed by Paul is maintained in his German New Testament translation, completed in 1522, which uses the German definite article (underlined in the text below) to render unmistakable the gender of certain names (Luther 1522: 76; 78):

³Grusset die Priscan vnd den Aquilan meyne gehulffen ynn Christo Ihesu, ...
⁶Grusset Mariam, wilche hat viel geerbeyt an euch. ⁷Grusset den Andronicon vnd den Junian, meyne gefreundten, vnd meyne mitgefange, wilche sind berumpte Apostel, vnd fur myr gewesen ynn Christo... ¹²Grusset die Triphena vnd die Tryphosa, wilche geerbeyt haben ynn dem hern. Grusset die Persida meyne liebe, wilche hat viel geerbeyt yn dem hern... ¹⁵Grusset Philologon vnd Julian, Nereon vnd seyne schwester, vnd Olympan, vnd alle heyligen bey yhn.

In the 1534 *Biblia Teutsch*, Luther made one change to the list of names: the ambiguous *Julian* of 1522 has become die *Julian*. Junias, however, remains masculine (*Gruesset ... den Junian*), and Olympas is left ambiguous.

Like Lefèvre and Erasmus, Luther took the adjective *nobiles* to imply *insignes*: Andronicus and Junia were ‘berumpte Apostel’—‘famous apostles’ (Luther 1517b: 125). Luther later argued (1545: 275) that the church in Rome had been founded not by Peter, but by Paul’s cousins, these ‘famous apostles’ Andronicus and Junias, together with Aquila, remarking that Paul ‘also praises a woman, Mary, who had worked particularly hard for the Roman Christians’ (1545: 275-76). Of the other women mentioned by Paul in Romans 16, not even Prisca merits a mention. Luther’s insistence on a male *Junias* may be rooted in his interest in claiming Andronicus and Junias as apostles to Rome, and thus as counters to Petrine claims of primacy.

Luther’s translation differed from contemporary French and English translations.¹⁴ However, the *Luther-Bibel* had immense prominence and incalculable influence in this respect, as in so many others.

Two Reformed Commentaries: Calvin and Peter Martyr Vermigli

Calvin’s Romans commentary includes an explicit comment on Prisca’s gender:

Salute Prisca and Acyla... It is a singular honour which Paul here confers on Prisca and Aquila and particularly on Prisca, because she is a woman. This reveals all the more the unassuming nature of the holy apostle, since he does not refuse to have, and is not ashamed to admit that he has, a woman as his associate in the work of the Lord (Calvin 1556: 323).

No mention is made of Junia(s), which might indicate that Calvin took the name to be masculine. However, when discussing Paul’s relationship to Andronicus and Junia(s), Calvin gives the nominative *Iunia et Andronicus* (Calvin 1556: 324), and it seems unlikely that Calvin would have expected *Junia* to be taken as a masculine name without comment. However, his discussion focuses, not on gender, but on Paul’s use of the term ‘apostle’:

Paul calls them *apostles*. He does not, however, use this word in its proper and generally accepted sense, but extends it to include all those who do not just establish one church, but give their whole efforts to spreading the Gospel everywhere. In this passage, therefore, Paul is referring in a general way to those who planted churches, by bringing the doctrine of salvation

14. Tyndale’s New Testament (1536) has ‘Andronicus and Junia, my cousins... which are well taken amongst the apostles’ and ‘Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympha...’ Tyndale’s view of the gender of Junia, but apparently not of her status, was followed by Coverdale (1540: ‘Grete Andronicus and Junia, my cosens... which are awncient apostles’), the Matthew Bible (1551: ‘Grete Andronicus and Junia, my cosyens... which are well taken among the apostles’), the Geneva Bible (1585: ‘Salute Andronicus and Junia my cousins... which are notable amongst the apostles’), and, as noted above, the Authorised Version (1611).

to various places, as apostles. Elsewhere he restricts the word to that order which Christ established at the beginning when he chose the twelve disciples (Calvin 1556: 324).

Calvin also makes this distinction in his *Institutes* (1559: IV.3.5), explaining that although the Twelve 'surpassed the rest in order and rank...by the meaning and derivation of the word, all ministers of the church can properly be called "apostles" because all are sent by God and are his messengers'. In this latter sense, Paul 'applied this name [apostle]...to Andronicus and Junia, whom he calls "of note amongst the disciples"'.¹⁵ Calvin appears here to define the term 'apostle' in such a way that it might be applied to a female Junia, to Prisca, Mary and the other women with whom Paul 'was not ashamed to work'. Like Luther, Calvin appeals to Romans 16 as evidence that Peter was not the founder of the church in Rome: 'of Peter [Paul] is yet utterly silent... The thing itself and the whole argument of the letter cry out that Peter ought not to have passed over if he had been at Rome' (Calvin 1559: IV.13.14). Unlike Luther, however, Calvin seems to think that the women mentioned by Paul might have contributed to the founding of the Roman church.

Calvin is also interested in the role of Phoebe, whom he, like Lefèvre and Erasmus, understands to be a *ministra* of the Church at Cenchrae (Calvin 1556: 322). She is to be commended first, because 'she has an honest and holy ministry in the Church' and 'it is right to respect all those who bear a public ministry in the church'. Secondly, Paul commends her because she had helped him. Finally, she is commended on account of the nature of her ministry:

The poor were supported out of the funds of the church and were looked after by persons charged with that duty. For this last widows were chosen, who, since they were free from domestic duties and not hindered by children, desired to dedicate themselves wholly to God for religious service... At a time of increasing degeneracy in the Church this most holy office, which was of very great use to the Church, became corrupted into the idle order of nuns.

This type of ministry, Calvin remarks, 'is also taught elsewhere: 1 Timothy 5.9'.

Calvin recognizes Phoebe as holding 'a public office in the church;' however, his association of her ministry with 1 Timothy's conditions for 'true widows' disguises the fact that Paul refers to Phoebe as *διάκονος* or deacon, a ministry which Calvin had himself renewed in the Genevan church.

15. This translation follows the Latin (Calvin 1559: 780: *Hoc nomen tribuit... Paulus ipse Andronico et Iuniae, quos dicit fuisse insignes in apostolos*), rather than the Battles translation, which gives 'Andronicus and Junias, men of note among the apostles' (Calvin 1559a: 1058).

That Calvin himself identified the widows of 1 Timothy with female deacons is apparent from his definition of diaconal ministry. Here he draws on his reading of Rom. 12.8 to identify ‘two distinct grades’ of deacon:

in the first clause [i.e. ‘the one who gives, with generosity’—CM] he [Paul] designates the deacons who distribute the alms. But the second [i.e. ‘the one who is compassionate, with cheerfulness’—CM] refers to those who had devoted themselves to the care of the poor and sick. Of this sort were the widows whom Paul mentions to Timothy. Women could fulfil no other public office than to devote themselves to the care of the poor. If we accept this (as it must be accepted), there will be two kinds of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other, in caring for the poor themselves. But even though the term διακονία itself has a wider application, scripture specifically designates as deacons those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve as stewards of the common chest of the poor (Calvin 1559: IV.3.9).¹⁶

In the *Institutes* (IV.13.18–19), Calvin identifies ‘those widows who were admitted into public ministry’ as the true predecessors of nuns, but he also associates them explicitly with deaconesses:

Deaconesses were created not to appease God with songs or unintelligible mumbling, not to live the rest of the time in idleness, but to discharge the public ministry of the church toward the poor and to strive with all zeal, constancy and diligence in the task of love.

Although Calvin does not mention Phoebe’s name in this context, his use of the term *diaconissa* (which does not appear in the Vulgate) suggests that he might have the διακονος Phoebe in mind. For Calvin, Phoebe exemplifies the proper ministry of women: care of the poor and the practical love of neighbour.¹⁷

Not all of Luther’s and Calvin’s contemporaries took any interest in Romans 16,¹⁸ but Peter Martyr Vermigli draws out several of the themes mentioned by Calvin. Of Phoebe, Vermigli writes:

She had ministered in the Church of Cenchrea, not indeed in teaching publicly, but in caring for the poor, who were sustained at the charge of the Church. And which widows, either with regard to age, or with regard to behaviour, were appropriate, is best described in the epistle to Timothy. By what means she was a help to Paul, we do not know. But it is enough for us to understand from Paul’s testimony that she had often offered support,

16. Calvin developed these ideas over time: while the final sentence of this description was included in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, the earlier section did not appear until the 1543 edition.

17. For modern understandings of Phoebe’s ministry and for the diaconal aspect of the ministry of widows, see Merz 2007 and Standhartinger 2007.

18. Neither Philip Melancthon (1530, 1540, 1552) nor Martin Bucer (1536) comment on the ministry of Phoebe, or indeed on any of Paul’s greetings.

both to many others, and to Paul himself. She is commended here in three ways: for being a sister, for being a minister, and for giving support to many others including Paul himself. To which may be added, that she was holy: for Paul immediately adds, *as is proper for the saints* (Vermigli 1558: 640).

Vermigli's account of Phoebe's ministry is clearly influenced by Calvin, but it also has close parallels with the actual ministry of Katharina Schütz Zell. Schütz Zell, the wife of the Strasbourg Reformer Matthias Zell, assisted in ministering to Strasbourg's poor, offered hospitality to Protestant refugees and exiles, and was appointed one of the *diaconi exilii* by the city of Strasbourg (Methuen 2007: 312). Her description of her ministry is strikingly similar to Phoebe's as envisaged by Calvin and Vermigli, both of whom had lived in Strasbourg, and must have known of her work:

...I did not stand in the pulpit, which I had no need to add to what I did; instead I behaved according to the teachings of Saint Paul and the rule of the faithful women who lived in his times and were loved by him, [visiting] many houses and people (also in other places, for I was not only in Strasbourg) and refused no-one my help and support in their need (Schütz Zell 1557: 231-32).

Although Schütz Zell does not refer explicitly to Phoebe as a model for her ministry, she could well have had her in mind as one of 'the faithful women who lived in [Paul's] times and were loved by him'.

Vermigli certainly sees such a ministry as appropriate to women other than Phoebe; indeed he suggests: 'When [Paul] says that these women Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, & Maria laboured, he probably meant that they had such a ministry as we said above that Phoebe had' (Vermigli 1558: 640). However, Vermigli also emphasizes that women are subordinate, commenting (1558: 640): 'neither is it to be marvelled at that Paul here commends a woman, for he also wrote letters of commendation to Philemon for Onesimus his bondsman'. For Vermigli, Phoebe's status is comparable to that of Onesimus. Similarly, Vermigli is puzzled that Paul mentions Prisca before Aquila: 'But why he sets the woman before the man, we do not know' (Vermigli 1558: 640). He concludes nonetheless that Prisca and Aquila are honoured by Paul because they shared in his work of spreading the gospel:

It is manifest that the love of both of them was notable, since for Paul's sake they put their life in danger... Neither should it be ignored that he calls the man and the wife his helpers, and *συνεργούς*, which commonly means fellow workers. And not without cause, for they instructed Apollo, a Jew, and one that had very great knowledge of the law, in the way of the Lord: as it is written in the eighteenth chapter of Acts.

Despite her gender, Vermigli recognizes Prisca as Paul's fellow worker.

Vermigli takes Junia to be a woman (1558: 640), and initially follows Calvin in numbering her with Andronicus amongst the apostles, following

the medieval tradition of counting Andronicus and Junia amongst the seventy-two rather than the Twelve: 'Origen thinks that it is possible that they were of the number of the seventy-two disciples. But I think this cannot be so, for they fell away from Christ'.¹⁹ However, for Vermigli, Junia's gender renders this interpretation problematic:

But how does [Paul] attribute this to [Andronicus'] wife? As though the apostleship could also apply to her? Perhaps they are called notable amongst the Apostles, in that they were well known unto them and had no small reputation in the Church of Christ. This sense does not displease me; the words themselves are not repugnant to it.

Vermigli's conviction that *Junia* is a female name thus leads to a reassessment of how she might properly be described.

Some Conclusions

Although there is little explicit discussion of the gender of Junia and the other women greeted by Paul in Romans 16, it is clear that sixteenth-century commentators and Bible translators were aware of a range of different traditions, and they appealed to them in ways that reflected their particular interests and their contexts. Vermigli, who was familiar with the ministry of Katharina Schütz Zell in Strasbourg, and who understood the women of Romans 16 to have exercised such a diaconal ministry, was nonetheless unconvinced that the terminology 'apostle' might be properly applied to a woman. Calvin's interest in the diaconate—he also knew Katharina Schütz Zell personally—allows him to acknowledge that women might share in the task of spreading the gospel through care of the poor and the practice of charity, and led him to define the role of the deacon and to redefine the term *apostle* in such a way as to make that their apostolic ministry. For Luther, the main concern seems to have been to establish a non-Petrine foundation for the church in Rome; an aim which he appears to have felt was best served by arguing that it was established by male apostles, and most importantly Paul's cousins. Of the three, Luther was probably furthest from the dominant patristic and early medieval interpretation of Junia as a woman apostle, but it was Luther's reading which came to dominate modern interpretations of Romans 16.

The lack of detailed commentary suggests that none of these commentators would have claimed Romans 16 as a central text, although it could have had a much greater significance for Calvin's revival of the diaconate than he in fact gave it. Luther, Calvin and Vermigli were all proponents of

19. Vermigli here refers to 'the common speculation among the Latin fathers that 'notable among the apostles' refers to the group of seventy-two that Jesus commissioned and sent out' (Belleville 2005: 236).

the principle of *sola scriptura* and of the clarity of scripture. Their expositions of Romans 16 indicate, however, that they read Paul's greetings to the Roman Church through the spectacle of their expectations about the possible roles of women in Paul's church—and in their own.

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BLAKE'S JERUSALEM: REFIGURING REVELATION'S WOMEN

Susanne Sklar

Abstract

Blake reshapes the attributes and action of Revelation's Woman Clothed with the Sun, the Babylon Harlot, and the New Jerusalem in the character of his Jerusalem, a heroine whose apocalypse reveals *apocatastasis*, the universal forgiveness from which no one is excluded. Blake's heroine has a shadowy counterpart, a Babylon figure called Vala, who uses virginity and morality to promote war and destroy humanity—but in Blake's vision Babylon/Vala is to be forgiven and incorporated into Jerusalem, the erotically active bride of Christ. Because her inclusive and liberating love threatens what we would call the military-industrial complex, Blake's Jerusalem is called a harlot, presiding (like John's Babylon) over an international trade network—but the trade she orchestrates spreads beauty and peace throughout the world. Like John's Woman Clothed with the Sun, Blake's Jerusalem faces a great dragon. The dragon devours her and she rises like Christ, making possible a world where continual forgiveness can be a social structuring principle. No one is condemned. St John's vision challenges the power of Empire and of Satan; Blake's additionally challenges the notion of good and evil, delivering humanity from the tyranny of binary thinking.

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In creating his heroine, Jerusalem, William Blake draws upon the mythic women in the Book of Revelation: the Woman Clothed with Sun (Revelation 12), the Babylon harlot (Revelation 17–18) and New Jerusalem, who is also the Bride of the Lamb (Revelation 21–22). St John's vision challenges the power of Empire and of Satan; Blake's additionally challenges the notion of good and evil as he reconfigures Revelation's mythic women. In this essay I will briefly describe Blake's illuminated epic, *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, before considering how John's mythic women inform the character of Blake's heroine. Blake alters the Sun-Woman's story and redistributes some of the attributes and activities of Babylon and New Jerusalem to create a Jerusalem whose apocalypse reveals *apocatastasis*, the universal salvation from which no one is excluded.¹

1. Origen first discussed *apocatastasis* in the third century and was anathemized

John wrote Revelation, in part, to preserve the integrity of Christian communities in Asia, warning congregations against assimilation and compromise with the idolatrous culture of the Empire (Boxall 2006: 11-14). Blake, too, warns his readers against worshipping his Empire's harlot and beast, but in *Jerusalem* the harlot-beast, infecting both individuals and societies, is symptomatic of the spiritual disease that prevents one person or group from connecting with another. In Blake's poem people and nations can be freed from the disease called Selfhood and incorporated (with Babylon) in Jerusalem. Blake's heroine faces a great dragon, is devoured, and rises like Christ to spread a culture of peace throughout the earth. In Blake's *Jerusalem* humanity is delivered from the binary thinking springing from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In John's Revelation the Woman Clothed with the Sun and New Jerusalem, the Bride of the Lamb, are good; the harlot called Babylon is evil and should be destroyed. Austin Farrer (1964), Tina Pippin (1992, 2005), Edith Humphrey (1995), Paul Duff (2001), Barbara Rossing (1999) and Lynn Huber (2007) are among those who discuss how the female figures in John's apocalyptic vision exist in terms of binary opposition. The good Woman Clothed with the Sun can be conflated with good New Jerusalem; both exist in antithesis to evil Babylon. Parallels between good Jerusalem and evil Babylon highlight their opposition (Duff 2001: 83-96).²

Barbara Rossing discusses this binary opposition in terms of what she calls 'the two-woman topos', a motif in pagan literature in which a hero (like Hercules) must choose between a modest lady, embodying Virtue, and a flashy one, embodying Vice. In the Book of Proverbs the reader must choose between the allurements of the dangerous strange woman and the virtues of the one called Wisdom (Rossing 1999: 18-21, 41-46). It has been argued that the 'good' women in Revelation, the Woman Clothed with the Sun and the Bride of the Lamb, are passive, powerless, protected, and pure whereas the evil harlot is active and assertive (Pippin 1992: 195-200, 203; Fiorenza 1991: 13). Reading Revelation in the light of Blake's *Jerusalem* I see that the Bride of the Lamb need not be controlled by the Lamb; she has the last word (Rev. 22.17). The Sun-Woman is resourceful and strong. No male warrior rescues her—or Blake's heroine. Blake's Jerusalem is not the antithesis of the harlot; the harlot is part of who she is. The harlot can be transformed and forgiven. As Christopher Rowland

for suggesting that God's inexorable forgiveness might transform Satan; Gregory of Nyssa modified the doctrine in the fourth century. For a good discussion of early Christian *apocatastasis* see Ludlow 2000: 1-115, especially 78-92.

2. For example, both are personified cities, gorgeously arrayed, introduced to John by the same angel with the words: 'Come hither, I will show thee...' (Rev. 17.1; 21.9); both wear sumptuous jewels.

observes, Blake ‘evolved his own mythology, rooted in the symbols and images of biblical prophecies and apocalypses to express a more humane conception of life. He sought to enable the Scripture’s imagery to be reborn’ (Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 189).

Blake’s Jerusalem

William Blake (1757–1827), the poet, painter, and engraver, created about fifteen illuminated books, dozens of unpublished poems, and hundreds of paintings and drawings, as well as commercial engravings. In his prophetic poems he develops a mythopoetic system, often peopled by quasi-angelic figures called Zoas and Emanations. Zoas are generally masculine characters embodying life-forces; Emanations are generally feminine ones through which Zoas interconnect and the human can become divine (J44.38, 88.2–11³). Blake claims to be divinely inspired, dining with Isaiah and Ezekiel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (12 K153), created between 1790 and 1792, and taking dictation from Jesus in *Jerusalem* (J4.5), created between 1804 and 1821.

Blake’s fascination with the Apocalypse was noted in the very first commentary about his work, written by Benjamin Heath Malkin in 1806. Malkin observes, ‘The Book of Revelation, which may well be supposed to engross much of Mr. Blake’s study, seems to have directed him’ (Bentley 2004: 567).⁴ Apocalyptic imagery informs much of Blake’s poetry and painting. He sketched and painted at least seven versions of ‘A Vision of the Last Judgement’, and painted eleven watercolours of scenes from Revelation, including two interpretations of The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun (B519/pl 580; B520/pl 581⁵). Blake explicitly identifies himself with John on Patmos in poems called *The Four Zoas* (8.601, K356) and *Milton* (40.22, K532), where he sees a great dragon threatening a feminine-divine heroine. In *The Four Zoas* the woman so threatened is called Jerusalem; her character is more fully developed in the illuminated epic that bears her name.

Blake’s *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, consisting of 100 beautifully illuminated plates, frequently alludes to the Book of Revelation. This great poem baffles many good readers, largely because its characters and settings are uncannily fluid. A person can be a place: Albion is a man

3. All *Jerusalem* references (‘J’) come from the Blake Trust facsimile, edited by Morton Paley (‘I’ = illumination). Other Blake references (‘K’) derive from *Blake: Complete Writings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (1972).

4. From the introductory letter in Malkin’s *A Father’s Memoirs of His Child*, published in London (1806).

5. ‘B’ refers to Martin Butlin’s excellent two volume catalogue, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*. (‘Pl’ = plate).

and a land; Jerusalem is a woman and a city, as she is in the Book of Revelation. Settings and characters can morph into one another. Microcosmically, they can be aspects of the human soul or personality; macrocosmically, they can have corporate identity. Ultimately all coinhere in Jerusalem—who coinheres with Jesus.⁶

In *Jerusalem's* first chapter Albion (a man and a land) rejects the Saviour's divine song, banishing Jerusalem (a woman and a city). When Albion casts out Jerusalem, his Zoas, their Emanations, and a chorus of sons and daughters fall into fragmenting dissension. 'Humanity shall be no more!' Albion cries, 'but War and Princedom and Victory!' (J4.32). The Zoas include: Los, a prophetic artist; Urizen, embodying reason; Luvah (also called France), filled with romantic and revolutionary energy. Luvah's Emanation is Vala, who can be called Babylon.

Before Albion's fall (and after his awakening) Vala/Babylon commingles with Jerusalem beside an Edenic River (J19.40-48, 28i). When Albion rejects human-divine love Vala splits from Jerusalem and becomes the Mother of War. Adorned with gems and gold she rides a seven-headed serpent dragon, dominating Albion and humanity (J75i, 89.53).

Los, the prophetic artist, struggles to rescue Albion who loses hope and dies several times. Exhausted, Los falls into error; Jerusalem gets deluded in the wilderness of dark Satanic mills, lamenting in a desert for her lost children (J53-60, 79). War rages globally: in Canaan, Europe, Tartary, in America, on the Euphrates. Rivers shrink; heaven streams with blood; stars fall; thunder and earthquakes roar; famine and pestilence blight the earth. Vala seems to triumph. Jerusalem simultaneously ascends from the wilderness of Albion's bosom while descending from heaven like a city and a bride, 'cover'd with immortal gems', holding the 'River of Life & Tree of Life' in her bosom (J86.14, 18). The harlot thrusts her cup of wrath upon Jerusalem and Jerusalem ends up in the Dragon's stomach (J89). But she rises, clad in gold (J92i). Time ends. With the breath of God, the Emanation awakens Albion. He sees the ruin he has wrought; he sees that Los is Christ and Christ is Los. He throws himself into fires which become fountains of living water. He and his Zoas welcome Jerusalem, as a bridegroom calls his bride. All Zoas and Emanations reintegrate in 'Wars of Love', in the Song of Jerusalem (J96-100).

Blake explicitly states that *Jerusalem* is dictated by Jesus Christ 'to open the immortal Eyes' of humanity (J5.19-20), and inspire the building of Jerusalem on earth as it is in heaven (J77). In an aesthetic manifesto (written while he was creating *Jerusalem*) Blake exhorts us to 'enter into' the images he creates, to make 'a Friend & Companion' of his characters, an

6. To coinhere means to exist together and to abide or dwell in one another. See Jn 14.10-11; 17.21.

imaginative act through which we can be transformed and transform the world around us (K611). This involves attending to what Blake calls the 'Minute Particularity' of a character like Jerusalem, which includes understanding her mythopoetic ancestry.

The Sun-Woman's Story

The story of Blake's Jerusalem is informed by the story of St John's Woman Clothed with the Sun. Blake's heroine retreats to a wilderness (J49-50, 78-80, 83; Rev. 12.6, 14), is devoured by a seven-headed dragon (J89), occasionally has wings (J2i, 14i, 86.1; Rev. 12.14) and carries the sun, moon, and stars in them (J2i; Rev. 12.1). When clearly labelled in Blake's illuminations (J26i and 92i) she wears the same dress and has what looks like the same face and hair as The Woman Clothed with the Sun in the watercolours Blake painted in 1803 and 1805. In the first of these paintings (B519/pl 580) the ferocious dragon-beast looms over 'the woman which was ready to be delivered' (Rev. 12.4). In Blake's poem, though Jerusalem has many children and seeks to defend her 'little ones' she, unlike the Sun-Woman, is not 'travailing in birth' (Rev. 12.2). This is a significant variation in the archetypal story.

The story of St John's Woman Clothed with the Sun draws upon pagan mythology. Adela Yarbro Collins (1993: 22-23) clearly shows that Revelation parallels a Latin version of the Greek myth of Leto, a Titan goddess impregnated by Zeus and pursued by Python, a serpentine creature not unlike John's dragon. Python wants to kill Leto because her child is destined to destroy him (as Christ was born to triumph over Satan). Zeus commands the North Wind to lift Leto beyond Python (as the Sun-Woman is given 'wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent' in Rev. 12.14). Protected by Poseidon, Leto gives birth to Artemis and Apollo, who slays Python when he is four days old. Though St John inveighs against Greco-Roman assimilation in his exhortation to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3), he incorporates the myth of a woman and child threatened by a devouring monster into the vision that came to him on Patmos, an island sacred to the children of Leto.⁷ This archetypal story was part of his cultural landscape.

While Blake was creating *Jerusalem* in London, a prophetess named Joanna Southcott, enacting her version of the Sun-Woman story, was part of his cultural landscape. Southcott identified herself as the Woman Clothed with the Sun in her first publication (1801: 40). In 1802 she wrote about

7. A temple of Artemis, goddess of hunting and childbirth, is said to have dominated the island. On its foundations the Monastery of St John arose (Boxall 2006: 10-11).

a seven day confrontation with the Devil, and in 1805 she again affirmed her identity as The Woman Clothed with the Sun before the Recorder of London, in the presence of respectable witnesses including William Sharp, the most successful engraver in London (Brown 2002: 190), who urged his friend Blake to become a disciple.⁸ Though Blake wrote a poem about Joanna,⁹ he was not interested in joining the Southcott flock, which grew to over 100,000 followers in 1813 after she announced that she, a 63 year old virgin, had been visited by the Holy Ghost and would give birth to Shiloh, a second Messiah. Expanding in ghostly pregnancy she went into something resembling labour on Christmas Day 1814 and died (Brown 2002: 245-94). No child was born. Her most devoted followers (including William Sharp) believed that this fulfilled the prophecy in Revelation 12 that the child was caught up 'to God and his throne' (Brown 2003: 39).

In her writings Joanna identifies herself not only with the Woman Clothed with the Sun, but also with the Virgin Mary, Eve, Sarah, the mother of Israel, and the Bride of the Lamb.¹⁰ Southcott called her closest supporters and protectors her 'Seven Stars', casting them as apocalyptic angels. As a second Eve, Southcott's Sun-Woman seeks to wreak vengeance upon Satan, casting the blame wrongly attributed to women back upon the serpent. 'Bruising the serpent' is probably Southcott's central theological metaphor.¹¹

William Blake was intrigued by Joanna Southcott but his heroine is not directly modelled upon her. Joanna thirsts for righteousness, for vindication, whereas Blake's Jerusalem longs for forgiveness, liberty, and love, crying:

Why should punishment Weave the Veil with Iron Wheels of War
When Forgiveness might it Weave with wings of Cherubim? (J22.34-35)

Though she confronts and protests against what St John would call 'the destroyers of the earth' (Rev. 11.18), Blake's Jerusalem never seeks to bruise even a worm. When Blake's heroine is called as a bride and all living things participate in 'the Song of Jerusalem' (J99), even the 'all wondrous Serpent' is 'humanized' in 'the Forgiveness of Sins' (J98.44-45). Jerusalem abhors vengeance. She is more interested in preserving and enhancing the

8. In his diary (Monday 30 January 1815) Crabb Robinson wrote of how Sharp 'endeavoured to make a convert of Blake the engraver' (Bentley 2004: 319).

9. 'On the Virginity of the Virgin Mary & Joanna Southcott' (K418).

10. In her twelfth book, the Spirit of God declares, 'now Two Marys let the public see!' 1802: (12)67; Southcott casts herself as Sarah in 1813: (58)2; and in a published letter to Sharp and her closest followers, describes the beauty of the Saviour when he visits her in bed in 1804: (24)113-14.

11. Frances Kennett discusses this at length in the third chapter of her forthcoming book, *The Woman in the Wilderness: Joanna Southcott's Theology*. Also see Southcott 1802: (12)17; 1803: (18)19.

lives of her children throughout the world than she is in destroying enemies (J20.27, 79). Before Albion's fall (and after his awakening) Blake's Jerusalem is active and inspiring, orchestrating multinational exchange (J24, 79).

This does not mean that John's Sun-Woman is passive or powerless. Re-reading Revelation 12 in light of Blake's *Jerusalem* I am struck by how resourceful and strong the Woman Clothed with the Sun must be. Giving birth is a demanding and dangerous activity. No one helps the Sun-Woman; alone, she gives birth while facing a dragon! Her male child is caught up to the protection of God 'and his throne,' but, bereft of her baby, the Woman flees alone (just after childbirth) 'into the wilderness'. She reaches 'the place prepared of God' without any help from any being—human, angelic, or divine. Michael is busy fighting Satan in heaven, and since the angelic host cannot annihilate him entirely, the Sun-Woman must face Satan alone again. She has no heavenly battalions. With wings she flies away, successfully avoiding the dragon that Michael and all his angels could not destroy. When Satan spews a flood at her, the Earth comes to her aid. As Ian Boxall notes (2006: 184), this is personified Mother Earth, a feminine character who is just as efficient at deflecting dragons as Michael and all his fighting angels. Creative retreat can be the wisest tactic in a conflict, especially if one values life.

Like St John's Sun-Woman, Blake's Jerusalem is often considered to be powerless and/or a victim (Mellor 1982/83: 148, Kaplan 1996/97: 68-82, Persyn 1999: 52-83, Connolly 2002: 218), partially because she retreats from those who seek to destroy her. Her enemies include Albion and his twelve sons (who are among her children and include the twelve tribes of Israel which are also the counties of Britain) as well as the seven-headed dragon and Vala. She is outnumbered. Like John's Sun-Woman, Blake's Jerusalem is helped by a female figure, a wise crone named Erin (Ireland) who manipulates time and space to free her from corruption in Albion's bosom (J49-50). When Jerusalem finally confronts Vala and those who destroy the earth (J79-80) she ends up in the Dragon's stomach (J89.43-44). She may be swallowed up in death, but like Christ she rises, clad in her Sun-Woman gown (J92i).

When Jerusalem is called as a bride by Albion and all of humanity, no one is excluded from the embrace of the human and the divine (J97-99). Vala, who is called Babylon, is not burned or devoured. In the 'time of love' Vala/Babylon is integral to what Blake calls human-divine 'comin-gling' (J19.46, 69.43, 88.6). In Blake's *Jerusalem* the harlot and the bride coinhere.

Beyond Good and Evil

In Blake's *Jerusalem* humanity is freed from the pathology of thinking in terms of the knowledge of good and evil. Eating of the 'Tree of Good &

Evil' obstructs emanation (J74.33-36) and occludes spiritual identity. In Blake's mythic system 'emanation' connects individuals with each other, with nature, with culture, and with God. Jerusalem and Vala/Babylon are meant to emanate together: Vala produces material bodies; Jerusalem gives 'the Souls' (J18.6). Matter and energy coinhere. Emanation is about quality of relationship, not moral judgment.

When Albion banishes his Emanation, severing the human from the divine and wreaking havoc upon nature and culture, he is not called evil. He is called sick (J23.40, 40.1-12); he has a disease (J4.13, 21.3-10, 44.31-32, 45.15-16, 66.80). Satan is a disease called Selfhood (J27.76),¹² a spiritual 'polypus' (J15.4, 18.40, 49.24) spreading jealousy, fear, doubt, greed, and a desire for aggrandisement within souls and throughout societies—in the name of Moral Virtue or Moral Law (J4.31, 21.48, 28.15, 40.30-35, 74.35). Selfhood, feeding on the deadly tree of Good and Evil, fractures emanation, engendering ecological destruction (J5.1-7), exploitation, and war.

When emanation fractures, Vala/Babylon thinks she is in competition with Jerusalem and wants to annihilate her. Like John's harlot, Vala is very well dressed, wearing fabulous sapphire shoes, a glittering veil (that can be scarlet, purple, blue, or silver-gold), and a crown of gold (J20-21, 65.37, 78.15). Like John's harlot she seduces rulers and kings, enthroning herself in the heart of Albion. Like John's harlot she rides (and ultimately coinheres with) a seven-headed red dragon, but they do not preside over a trade network. Together 'the dragon red and hidden harlot,' are named 'Religion Hid in War' (J75.20, 89.53).

The author of Revelation wrote during what is called the *Pax romana*, but Blake was not creating *Jerusalem* during a *Pax britannica*. From 1793 to 1815 Britain was in a state of what seemed like perpetual war with France. In Blake's poem, as in his country, all 'the Arts of Life they changed to arts of Death' when Vala/Babylon reigns (J65.16). What we would call a military industrial complex devours the life, liberty and happiness of Albion's children—with the spurious blessing of God. Most Anglican priests supported Britain's ongoing war. In sermons and tracts Bonaparte was identified as Revelation's Beast and dragon (Burdon 1997: 102-103). Even Joanna Southcott urged her disciples to 'obey King & Country,' drawing the sword like Gideon 'who was ordered to go to War' (PN.106.59).

According to Blake, 'the Religion of Jesus, forgiveness of Sin, can never be the cause of a War...the Glory of Christianity is To Conquer by Forgiveness' (J52). A system that destroys 'little ones' in the name of Jesus is a system that serves the beast. In *Jerusalem* making war (not love)

12. Blake derived his idea of 'Selfhood' from Jacob Boehme, a German visionary. Annihilating Selfhood does not destroy identity; it enhances it. Selfhood prevents us from dwelling with and in God (Sklar 2005: 66-67, 70-71).

makes a character a whore.¹³ Vala/Babylon does not fornicate; she is a virgin, untouchable and robed in white when inspiring warriors to die for her (J65-66). Like the 144,000 who follow the Lamb in Revelation (14.4) Albion's bellicose sons are not 'defiled with women'. Instead they are defiled with the concept of 'enemy'.

When stricken by Selfhood, Albion and his sons want to be exalted over, not connected to, other people. They manufacture '(miscall'd) enemies' to do this (J28.20-23). For Albion to be 'good' others must be 'evil'. The sons declare that Jerusalem must be condemned so that they 'the Perfect/May live in Glory' (J18.26-27). They condemn her, crying, 'Cast! Cast ye Jerusalem forth! The Harlot daughter! Mother of Pity and Dishonourable Forgiveness!' (J18.11-12). Not only does she enjoy making love, Jerusalem's 'Dishonourable Forgiveness' threatens the war-machine. The forgiveness freely offered by Jerusalem and Jesus obliterates the codes of 'Moral Virtue' and 'Moral Law' by which Albion and his sons aggrandise themselves.¹⁴ When Jerusalem's forgiveness 'overspread[s] all Nations' (J97.2), 'the Tree of Good & Evil' disappears (J98.40-47). No one is called a harlot or condemned.

Fornication and Forgiveness

In the Hebrew Bible Jerusalem is called a harlot when she consorts, or 'fornicates' with other nations.¹⁵ When John describes Babylon in Revelation he alludes to Ezekiel's Jerusalem, fornicating freely with the princes and merchants of earth, only to be stripped and devoured by those who adored her (Rev. 17.16; Ezek. 16.39, 23.29). John's New Jerusalem is clothed in white (like Blake's Babylon/Vala), untouched by foreign princes or merchants. By contrast, Blake's Jerusalem descends from heaven in naked beauty (J86.1-25), freely embracing all people when she embraces Jesus, for all belong to his Divine Body. Her loins reveal that the children of Israel can dance in peace with the children of Moab, Egypt, and Canaan (J86.26-31). What is called 'fornication' by Blake's prophetic predecessors is the foundation for Jerusalem's culture of peace.

Among the prophets 'fornication' can refer, not only to sex outside marriage, but also to religious heterodoxy or apostasy. Honouring other gods can be called fornication, especially when those others are fertility gods, like Baal (Hosea 2), whose worship involved erotic rituals. 'Fornication' can additionally allude to indulging in trade, as when Isaiah (23.17-19)

13. Blake also calls King Arthur (not yet romanticized by the Pre-Raphaelites) a 'male harlot' (J64.15).

14. See J4.31, 28.14-16, 31.18-20, 39.10-26, 40.30-35, 42.40-43, 74.35-36, 91.27-29.

15. See Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 2-3, Ezekiel 16, 23, Hosea 2.

calls the city of Tyre a harlot, condemning her for 'fornicating,' or trading her merchandise, 'with all the kingdoms of the earth'. In Revelation 18, Babylon's fornications bring forth the fruits of 'living deliciously'—with gold, gems, costly fabrics, marvellous wood, perfumes, and slaves. Barbara Rossing discusses how John's New Jerusalem is 'the antithesis of toxic Babylon/Rome's imperialism, violence, unfettered commerce, and injustice.' In John's New Jerusalem there is no more sea, so there can be no more shipping economy (Rossing 1999: 70, 144). International trade is whoredom.

In Blake's *Jerusalem* international trade can bring spiritual and material wealth to all people. Vala/Babylon does not orchestrate trade; Jerusalem does. Trade need not destroy the earth or be built upon what Blake calls 'the Miseries of once happy Families' (J24.25-35). When Jerusalem emanates, globalisation is driven, not by greed, but by contagious beauty. Jerusalem's multinational business combines music with commerce: from Europe and Asia to Africa to North and South America (J79). The sun never sets on her aesthetic economy.

Jerusalem teaches the ships of the sea to sing (J79.38), and every nation contributes to the great celebration in the courts of 'the Lamb of God'. Conventional 'enemies'—such as Turkey and Greece, or Israel and Canaan—make music (J79.47-50) or dance in 'love and harmony' (J86.26-31). The gifts of the nations are exchanged in song, 'with blessings of Gold and Pearl and Diamond' (J24.38-42). Housewares, clothing (J13.21), curtains, furniture (J79.46-47): all contribute to the beauty of Jerusalem. Workers are not exploited. Poverty disappears (J98.51-52). International exchange is like a great symphony in which every culture makes a necessary contribution; an orchestra cannot function if the strings are trying to conquer the woodwinds and the brass section is starving! In Jerusalem's global fair-trade network, generosity is more contagious than greed. Even Babylon participates peacefully (J24.36-38). Like Jerusalem, Babylon is meant to enjoy the embrace of the human and the divine. The spiritual and material coinhere, economically and erotically.

In 'the time of love' (before Albion's fall and after his awakening) the composite Emanation (Jerusalem/Vala) enjoys a spiritually erotic foursome with the human-divine bridegroom (Albion/Jesus). In 'the time of love' Albion's passion pierces through Vala's veil, launching Jerusalem from his bosom to the arms of Jesus, who makes her his 'Bride & Wife' (J20.30-41). The human and the divine commingle, and this bliss transforms souls and societies. Los, the prophetic artist, declares that the place of 'Holy Generation!' (Jerusalem's holy vulva) is the 'point of mutual forgiveness between Enemies' (J7.65-66). But when Albion falls, he and his sick sons condemn sexual joy, equating Jerusalem's bliss with shame, and forgiveness with dishonour (J18.11-35).

Like a biblical harlot Blake's Jerusalem is not controlled by a husband, brother, or father. She is named Liberty (J26, 54.5) as well as Jerusalem, infuriating Albion when she proclaims, 'I cannot be thy Wife!' (J31.44). She and her children cannot 'belong' to a patriarch, for all things must freely participate in God. Jerusalem never even flirts with anyone other than her bridegroom, but her Jesus is not only the man who preached in Galilee, he is also the cosmic Christ, encompassing all creatures and nations while dwelling within each one (J4.18-20). When Jerusalem makes love to her glorious Lamb on a golden couch in Spain their joy delights 'little ones' throughout the earth (J79.40-45). Even Babylon (Vala) is blessed by this (J24.36-42).

Jesus explicitly states that he will not leave Vala (or anyone) 'in the gnawing Grave' (J62.21-22). Babylon is part of Jerusalem; Luvah (called France) is akin to Christ who contains Albion (J63-66); the Canaanites dance with the children of Israel: all are children of God (J86.26-32). The concept of 'enemy' is as mistaken as the concept of 'slave'. Forgiveness extends to all people, whatever their creed. All can participate in 'the Divine Body, the Saviour's Kingdom' (J3; 98-99). In one of his first poems, 'The Divine Image', Blake proclaims:

And all must love the human form
In heathen, turk, or jew
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too (K117).

Apocatastasis Now—The Feminine and the Divine

Even those John would call 'dogs and sorcerers' (Rev. 22.15), can be transformed in the forgiveness of sins. Reading Revelation in the company of Blake's poem I see that John's 'Spirit and the Bride' have the last word. When the Spirit/Bride speaks in Revelation 22, her words can change judgment into forgiveness. She may be inviting all to partake in universal salvation, or *apocatastasis*.

'The Spirit and the Bride say: "Come!"' Whoever is thirsty is invited to 'come and drink' (Rev. 22.17). It could be that John's bride, like Blake's, excludes no one from the water of life. Those in the lake of fire must be very thirsty indeed. Can those condemned to burn hear the Spirit/Bride's words? In Blake's *Jerusalem* the fires into which Albion falls become 'Fountains of Living Water Flowing from the Humanity Divine' (J96.37). Through Jerusalem even the most fallible creature can be a 'Divine Member of the Divine Jesus' (J91.31). The Emanation's 'extreme beauty' (J86.16) is ultimately irresistible.

In John's Revelation the Bride, New Jerusalem, is called the 'Spirit'. If the 'Spirit' is the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit is as feminine as her bridegroom is masculine. In Blake's poem Jerusalem is as divine as her spouse,

and humanity is deified when 'Selfhood is lost!' (J96) and Jerusalem emanates (J97). Like Jesus, the Emanation (Jerusalem the Bride) dwells within every human breast (J4.19, 44.38-39). All living things ultimately participate in 'fourfold' human divinity (J98); Jesus and Jehovah and Jerusalem and humanity coinhere. Ontologically we contain and are contained by God.

Blake's Jerusalem is not a place where 'the Perfect may live in Glory' (J18.26-27); she is a place where the fallible are *continually* forgiven (J52, 61.21-23). She is a person animating the ongoing process of forgiveness. She is the dynamic by which each distinctly individual creature (including you, the reader) interrelates with all in differentiated unity. We each exist within another; we all abide together. We must engage with what is shadowy and strange as well as with what is familiar and kind. Differences can create conflict, but conflict is creative in the context of Jerusalem's continual forgiveness (J97-98). Forgiveness, not condemnation, brings the kingdom of heaven to earth. This can be a social structuring principle.¹⁶

Humanity need not be destroyed by the spiritual disease spreading war, greed, jealousy, fear, and ecological disaster throughout the earth. In Revelation (11.18), those 'which destroy the earth' must be destroyed. In Blake's *Jerusalem* Selfhood destroys the earth and is annihilated so that all can freely emanate. Blake draws upon John's mythic women to create his Emanation, carrying the cosmos in her wings, rising from the devouring stomach of the dragon, orchestrating global exchange, descending like a city from heaven, embracing her beloved, the Lamb of God. With this Emanation Blake seeks to turn his readers (with his characters) from judgment and condemnation to the water of life and the tree of life, whose leaves are 'for the healing of nations' (Rev. 22.2).

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16. In South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission assumed that forgiveness *must* be a social structuring principle, in accordance with the African spirit of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* assumes that people only exist and have identity in relation to other people. For a good description of *ubuntu* see Desmond Tutu (2000: 31-32, 45-56).

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IMAGES OF BABYLON:
A VISUAL HISTORY OF THE WHORE IN
LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ART

Natasha O'Hear

Abstract

This essay seeks to illuminate two broadly contrasting approaches to the visualization of the figure of the Whore of Babylon across a selection of Late Medieval and Early Modern images. It will show that an earlier (thirteenth and fourteenth century) illuminated manuscript and tapestry tradition in which more 'personal' visual representations of the Whore were common, gave way to more 'public', predominantly woodcut visualizations in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Thus more devotional images of the Whore, created with an eye to the demands of the largely female patrons of the illuminated manuscript versions of the Apocalypse were replaced with images that visualized the Whore through the lens of more general concerns ranging from the role of women in society to anti-Papal polemic. This change of medium, focus and intended audience resulted in the replacement of more subtle evocations of the Whore and her sexuality with bolder, more overt, sometimes even misogynistic visualizations.

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Introduction

Drawing on examples from the Late Medieval and Early Modern era, this essay will present two broadly contrasting approaches to the visualization of the figure of the Whore of Babylon.¹ In order to better understand these different visualizations of the Whore and how they relate to, interpret, as well as strain against, the source text, the Book of Revelation, a short survey of the textual symbol of Babylon follows.

The Book of Revelation (hereafter the Apocalypse) famously re-uses and re-interprets symbols from the Hebrew Bible.² The imagery used to describe the Beast in Revelation 13 for example, is clearly derived from

1. I am grateful to Susan Gillingham, Christopher Rowland and Christine Joynes for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. Bauckham 1993a: 4-5.

Daniel 7.³ While the Danielic beasts (Dan. 7.1-8) are symbolic of the successive Empires that had oppressed Israel since the Exile, the Beast of Rev. 13.1-3 is symbolic of, on one level at least, Imperial Rome. Thus the same imagery is recycled to fit a similar context. The concept or symbol of Babylon however, whilst used frequently in the Hebrew Bible to denote a real, historical enemy of Israel (see Jer. 51, Isa. 47 or Dan. 1.1-2, for example), is given a rather different meaning in the Apocalypse. Within the Apocalypse the title Babylon functions symbolically, denoting both an antithetical city and a harlot. John has taken over the language of harlotry, used almost exclusively of Israel in the Hebrew Bible (see Hosea 1-2; Jeremiah 2-3 and Ezek. 16, 23), and fused it with the symbol of Babylon, to create the figure of the Whore of Babylon (see Revelation 17-18). In the Hebrew Bible harlotry 'is a metaphor for false religion and all the social practices involved in it'.⁴ This double meaning sits well with John's Whore of Babylon who also functions, on a third level, as a veiled critique of Rome and its Imperial cult.⁵ The association of the Babylon of Revelation 17-18 with Rome was probably first articulated by Tertullian (based on Rev. 17.9-10, where the Beast on which Babylon rides is equated by the angel with the 'seven hills', and Rev. 18.9-20, the lament over Babylon by the merchants and kings who profited from her) and has been extended and developed ever since.⁶

Although Babylon appears in Revelation 17 in the guise of a harlot and in Revelation 18 mainly as a city, visual interpreters have tended to focus on the former incarnation. This is particularly true of the Late Medieval and Early Modern visual tradition. The two contrasting interpretative strategies present within this visual tradition, the earlier more 'personal' approach versus the later more 'public' approach, will be illuminated throughout this essay via two investigative strands. First I will examine the points of contact between the visual interpretations discussed and contemporary textual exegesis of the complex figure of the Whore of Babylon, as well as with the artist's interpretative and historical context more generally.

Secondly, the often negatively orientated focus on the feminine aspect of Babylon found in most of the images to be discussed below presents its own problems in terms of the ongoing legitimacy of this strategy as an interpretative position. The motivations behind this visual tradition as well as the possible effects that it has had on its male and female viewers will also be examined.

Thus the essay begins with a summary of R. Muir Wright's research into the Whore of Babylon in the thirteenth and fourteenth century illuminated manuscript tradition with particular reference to *The Lambeth Apocalypse*,

3. See Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 147-48.

4. Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 177. See also Yarbrow Collins 1993: 20-33.

5. Bauckham 1993b: 338-83.

6. Kovacs and Rowland: 177-83.

The Angers Apocalypse Tapestry and related visualizations.⁷ The focus will then turn to three main examples from the Early Modern era, those of Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder and Jean Duvet. I argue that their adoption of a new condensed 'printed book' format for their visualizations, combined with a new, 'Italianate' or naturalistic style and, in the case of Cranach, a radically different religious context, gave rise to fresh exegetical approaches to the figure of the Whore.

The Whore of Babylon in Late Medieval Visualizations

The Babylon symbol has been visualized as a female figure since the fifth century when she was depicted as a classical, female 'guardian of a city' in the *Carolingian Apocalypse Manuscripts*.⁸ From around the ninth century (in the *Trier* and *Valenciennes Apocalypse Manuscripts*, for example) the image of Babylon as a harlot riding the seven-headed Beast from Revelation 17 took precedence, in the visual tradition at least, over the image of Babylon as a city. The exception to this is the 'Fall of Babylon' which was usually depicted as a ruined city rather than as the destruction of the Whore herself.

Muir Wright argues that in the Apocalypse the Whore of Babylon is not a human being but a perversion of the image of the New Jerusalem, the ideal city. Elements of the language used to describe the Whore are recapitulated in a positive way in the textual description of the New Jerusalem given in Revelation 21. Thus in Rev. 18.3 the 'kings of the earth' are said to have fornicated with the Whore, whereas in Rev. 21.24 'the kings of the earth' are described as bringing their glory and honour into the New Jerusalem.⁹ However, representations of the Whore as a powerful, sexualized and often regal woman in the visual tradition imply that she is a counterpart not to the New Jerusalem but to the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun' of Revelation 12, who is usually visualized as a virginal Marian figure (see *The Trinity Apocalypse* f.14r for a good example of this tradition).¹⁰ The implied visual contrast drawn between the 'Woman Clothed with the Sun' and the Whore, Muir Wright argues, is an expansion of the textual meaning, which functions on a symbolic rather than a literal level.¹¹ Textual exegesis of Revelation 17 and 18 has, in her opinion, tended to preserve the metaphorical force of the Babylon symbol rather better.¹²

7. See Muir Wright 1995: 180-214; 1997.

8. Muir Wright 1995: 180-88.

9. Compare also Rev. 17.5 with Rev. 21.9, and Rev. 17.4 and 18.12 with Rev. 21.19.

10. *Trinity Apocalypse*: Cambridge, Trinity College, Trinity R 16.

11. Muir Wright 1995: 191-92.

12. Muir Wright 1995: 181.

While any form of exegesis, textual, visual or otherwise, involves an expansion of the textual meaning to an extent, I would argue that the Late Medieval visualizations of the Babylon symbol discussed below do indeed capture this perceived metaphorical force.¹³ The harlotry metaphor used to describe the Whore in Revelation 17 is complex and drawn out. Thus, for instance the ‘fornication’ that she commits with the ‘kings of the earth’ (Rev. 17.2) implies the seductive allure of competing religions, such as those present in ancient Rome. Her ostentatious appearance (Rev. 17.4) is thus part of the metaphor. Representations which visualize these aspects of the textual description in a literalistic way are surely not expanding the textual meaning but rather buying into the textual metaphor. A visual presentation of the Babylon symbol as an attractive, lavishly attired young woman exemplifies the dangerous appeal of the competing system that she represents in a way that a commentary passage cannot. The Berengaudus commentary on Revelation 17–18, for example—the commentary used in the vast majority of thirteenth and early fourteenth century illustrated Apocalypses—speaks of the Whore as representing the city of the Devil, in itself an abstract concept, but one which can be given a human face in an accompanying image.¹⁴

The thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman illustrated Apocalypse iconography, as evidenced in manuscripts such as *The Lambeth Apocalypse* (hereafter *Lambeth*) or *The Trinity Apocalypse*, is a useful place to start when surveying the developing tradition of the visual tradition of the Whore of Babylon. This iconography, whilst not having clear antecedents, became hugely popular throughout Northern Europe, influencing visualizations of the Apocalypse until well into the fifteenth century. It thus established what might be termed a ‘normative’ apocalyptic iconography, the origins of which can be studied in the extant twenty or so manuscripts, which include, on average, about seventy-five images each. These images functioned not so much as a visual gloss on the Latin text but as a separate, visual version of the Apocalypse designed to appeal to secular patrons who could not read Latin unaided.¹⁵ Female ownership of a number of these manuscripts is evident, which may also have influenced the fairly sustained and ‘feminised’ focus on the Whore of Babylon found therein.¹⁶ Earlier examples of female-owned and commissioned images of the Whore include those in the twelfth-century *Hortus deliciarum*, a reference work designed by two nuns for the community of Sainte-Odile. The manuscript’s occasionally violent images

13. See Berdini 1997: 1–35, O’Kane 2005: 340–48 and O’Hear 2008: 333–38 on textual and visual exegesis.

14. Morgan 1990: 216.

15. O’Hear 2008: 31–32.

16. See Morgan 1990: 72–82, Carmi Parsons 1996: 175–201 and Lewis 1995: 240–41 on the female secular owners of thirteenth-century Apocalypse manuscripts.



Fig. 1. The Fall of Babylon, *Hortus deliciarum*, 1176–96, f.258r. Photo credit: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

of the Whore (see Fig. 1, for example) had a didactic purpose, serving to warn the nuns against the dangers of vanity and pride.¹⁷

The Whore is presented in the Anglo-Norman Apocalypse manuscripts as a young and attractive woman of aristocratic appearance (see Figs. 2 and 3, for example). The aristocratic character of the Whore, who refers

17. Muir Wright 1995: 188–89.

to herself as a queen in Rev. 18.7 had been emphasized in the earlier illustrated *Beatus Manuscripts*, such as in the *London Beatus* where her robes are decorated with gold.¹⁸ As is generally the case in Anglo-Norman iconography, in the two *Lambeth* images the Whore appears first seated on 'the many waters' (Rev. 17.1) and then riding the seven-headed Beast of Revelation 13 (see Rev. 17.3-18). In the first image (Fig. 2) the Whore sits on a small hill surrounded by streams. Her frontal pose is simultaneously sexually suggestive *and* confrontational.¹⁹ In her right hand she holds a mirror, into which she is gazing. The mirror and its suggestion of vanity, a common feature of the Anglo-Norman iconography, as well as perhaps echoing the allegations of egotism found in Rev. 18.7, may also suggest a visual link with the medieval figure of Luxuria or Vanity who appeared in the moralized Bibles carrying a mirror.²⁰ In *Lambeth* f.29v and 30, the Whore's purple gown is adorned with a large necklace, and in the case of f.30 a bejewelled belt also. Muir Wright contrasts the Whore's prominent necklace of f.29v with the angel's crossed and knotted golden stole, a visual reminder of the dichotomy that exists between the two systems that they represent.²¹ Perhaps out of reverence for the manuscript's female patron, the sign that is said to hang around the Whore's forehead (Rev. 17.5) is hung from her jewelled belt in f.30. Likewise, the Whore's confident, aristocratic posture is further emphasized by the diminished size of the John figure in f.30. Carried by the angel in accordance with Rev. 17.3, he has taken on almost childlike proportions. What then can we conclude regarding the purpose of this comprehensive and detailed visualization of the Whore of Babylon?

Firstly, the *Lambeth* images of the Whore owe little to the Berengaudus commentary extracts that accompany the text. The chosen commentary extracts emphasize the metaphorical side of the Babylon symbol while the images have feminized and contemporized the figure as well as emphasizing different textual details.²² The lack of correspondence between the Berengaudus extracts and the *Lambeth* images of Babylon is not in itself remarkable: this is a common, and somewhat puzzling, feature of the Anglo-Norman Apocalypse manuscripts. It seems that, as most of the patrons of these manuscripts could not read Latin, it was the images and not the Latin text or commentary which held a position of primacy in practical (i.e.

18. See *The London Beatus Manuscript*, London: British Library, MS Add. 11695, folios 182v and 183v.

19. Muir Wright 1995: 196.

20. Muir Wright 1995: 194.

21. Muir Wright 1995: 201-202.

22. See Morgan 1990: 216-22 for the Berengaudus commentary extracts used to describe the Whore of Babylon in *Lambeth*.



Fig. 2. The Whore of Babylon on the Waters, *Lambeth Apocalypse*, c.1260. Lambeth MS 209, f.29v. Photo credit: Lambeth Palace Library.



Fig. 3. The Whore of Babylon Seated on the Beast, *Lambeth Apocalypse*, c.1260. Lambeth MS 209, f.30r. Photo credit: Lambeth Palace Library.

devotional and exegetical) terms. The Latin text and commentary were thus probably included to add gravitas to the whole production.²³

That the manuscript also had a devotional function is implied by the existence of a series of additional miniatures attached to *Lambeth* which both reflect and strengthen the visual hermeneutical strategies found within the *Apocalypse* miniatures themselves. The second quire in particular consists of twelve full-page devotional and allegorical illustrations, including images of the Virgin and Child with Eleanor de Quincy (the likely patron of *Lambeth*), St Margaret and St Catherine and an allegorical scene of faith and penitence.²⁴ In all of these images the various women have been depicted in contemporary aristocratic dress, a visual antithesis to the depiction of the Whore of Babylon on folios 29v and 30.²⁵ Thus it appears that, like the images of the Whore in the earlier *Hortus deliciarum*, the visual presentation in *Lambeth* was intended to provide a didactic, moralizing warning to its aristocratic reader of the divergent path between virtue and vice. Since the additional miniatures were included in *Lambeth* to remind the reader/viewer of spiritual dangers in light of the emphasis placed on the concept of mortal sin at Lateran IV (1215), the images of the Whore in f.29v and 30 were thus part of this overall communication to the conscience of the individual.²⁶

The 'moralizing' potential of a certain sort of visual representation of the Whore had not faded by the fourteenth century, as exemplified through one of the images found in the *Angers Apocalypse Tapestry* of 1373 (hereafter *Angers*). Based in compositional and iconographic terms on the Anglo-Norman manuscript tradition, and in particular on the *Burkhardt Wildt* manuscript, the huge tapestry had a secular and ceremonial rather than a devotional or meditative function.²⁷ There is no extant text accompanying the tapestry and although the presence of an 'original text-panel' is attested to, it is unclear whether this relatively narrow tier of tapestry text (either of the *Apocalypse* itself or of a gloss) would have been legible.²⁸ Thus the emphasis is very much on the visual.

The backgrounds of several of the tapestry's images or scenes are decorated with a 'Y' symbol. The first is *Angers* 1.7, which depicts the slaughtered lamb of Rev. 5.6-14. Here, the background of the panel is decorated with a recurring 'Y' motif. This 'Y' motif appears again in *Angers* 1.1 and

23. See O'Hear 2008: 30-32.

24. See Lewis 1995: 281-296 and Morgan 1990: 58-71 on the second quire of miniatures.

25. Muir Wright 1995: 200-201.

26. Muir Wright 1995: 203.

27. See Henderson 1985: 209-218 on the relationship between *Burkhardt Wildt* and *Angers*.

28. Muel 1996: 14.

4.41, both decorative panels, and also appears in the background of *Angers* 5.64 (Fig. 4), which once again depicts the Whore of Babylon seated on the 'many waters' (Rev. 17.1-2). Still dressed in a contemporary, fitted, noblewoman's gown, *Angers'* Whore has also retained the mirror and the comb, symbols of vanity, from the Anglo-Norman Apocalypse manuscript tradition. Graham argues convincingly that the 'Y' motif, which appears in the aforementioned four images, is the sign known as the 'Pythagorean letter', a symbol for the divergent paths of virtue and vice.²⁹ One arm of the letter 'Y' corresponds to the path of virtue and the other to that of vice. She gives two roughly contemporary examples of the letter being used in this way. The first are the 'Y's in the windows of the chapel of St Nicholas in the priory Church of St Martin des Champs in Paris. The chapel was appropriated as the burial place of Philip de Morvilliers in 1426, who then had the symbol incised on his tomb. A symbol representing the divergence between virtue and vice is certainly appropriate to the subject matter of the Apocalypse. In *Angers* 1.7 the slaughtered Lamb is a victim but also the conqueror of vice and death, and thus a source of life and virtue. In 5.64, the Whore has the appearance of something wonderful (Rev. 17.4) but in fact is 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations' (Rev. 17.5).³⁰ Thus the 'Y' symbol functions as a reminder of the two contrasting 'systems' (the transcendent and the earthly) that oppose each other throughout the Apocalypse.



Fig. 4. The Whore seated on the Waters, *Angers Apocalypse Tapestry*, c. 1373–80, 5.64. Photo credit: 1992 Scala, Florence.

29. Graham 1947: 227.

30. See also Muel 1986: 106.

There are several strands that can be drawn together vis-à-vis the visual interpretation of the Whore of Babylon found in *Lambeth*, *Angers* and related manuscripts. First, the figure of the Whore is generally depicted using two, separate images as an aristocratic female and not as a city. This presentation may have been influenced by the upsurge in female patrons of biblical manuscripts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Second, the representations bear little correspondence to contemporary exegesis of the figure of the sort found in the Berengaudus commentary, which emphasizes the symbolic nature of Babylon. This divergence may have been due to the prioritization of the visual over the textual, in practical terms, in the thirteenth and fourteenth century Apocalypse manuscript tradition. The personal devotional concerns of the mainly lay viewers were thus reflected to a greater extent in the images rather than in the commentary extracts. More general theological issues, such as the emphasis placed on mortal sin at Lateran IV, may also have influenced the 'moralistic' presentation of the Whore found in the thirteenth century devotional Apocalypse manuscripts such as *Lambeth*. Even in a seemingly 'public' representation such as *Angers*, the symbol of the Whore is not used to make a theological, polemical or political point so much as one directed at the personal, moral life of the viewer. Most of these emphases were significantly altered, if not overturned altogether, in the Early Modern depictions of the Whore of Babylon to which I now turn.

The Whore of Babylon in a Selection of Early Modern Visualizations

Albrecht Dürer's depiction of the Whore of Babylon (Fig. 5) forms part of his Apocalypse series of 1498. His representations were not designed as part of a Bible, but as a stand-alone version of the Apocalypse in which the large, full-page images jostle for precedence with the accompanying Apocalypse text and indeed, one could argue, ultimately overwhelm it. Dürer, having embraced the artistic values of the Italian Renaissance, was thus the first known artist to present an Apocalypse series first and foremost as a set of images.³¹ The text of the Apocalypse is not, of course, discarded. The images and the text, set out in two columns, are on facing pages, but they do not correspond directly to each other. No commentary is included in the series and Dürer's own exegetical influences are not known although he may have been in contact with Joachite interpretation of the Apocalypse.³² Dürer's *Apocalypse* cycle, which teeters on the edge of the Early Modern era, thus represents a fusion between Renaissance artistry and a Late Medieval religious outlook.³³

31. See Panofsky 1955: 35; Bartrum 2002: 105-34; Koerner 1993: 253 and Krüger 1996: 72-73 on Dürer and his relationship with the Italian Renaissance.

32. O'Hear 2008: 268.

33. Koerner 1993: 204-205.



Fig. 5. The Whore of Babylon, Albrecht Dürer's 'Apocalypse', 1498. The British Museum. Photo credit: © The Trustees of The British Museum.

Dürer's image of the Whore of Babylon is fourteenth in the series of fifteen and thus occupies a climactic position within the visual drama. The Whore enters the image from the right, possibly from the East, riding a hybrid Beast with seven distinctive heads. Her clothing, hair and jewellery recall those of a Venetian courtesan that Dürer had drawn in 1495. Above the Whore in the top right hand corner flies the angel from Rev. 14.8 and, further to the right, the city of Babylon burns (see Rev. 18.9). In the bottom left-hand corner stands a crowd of noblemen and 'townsfolk' as well as a

monk and a sultan with his back to us. They all stare at the Whore. Above the crowd in the top left-hand corner flies the Angel with the Millstone from Rev. 18.21, while further to the left, the Rider on the White Horse (Rev. 19.11-21) descends from the clouds with his army behind him. In exegetical terms there is much more that can be said about the effect of condensing and synchronizing these different sections of the text in one image.³⁴ The present focus is however on the figure of the Whore. Much of the scholarship on this image has turned on the question of whether the Whore and the monk represent the church or not. The monk is the only figure from the crowd who appears to be worshipping the Whore. This led the art historian Dvořák and several others after him to assert that the Whore represented Papal Rome, and that Dürer was espousing a proto-Reforming ideal.³⁵ However, none of the arguments ultimately convince.³⁶

My own research into the context behind Dürer's decision to depict the Whore as a Venetian prostitute astride the Beast suggests other motives.³⁷ It is likely that in portraying the Whore thus, Dürer sought to link her with the threat from the East posed by the sultan. The sultan's stance and hand gesture suggest that he is presenting or introducing the Whore to the unsuspecting crowd. The link between the two is further emphasized by the fact that they are the only two figures in 'foreign' dress. The rest of the crowd are dressed in more contemporary German dress. The constant (and real) threat to Western Christendom from the Turks was never far from the Western European mind and was one of the main sources of apocalyptic speculation in the late fifteenth century.³⁸ Dürer made sketches of a Turk's head and of an Oriental ruler on his throne which became the model for the sultan on the same trip to Venice as the one where he made the sketches of the Venetian Courtesan which were to become the model for the Whore.³⁹ Thus the two were probably linked in his mind. By linking the Whore with the threat from the East, Dürer was also following in a tradition established by the *Beatus* manuscripts in which the Whore was often depicted as an Oriental queen.⁴⁰

34. O'Hear 2008: 237-44.

35. Dvořák 1984: 5. See Bialostocki 1986: 282-89 for a review of this line of scholarship.

36. See Price 1994: 688.

37. The decision to depict the monk apparently 'adoring' the Whore is probably not an allusion to some sort of proto-Reformation but rather a reference to the well-documented tradition of 'popular' drawings in Northern Europe which satirized monks for their drunkenness, gluttony, immorality and lack of judgment (Scribner 1981: 37-43 and Price 1994: 688-95).

38. See MacCulloch 2004: 53-57.

39. See, for example, Albrecht Dürer, *An Oriental Ruler on his Throne*, c.1495. Washington: National Gallery of Art, Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund.

40. Muir Wright 1995: 190.

The notion that the Whore represented a threat to society leads to a second key point. By depicting her astride the hybrid Beast, Dürer suggests that there is something socially deviant about her, that she is a usurper of male power and a force to be feared. During this period riding was traditionally associated with the male nobility 'in its function as a military caste'.⁴¹ Women, by contrast, were rarely depicted on horseback unless accompanied or led by a man. The exceptions to this rule were representations of the virtues and the vices, representations of female gods and wild women or women of dubious moral character and those with pretensions to traditionally 'masculine' roles.⁴² Zika argues that 'riding women play the man, they invert proper sexual order, they emasculate'.⁴³

Perhaps the Rider on the White Horse who gallops down from the clouds in the top left-hand corner of the image on horseback (i.e. diagonally placed vis-à-vis the Whore) is intended to emphasize this point. The male military saviour belongs on a powerful horse but a woman does not. The notion that the Whore has stepped outside the acceptable social norms for a woman, whether intended symbolically or not, is certainly found within the Apocalypse itself. Rev. 18.4-7, for instance, characterizes the Whore as a 'wanton' with royal pretensions. Pippin suggests that the Whore is destroyed on account of the egotism she displays in Rev. 18.7. Both her erotic power (as the 'mother of Whores', Rev. 17.5) and her independence are dangerous to men.⁴⁴

Closer inspection of the image also reveals the Whore to be only superficially beautiful. When one really gets close to the page (which owners of Dürer's Apocalypse books would have been able to do) she is actually rather haggard and ugly, an effect that Dürer was able to achieve through the use of tiny, curved optical lines around the eyes and mouth. In addition, the 'reptilian' hatching at the bottom of the dress mirrors very closely the hatching on the body of the Beast itself. By visually intimating that she is somehow part of the Beast, Dürer is perhaps suggesting that the Whore derives her power from the Beast, and that it controls her despite the fact that she is riding on it. Certainly the Whore's demeanour is passive in this image, a possible visual reflection of Rev. 17.16:

And the ten horns that you saw, they and the Beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.

41. Zika 1994: 137.

42. Zika 1994: 137. See further Moxey 1989 for specific visual examples of the negative fifteenth and sixteenth century characterization of the 'riding woman'.

43. Zika 1994: 139-40.

44. Pippin 1992: 57-68.

The ambiguous relationship between the Whore and the Beast has been emphasized by Kovacs and Rowland who write that 'the imagery [of Revelation 17 and 18] suggests the complexity of oppression. Babylon is deceived and culpable, but ultimately at the mercy of the Beast'.⁴⁵ This line of interpretation seems to be captured in Dürer's image, where the ugly fate of the Whore is pre-figured by the presence of both the Angel with the Millstone and the burning city in the background.

The 'Fall of Babylon', in the Anglo-Norman manuscript tradition and beyond, was nearly always depicted thus, as the destruction of a city and not of a woman. Others did not, however, shy away from images of the demise of the Whore herself. The earliest known representation is found in the twelfth century *Hortus deliciarum* (see Fig. 1). Here the Whore, visibly still alive, is speared by angels into a fiery pit. There also exists an example from a thirteenth-century Apocalypse where the lifeless body of the Whore has been placed in front of a fire, around which some mourners are gathered.⁴⁶ Finally there are a few examples from the Later Medieval period in which the Whore-as-woman appears in Hell in depictions of the Last Judgment.⁴⁷

It is not until Jean Duvet's representation of 1561, however, that I have been able to find another depiction of the Fall of Babylon represented literally as a 'fallen woman'. Heavily reliant on Dürer's woodcuts, Duvet's 'tablet-shaped' engravings represent an expanded, very personal visualization of the Apocalypse in roughly the same tradition.⁴⁸ Like Dürer, and unlike Lucas Cranach the Elder, Duvet cannot be satisfactorily located within one particular religious or artistic tradition.⁴⁹ Duvet's first image of Babylon (Fig. 6) is fairly similar to Dürer's in visual content, although the Rider on the White Horse is lacking, perhaps because Duvet devotes an entire image to this composition later on.⁵⁰ The Whore herself is attired in classical dress and her brazen sexuality, as well as perhaps her vulnerability, is suggested by her exposed breasts. The following engraving (Fig. 7) overlaps in subject matter with the previous image. Here the city of Babylon is in a state of disrepair and still on fire (as in the first image). On the right and left, the kings and merchants have gathered to lament the demise of the great city (see Rev. 18.11-20). The 'Angel with the Millstone' (Rev. 18.21-24) has cast it down, striking one of the kings dead in the process.

45. Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 188.

46. Fol. 22v, London: British Museum, Add. MS 35166.

47. Muir Wright 1995: 207-208. (See the *Dublin Apocalypse and the Apocalypse of Isabella*.)

48. See Eisler 1979: 102.

49. Eisler 1979: 58-62.

50. Carey 1999: 174.

In the centre left of the composition however, the massive figure of the Whore falls down to earth in an awkward pose. The seven heads of the Beast lurk menacingly below her head, lending her, as Bartrum argues, a medusa-like appearance but also implying that they are about to devour her, as suggested by Rev. 17.16.⁵¹



Fig. 6. The Whore of Babylon, Jean Duvet's, 'Apocalypse', c. 1561. The British Museum. Photo credit: © The Trustees of The British Museum.

51. Bartrum 1999: 175.



Fig. 7. The Fall of Babylon, Jean Duvet's 'Apocalypse', c. 1561. The British Museum. Photo credit: © The Trustees of The British Museum.

Interestingly this image of the Whore's violent death is also echoed in a roughly contemporary tapestry from the Pannemaker Studio. Here, somewhat disturbingly, the Whore, still alive it would seem, burns in the background whilst in the foreground, the Marriage Feast of the Lamb and the Bride is taking place.⁵² The Lamb, the Bride and the other guests at the

52. See Van der Meer 1978: 315-30.

wedding seem oblivious to the grisly scene unfolding behind them. Such an image surely reflects Boxall's fears that interpretations of the Whore in which the feminine aspect comes to the fore can serve to legitimate negative or even violent feelings towards women.⁵³ Whether Duvet's image functions in this way is open to interpretation. While her fate is a violent one, his image makes explicit the vulnerability that was implicit in Dürer's image, thus serving to further underline the complexity of the metaphorical system which she both represents and is a victim of.

Roughly contemporary with Dürer and Duvet's more subtle visual interpretations of the Babylon metaphor is Lucas Cranach the Elder's now infamous image of the Whore of Babylon, produced for Luther's German New Testament of 1522 (Fig. 8). Polemical in tone, this image functions not as a nuanced exploration of the Whore of Babylon figure, but rather privileges an anti-Papal 'reading' above all others. Important stylistic and compositional contrasts aside, the most obvious difference between the Cranach and Dürer Apocalypse series is thus the addition of the Papal triple tiara to Cranach's 'pared down' rendering of the Whore, as well as to the Beasts in his eleventh and sixteenth images in the series.⁵⁴ The *Passional Christi und Antichristi* of 1521, which Cranach had also provided the illustrations for, asserted through visual means and to a 'popular' audience that the Pope was in fact the Antichrist. Given the exegetical links that had already been made between the Antichrist figure and the Beasts of the Apocalypse, it is not surprising that the latter wear the triple tiara in Cranach's Apocalypse illustrations, although this would still have been extremely provocative.⁵⁵ The link between the Antichrist, the Pope and the Whore of Babylon is a little harder to follow. Scribner proposes that the equation of the Papacy with the Whore may have been suggested by the 'legend of Pope Joan' which became popular in the Late Medieval era, the tale of a ninth-century woman who impersonated a man in order to become Pope only to be found out when she gave birth in the middle of a procession.⁵⁶ This 'popular' legend (whether it was in fact based on any truth or not) served to link the Papacy with allegations of sexual immorality and deception.⁵⁷ It is also clearly alluded to in Martin Schrott's only slightly later image *On the Terrible Destruction and Fall of the Papacy* (c. 1540).

Boxall argues that since the Apocalypse was written for an oppressed minority struggling against the dominant ideology of Rome, a theme that is particularly to the fore in Revelation 17–18, there is some justification for

53. Boxall 2001: 60, 68.

54. See Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Apocalypse*, 1522, The Two Witnesses and The Seven Bowls. London: British Library, C.36.g.7.

55. See, for example, Melanchthon's commentary to the thirteenth picture pair of Cranach's *Passional* of 1521.

56. Scribner 1981: 171–73.

57. Scribner 1981: 172.



Fig. 8. The Whore of Babylon, Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1522 Apocalypse illustrations for Luther's German New Testament. Photo credit: By permission of The British Library.

the secondary critique developed by the Reformers against Papal Rome in both texts and images. However, this critique became more problematic as the Reformers became, in some cases, not the 'oppressed' any longer but the 'oppressors'.⁵⁸ Certainly the iconographic legacy of the identification of the Whore of Babylon with the Papacy was not eliminated as the Reformation

58. Boxall 2001: 65-67.

progressed. In his Apocalypse illustrations of 1523 for a reprint of Luther's New Testament, Hans Holbein the Younger used all the Papal motifs from the September 1522 edition. The Apocalypse illustrations in Luther's complete Bible of 1534 gave the Beast and the Whore very prominent and much bigger triple tiaras than in the September 1522 version.⁵⁹ Emmerson argues that in exegetical terms, Cranach's polemical illustrations and their successors resemble, in purpose and effect, contemporary Protestant exegesis, such as that found in the *Geneva Bible*.⁶⁰ This type of exegesis stresses the literal nature of the text whilst simultaneously inserting polemical identifications. The marginal notes to Rev. 17.3-4 that appear in the *Geneva Bible* are typical:

The Beast signifies ancient Rome: the woman that sitteth thereon, the new Rome, which is the Papistrie, whose cruelty and bloodshedding is declared by scarlet... This woman is the Antichrist, that is, the Pope with the whole body of his filthy creatures.⁶¹

The extent to which Cranach's polemical Whore of Babylon was reproduced in representations of many varying standards over the next century and a half is testament to the power of his original image. Although a pale imitation in stylistic terms of Dürer's Whore of Babylon, in just a few woodcut lines Cranach designed something lasting and iconic. However, simultaneously, he also served to limit the interpretative potential of the symbol. For once one had seen the Whore in the Papal triple tiara, it must have been difficult to think of her in any other way, with the subtlety of Dürer's interpretation now superseded by an image from the propaganda machine of the Protestant movement.

To conclude therefore, we have seen that there exist some important differences between Late Medieval and Early Modern visualizations of the Whore of Babylon as characterized by the examples discussed above. While the emphasis on the femininity of the textual symbol of the Whore was retained, she was no longer portrayed as an aristocratic woman, as in *Lambeth* and related manuscripts, but rather, after Dürer, as a prostitute of Venetian or classical origins. This was perhaps partly due to the fact that Dürer, Cranach and Duvet were not catering to the demands of a specific patron or even a specific demographic but rather to the demands of the print-buying public. The image of the Whore as a Venetian prostitute thus captures both her feminine allure (as set out in Rev. 17.1-5) as well as capitalizing on contemporary fears about the threat from the East and the corrupting force of Venetian immorality. Instead of engaging with the viewer on the level of personal morality, the sixteenth-century images of the Whore play on public fears, and particularly

59. String 2000: 140.

60. Emmerson 1981: 222.

61. *The Geneva Bible* 1560: 120.

in Dürer's case, received ideas about the role of women in society. However, I have also argued that both Dürer and Duvet display an interpretative sensitivity towards the complex relationship between the Whore and the Beast which is not witnessed in the Late Medieval examples where the Whore is depicted functioning as efficiently with the Beast as without.

Despite Dürer and Duvet's perceived sensitivity towards the Whore, from this time onwards she is mainly depicted as a prostitute or at least as an overtly sexual female.⁶² It is only in the mid to late twentieth century that artists have attempted a revisionary portrayal of the Whore which did not hinge on the temptress/seductress model. Kip Gresham's visualization of the Whore of Babylon as an androgynous skeleton is noteworthy as a conscious attempt to extricate his interpretation from earlier, sometimes misogynistic modes of visualization.⁶³

Finally, whilst Dürer and Duvet's direct interpretative influences are difficult to determine, Cranach's image can be seen to have a direct link with contemporary anti-Papal Protestant interpretations of the Whore. But Cranach's polemical visualization, as well as being very effective in terms of the way in which it embeds itself in the imagination, may be able to derive some legitimacy from the Apocalypse itself. He certainly engages with the radical critique of the (perceived) dominant and oppressive 'system' that pervades the text in a way that none of the other visual examples discussed come close to. Just as John himself borrowed and combined the 'themes' of Babylon and 'harlotry' from the Hebrew Bible in order to express his veiled critique of ancient Rome, so Cranach built on John's symbols in order to re-express the vision for his own, very specific, times. The sense of parallelism is striking. Whether one appreciates the end result is quite a different matter.

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63. See Kip Gresham's pictogram of Revelation 17 in Rowland 1993.

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FOVEA PECCATI ET UTERUS ECCLESIAE:
THE SYMBIOTIC NATURE OF FEMALE
SEXUALITY ON MEDIEVAL BAPTISMAL FONTS

Harriet M. Sonne de Torrens

Abstract

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the medieval fonts of Europe were often envisioned as living entities, personified as female, symbolizing the symbiotic relationship between the Old Testament figure of Eve, who was understood to have caused mankind's downfall and the New Testament personification of Ecclesia, who offered salvation through the Church. This theological understanding formed the basis of a unique corpus of sexual images that were used to ornament baptismal fonts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Not before nor after, will the pedagogical use of female sexuality and body parts, such as the vagina and womb, emerge as a viable, pictorial art form in the history of font making. Medieval theologians, drawing on the writings of the early Christian Fathers, created a complex set of relationships, which equated the female vagina (fovea) with notions of Hell and the Old Testament pits of sin. In turn, this resulted in bizarre images of female figures such as Sheela-na-gigs, Luxuria and other promiscuous women on fonts to illustrate the differences between what constituted mortal vices versus spiritual salvation. In this article the author unravels the theological foundations which gave rise to the portrayal of illicit women and sexuality on baptismal fonts.

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In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Church developed a pictorial repertoire of illicit women and sexual motifs that was used to represent an array of homiletical, political, catechetical and spiritual ideas associated with Baptism. These representations of women, derived from a larger corpus of sexual imagery popular at the time, were modified for the specific ornamentation of baptismal fonts. To viewers today, explicit images of fornication, snakes suckling Luxuria's breasts and women displaying their vulvae next to a masturbating monk on consecrated, liturgical vessels appear as troublesome curiosities, riddled with many unanswered questions. Yet, despite the geographic distances, we find that variations of these themes appear on baptismal fonts across the Latin West in regions such as England,

Scandinavia and in the northern kingdoms of medieval Iberia. Essentially, wherever communities have managed to preserve their twelfth- and thirteenth-century baptismal fonts from later abuses, you will find some evidence of this pictorial repertoire, a development that was specific to this period.¹ At the core of this visual language was the Old Testament figure of Eve who was understood as the prefiguration of Ecclesia. These two female personae inspired both theologians and artists to weave a complex set of relationships that resulted in the pedagogical use of sexual imagery on Romanesque fonts. The liturgical season of Lent, a time of fasting and sexual prohibitions, offered the liturgical rationale and seasonal framework for the carnal imagery.² This essay discusses some of the theological roots behind the use of female sexuality in the baptismal context and examines the reasons why female sexuality was considered a legitimate language in the ornamentation of Romanesque baptismal fonts. For the sake of brevity, just a few of the pictorial genres that characterized women on fonts have been selected.

The early patristic concept of the Church as the 'womb of the Mother' (*vulva matris*) or the 'womb of the Mother Church' (*uterus matris ecclesiae*) gave catechetical substance to the process of regeneration, establishing the parturitive framework in which diametrically different portraits of women emerged. This essay will focus primarily on two types of women. The first was known as the seducer, those who, like Eve, deceived men and were the cause of men's carnal lust, as seen on four baptismal fonts from the villages of Vilac (Vall d'Aran, Lerida, Spain) (Figs. 1–2), Senosiáin (Navarre, Spain) (Figs. 3–9), Hortigüela (Burgos, Spain) (Figs. 10–11) and Albacastro (Burgos, Spain) (Fig. 12). The second type of female persona pertains to the women known as Sheela-na-gigs, seen on the Cleckheaton font from West Yorkshire, England (Fig. 13) and on two fonts in Denmark. Sometimes called exhibitionists, they were rendered naked and squatting, opening their vulvae to reveal their vaginas. But unlike the female seducers, many of these women represented the darker sides of regeneration, death and physical pain, which define mortal existence. A considerable corpus of literature exists on Sheela-na-gigs, their pictorial origins and widespread appearance, but it gives no explanation of why they were considered appropriate motifs for ecclesiastical contexts. In this article I will

1. While its origins lie in the context of early Christian texts about baptism, the pictorial representation of female sexuality on baptismal fonts is specifically a twelfth- and thirteenth-century development which was not known prior to this period. For a discussion of the types of symbols and ornamentation used on early Christian fonts, see Jensen 1991.

2. For a more detailed discussion of the Lenten season and sexual imagery in the baptismal context see Sonne de Torrens 2007.

demonstrate that the textual origins of the Sheela-na-gig concept can be traced to the monastic texts of Bede the Venerable and later theologians when writing about carnal sin. They compared the Old Testament references to the 'pit of sin' or *fovea* (understood also to be the abode of the dead) with female sexuality, which, in turn, by the twelfth century in exegetical literature was referred to as the *fovea peccati* symbolizing the sinful vagina. It is likely that these are some of the theological sources that contributed to the widespread appearance of Sheela-na-gigs on baptismal fonts and justified their placement in other ecclesiastical locations during these centuries.

The Female Body of Medieval Baptismal Fonts

Stone baptismal fonts made in the Middle Ages were envisioned as living, corporeal entities. Like ecclesiastical edifices and other liturgical furnishings, they were ornamented with imagery that was connected to their sacramental role in the liturgy and in their communities. By the twelfth century, baptismal fonts were conceived and gendered as female, as were the vices of humankind, represented by Eve, and the spiritual process of regeneration, represented by Ecclesia. From the time of the Early Church, the female body had provided theologians with a rich repertoire of images that not only embraced the symbiotic notions of sin and salvation but provided an allegorical means of describing the abstract, spiritual transformation that occurs in Christian Baptism. Female body parts such as the vulva, the vagina, the womb and even the breasts form part of the descriptive language that developed in the early 'imagistic' writings of the Church Fathers when discussing Baptism.³ The earliest reference that connects Baptism with parturition and the female body occurs in the Gospel of John, where Jesus comments, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (Jn 3.3-5).⁴ Elsewhere in the New Testament, the life of the kingdom of God is compared to new birth (Mt. 19.28; Tit. 3.5); the Christian community is seen as a chaste virgin betrothed to Christ (2 Cor. 11.2); and the process of spiritual regeneration is compared with conception (1 Pet. 1.3 and 23 and 1 Jn 3.9-10).

In western thought the parturient associations with the baptismal font quickly gained momentum. References to the matriarchal role of the Church can be found in the *Letter of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne* (177 or 178 CE) where the Church is referred to as 'the virgin mother' (Bedard 1951:

3. For the discourse on Ecclesia as the womb, see Jensen 2008: 137-55; Plumpe 1951: 17-36. The term 'imagistic writings' is discussed by Conybeare 2000: 57.

4. In medieval iconography the vulva became a symbol for John 3 in pictorial summaries of the Gospel of John. See Carruthers 2008.

18).⁵ The idea of the Church as mother led to discussion about the baptismal font as the very womb of the Church.⁶ In *De baptismo* Tertullian refers to the newly baptized as the newborn and uses the terms *pater*, *mater* and *fratres* to describe the family of the Church welcoming the newly initiated.⁷ He argues that the waters of the font, like the primeval waters in Gen. 1.2, have the power to sanctify due to the Holy Spirit (Ofrasio 1990: 83). In contrast to the fertile waters of the baptismal font, Tertullian refers to the water used by pagans in their initiation rites as *viduis aquis* translated as ‘widow water’ or ‘barren water’ (*De baptismo* 5.1).⁸ Moreover, the process of regeneration is itself regarded as a form of childbirth, developing the implications of Jn 3.3-5. John Chrysostom’s *In Joannem* considers Baptism a ‘painless’ childbirth and brings together all the sexual and familial elements associated with mortal parturition:

O unsullied childbirth! O spiritual parturition! O new bringing forth! Conception without womb, begetting without bosom, birth without flesh! Spiritual birth, birth by the grace and loving-kindness of God, birth full of joy and gladness! But the first birth was not thus; it began with lament... But not so this birth... There are never laments nor tears here, but greetings and kisses and embraces from the brethren who acknowledge a member of the family (Bedard 1951: 22).

Augustine of Hippo frequently introduces the phrases *uterus ecclesiae*⁹ and *vulva matris* in his catechetical sermons preached at Easter c. 409 CE in Carthage or Hippo: ‘Behold them: at whatever age they be in the flesh you see them as infants: see and be glad. Behold them: “who are born of God” (Jn 1.13). The Mother’s womb [*vulva matris*] was the water of baptism’.¹⁰ Augustine extends the idea of the *vulva matris* even further in a later sermon, c. 410–412 CE, when he states that catechumens, conceived by the Father’s seed (*illius semine concepti estis*) are reborn in the font, the womb of Ecclesia (*utero ecclesiae in fonte pariendi*).¹¹

5. Similar associations appear in writings by Ambrose of Milan who, in *De virginibus* 1.6 (FP 31: 33), praises the Church for her virginity and motherhood, and refers to the sacrament of Baptism as a form of birth.

6. See here, for example, Tertullian’s *De baptismo*, discussed by Bedard 1951: 18.

7. Tertullian, *De baptismo* 20.5 (CCSL 1: 295).

8. See further Ofrasio 1990: 83 and Bedard 1951: 24–25.

9. Augustine, Sermon 56 *De oratione dominica ad competentes* (PL 40: 637).

10. Latin text in Augustine, *Sermo* 119 (PL 38: 674; ET Bedard 1951: 29).

11. Augustine, *Sermo de oratione dominica ad competentes* 56.5 (Verbraken 1958: 28–29). Similar analogies appear in the fourth-century writings of Zeno of Verona where he describes the font as the womb of the mother Church (*Fontanum semper virginis matris dulcem ad uterum*). See Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus* I 55 (II 33) *Ad neophytos* (CCSL 22: 130).

Ambrose develops further connections between the font as the womb of Ecclesia and the virginal womb of Mary. In his commentary on St Luke, *Expositio evangelii Lucae*, Ambrose links the virginal Church with the Virgin Mary, stating that she is a type of the Church, though married.¹² In *De mysteriis* Ambrose directly refers to the font as the womb and connects this spiritual regeneration with the Virgin Mary: 'If, then, the Holy Spirit coming down upon the Virgin wrought the conception, and effected the work of generation, surely we must not doubt but that, coming down upon the Font, or upon those who receive Baptism, He effects the reality of the new birth'.¹³

In the production of the hundreds of stone baptismal fonts that were carved in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries across the Latin West, the theme of the *vulva matris* or the *uterus ecclesiae* was especially popular for theological and ecclesiological reasons, promoting the authority of *Ecclesia Universalis*.¹⁴ How artisans expressed this concept differed in the various regions. When focused primarily on the idea of the font as the womb of Ecclesia the baptismal font was conceived as an ecclesiastical edifice with arcades, columns and other architectonic features. See, for example, the Redecilla del Camino font from the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Calle (Burgos) (Fig. 14) situated on the French Camino to Santiago de Compostela. Others simply employ a blind arcade around the basin as in the case of the Artaiz font (Navarre, Spain) (Fig. 15). Another theme that accentuates the sacramental connections between Baptism and the conception of the Virgin Mary is the portrayal of the *Annunciation to the Virgin Mary* which may include Gabriel and Joseph in the same scene. This is evident on the thirteenth-century fonts from Upavon, Wiltshire, England (Fig. 16) and the late twelfth-century font at Cueva Cardiel (Burgos, Spain) (Fig. 17) where the scene is accompanied by the twelve apostles and a priest, and the font in Santoña (Santander, Spain) with Joseph present (Fig. 18). In his Christmas sermon, Pope Leo I in fifth-century Rome discusses the virginal womb of the Church, the font, and explains how the Holy Spirit nullifies sin in the sacrament of Baptism as also happened when the Virgin Mary conceived: 'And each one is a partaker of this spiritual origin in regeneration; and to every one when he is re-born, the water of baptism is like the Virgin's womb; for the same Holy Spirit fills the font, Who filled the Virgin, that the sin, which that sacred conception overthrew, may be taken away

12. Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio evangelii Lucae* (CCSL 32: 45).

13. *De mysteriis* 9.59 (SC 25: 192-93; ET Knight: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3405.htm> Accessed: March 6, 2009).

14. The bodily associations with the female womb and rebirth dominates the popular conception and design of most fonts in the Latin West during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in comparison to the earlier associations with the tomb, resurrection and themes of death. See further Bedard 1951, Ofrasio 1990.

by this mystical washing'.¹⁵ In the representation of the *Annunciation to the Virgin* on fonts, the sacramental significance of the blessed water in the font and the blessed womb of the Virgin Mary were considered one and the same. The sexual and reproductive systems of the female body offered early Christian theologians a means for explaining the symbolic significance of the baptismal font in the sacrament of Baptism.

The early patristic references to the female body and fecundity remain embedded in later theological treatises from the tenth to the twelfth centuries but there was an important and marked shift in emphasis that parallels the rise of monasticism (Miles 1991). Sexual metaphors associated with the Church and the Virgin Mary, as popularized in the *Song of Songs* by Bernard of Clairvaux¹⁶ and Rupert of Deutz in his Marian interpretation of the *Song of Songs*,¹⁷ opened the door even wider to a range of condoned sexual associations with Ecclesia and Eve, which, in turn, migrated into the baptismal imagery that emerged in the twelfth century. Mortal childbirth, in contrast to the spiritual regeneration of Baptism, acquired increasingly tainted associations. In Innocent III's lament about the human condition, *De miseria* I:6, he explains how the pain of childbirth is due to Eve's transgressions, typifying the general shift that occurred in monastic perspectives which led to the negative associations with female sexuality in the twelfth century.¹⁸

Female Sexuality and Carnal Lust

The solitary portrait of a semi-naked woman adorns the underside of the upper basin of the baptismal font from the church of San Félix in the village of Vilac (Figs. 1–2). The church is situated in the Vall d'Aran region of the Pyrénées, close to the French border in the province of Lerida. The Vilac woman is not visible unless you kneel in front of the font's basin, which probably accounts for why she has not been destroyed over the centuries. Brazenly flaunting her sexuality, this extraordinary woman stands in front of a stool resting her right hand on her hip with her left arm raised above her head in what is a typical dance pose in medieval art. However, unlike the long, unruly hair of flirtatious women (Fig. 3) and depictions

15. Leo I, 'On the Feast of the Nativity' (ET Knight: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360324.htm> Accessed: March 4, 2009). In Latin see *Sermo* 24.3, *De natale Domini* (CCSL 138: 112–13) which reads: 'Cuius spiritualem originem in regeneratione consequimur, et omni homini renascenti aqua baptismatis instar est uteri virginalis, eodem sancto Spiritu replente fontem, qui replevit et virginem, ut peccatum quod ibi vacuabit sacra conception, hic mystica tollat ablution'.

16. See the *Song of Songs* 8 (PL 183: 810D–814D).

17. Norris 2003: 24–25.

18. Innocent III, *De miseria condicionis humane* I:6 (ET Lewis 1978: 102–103).

of Luxuria (Fig. 20), her hair has been covered eliminating the solicitous associations with long hair, much like the hairless depictions of Sheela-na-gigs. Her clothing is reduced to a minimum for she wears only a blouse that ends below her breasts with long, tight-fitting sleeves as seen at her wrists. From her round navel to her knees she is naked, her short legs are bare and she wears shoes with a strap.¹⁹ The most prominent and striking feature is her enlarged pudenda that dominates the abdominal region disproportionately. Her vulva reveals a round and protruding clitoris designed like the tongue of a bell and beneath it is a finger-sized hole for her vagina. No other motifs accompany the sensuous and youthful woman on the Vilac vessel.

The Vilac woman adopts the pose of a seductress and dancer, a stance that would have instantly signified promiscuity, prostitution and carnal temptation (Schmitt and LeGoff 1985).²⁰ It is a pose of seduction long associated with biblical women of sin. The evils of female dancers were associated with Salome, daughter of Herodias, who performed a seductive dance for her stepfather, King Herod, an incestuous flirtation for which she was rewarded with John the Baptist's head (Mt. 14.3-12). In Romanesque art Salome is rendered standing akimbo or bent over backwards in an acrobatic posture when dancing. Women representing loose morals or female promiscuity are often shown in similar poses.²¹ On the Hortigüela font (Burgos, Spain) a female dancer holds her long hair (Fig. 10),²² another symbol for promiscuous behaviour, next to a female harpy (Fig. 11), a symbol for seduction. In the case of the female standing on the Albacastro font (Burgos, Spain) (Fig. 12), the female dancer stands looking at the viewer, cupping both breasts in her hands, signifying seduction and the perils of female lust.²³ The carved program on the early thirteenth-century

19. In popular folklore a woman's body from the waist down was considered evil; see Tale 43 from *The Book of Count Lucanor and Patronio* (ET Keller and Clark Keating 1977: 158).

20. The jugglers, like the musicians and dancers represented indulgences which were recognized as dangerous and leading to carnal sin; see Schmitt and LeGoff 1985: 111-12, 113, 124.

21. On the Kilpeck church in England on a corbel is a Sheela-na-gig who is accompanied by images of a musician, a couple dancing or embracing and an acrobat, demonstrating in this case that the Sheela-na-gig and the actions of the other motifs were viewed as disreputable and improper behaviour. Marian Annis Bleeke discusses this problem with the missing corbels on the Kilpeck Church which were probably deliberately destroyed on account of the disreputable imagery (Bleeke 2001: 60).

22. Hortigüela was under the jurisdiction of the Benedictine monastery of San Pedro de Arlanza and ultimately, San Pedro de Arlanza (Serrano 1935-36, II: 256-57).

23. The font, originally from the Church of San Pedro Apóstol in Albacastro (Burgos), is now in the Museo del Retablo in Burgos. It measures 85.5 cm in height and 105 cm in diameter.

font in the village of Senosiáin (Navarre, Spain) (Fig. 4) is devoted to an array of illicit forms of carnal behaviour. The baptismal font from the Gothic Church of San Martín in the village of Senosiáin in Navarre was made during the reign of Sancho VII (r. 1195–1234) when the new town of Senosiáin was established²⁴ and the Gothic Church was constructed.²⁵ A naked woman with long, flowing hair (Fig. 3) stands in an akimbo pose next to a masturbating monk (Fig. 9). In this Lenten program, the representation of the tonsured male masturbating and crying out in pain as a winged demon bites the sole of his raised, left foot, has several parallels with the Spinario motif as rendered on baptismal fonts.²⁶ The demon biting his sole, an accutely sensitive area of the human body, represents physical pain. But it is the woman with a large demonic face above her head that shows viewers the cause of the monk's carnal indulgence. Another headless woman with a snake wrapped around her ankles (Fig. 6) is included in this program of demonic creatures, female faces, lions, a cross and reptiles (Figs. 7–8).

The provocative stance of the woman on the Vilac font (Fig. 1) with her enlarged pudenda is one of solicitation, reflecting medieval attitudes about female sexuality and, in this case, also prostitution, a growing social problem in many areas of urbanized Europe (Sonne de Torrens 2007).²⁷ For contemporary eyes the representation of a prostitute on a sacred vessel is incongruous. But, from the perspective of the medieval Church, it reflected a growing concern in thirteenth-century Iberia, in fact in the whole of medieval Europe (Roussiaud 1988).²⁸ From the eleventh to the fourteenth century, prostitution was illegal but tolerated all over Spain (Lacarra Lanz 2002).²⁹ It was not until the third decade of the fourteenth century that a

24. It is situated in the Valley of Ollo, twenty-one kilometers north of Pamplona in the Pyrénées mountains, a merchant route that connected Pamplona with France. At that time the valley lay under the jurisdiction of the Cathedral of Pamplona (*Catálogo monumental de Navarra*, 5/2; Estella, Navarra: Gobierno de Navarra, Arzobispado de Pamplona, Universidad de Navarra, 1996: 492).

25. Asunción Domeño Martínez de Morentin 1992: 177; and A. Navallas Rebolé y M.C. Lacarra Ducay 1986: 221.

26. Spinario is the Roman representation of a young boy pulling a thorn from the sole of his foot as recounted by Master Gregorius in *Mirabilia Romae*, his account of seeing Rome in the twelfth century. This motif gains considerable popularity in the Middle Ages on baptismal fonts and is associated with the time of Lent. For more information see Nichols 1986 and Sonne de Torrens 2003a.

27. For discussion about the portrayal of prostitutes on medieval baptismal fonts see Sonne de Torrens 2009.

28. Prostitution was of great concern to the ruling monarchies and the Church in the thirteenth century. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, prostitutes were decreed to wear special clothing so they could not hide when in public society.

29. This differed from what was happening in France. In December 1254 St Louis ordered the expulsion of all 'women of evil', confiscating their belongs and clothing;

process evolved to regulate prostitution and its abolition did not occur until 1623 (Lacarra Lanz 2002: 171). This is the social and political climate in which the Vilac woman was conceived.

Close examination of the genital area on the Vilac woman shows that the area around the clitoris is darker than the rest, indicating a residue on the stone. Her genitals are reachable if you stand before the font, about one meter high, and reach under the basin with your hand. This suggests that at some point she may have been rubbed or touched in this area, acquiring an apotropaic meaning in the community, crossing the boundaries into popular culture and the folkloric realm. Cultural and social historians have noted that some carvings of Sheela-na-gigs also show signs of being rubbed or touched around the genital area (McMahon and Roberts 2001: 157). The placement of female genitalia on the exterior sides of a blessed vessel would have evoked conflicting responses in medieval viewers. On the one hand, these women and their exposed genitalia represented carnal pleasures, the vices that the Church struggled to suppress or contain with the rules of society. On the other, the exposed genitalia symbolized the physical bridge that connected human procreation with the spiritual rebirth attained in Baptism, which, in turn, endowed the female sexual organs with an omnipresent power. This power evoked deeply human responses that simultaneously brought forbidden arousal along with fear and guilt, in turn, bestowing the stone font with living attributes.

Fovea peccati: The Vagina and Death

In contrast to the Vilac woman's fleshy attributes, Sheela-na-gigs are rendered as ugly, naked, squatting women revealing their vulvae and usually with open vaginas, often represented as 'narrow pits' (Ps. 23.27) or carved slits in the stone (Freitag 2004).³⁰ These women are found in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales (McMahon and Roberts 2001: 111-75), and variations of the motif appear in Western France, Northern Spain,³¹ Germany,

he repeated the order in 1256 and 1269; see Roussiaud 1988: 55-56. In France small towns kept their own brothels: Viviers, Pernes, Bedarrides, Tarascon and Lyon had 70-80 prostitutes in 1480 for 500-600 households; Dijon had more than 100 prostitutes for a population less than 10,000 (Roussiaud 1988: 10).

30. Barbara Freitag (2004) gives an excellent update of current views, scholarship and location of Sheela-na-gigs in Ireland and England with a good overview of the topic on the Continent as well.

31. On the interior capital of the Church of Teza de Losa in Burgos there is a Sheela-na-gig squatting on a low stool with her left hand holding her breast. On either side of her is ornamental vegetation which feeds into her mouth. Her eyes and nose have been recut with a large cross on the front of her face. This appears to be a later addition to this motif. For an illustration of this motif see García Guinea 2002b: III: 2044.



Fig. 1. *The Prostitute*. Vilac, Vall d'Aran, Lerida, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 2. Baptismal Font. Vilac, Vall d'Aran, Lerida, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 3. *Naked Female with Demonic Head*. Senosiáin font, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Andres Ortega.



Fig. 4. Baptismal Font. Senosiáin, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Andres Ortega



Fig. 5. Baptismal Font, taken before restoration. Senosiáin, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index and Larrión and Pimoulier of Pamplona, Spain.



Fig. 6. (Left motif) *Headless Figure with Serpent around Ankles*. Senosiáin font, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Andres Ortega.



Fig. 7. (Detail) *Headless Figure with Serpent Around Ankles*. Senosiáin font, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Andres Ortega.



Fig. 8. *Demonic Faces and Creatures and the Cross*. Senosiáin font, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Andres Ortega.



Fig. 9. *Tonsured Monk Masturbating*. Senosiain font, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Andres Ortega.



Fig. 10. *Female Holding her Long Hair*. Baptismal Font, Church of Asunción de Nuestra Señora, Hortigüela, Burgos, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 11. *Woman Holding Hair and Female Harpy*. Hortigüela, Burgos, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 12. *Female Cupping her Breasts*. Albacastro, Burgos, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 13. *Sheela-na-gig*. Cleckheaton, England. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 14. Baptismal Font. Church of Nuestra Señora del Camino, Redecilla del Camino, Burgos, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 15. Baptismal Font. Artaiiz, Navarre, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.

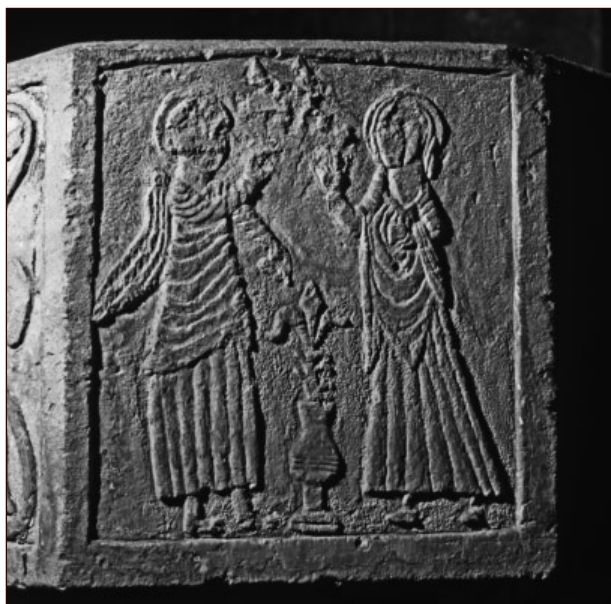


Fig. 16. *Annunciation to the Virgin*. Baptismal Font. Upavon, Wiltshire, England. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 17. *The Annunciation* (Gabriel, Virgin Mary, Bishop). Baptismal Font. Church of San Cucufate, Cueva Cardiel, Burgos, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 18. *Annunciation to the Virgin*. Baptismal Font. Santoña, Santander, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 19. *Sheela-na-gig*. Winterbourne Monkton, England. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.



Fig. 20. *Luxuria*. Church of San Salvador, Rebanal de las Llantas, Palencia, Spain. Photo credit: Baptisteria Sacra Index.

Denmark and Sweden.³² The Continental motifs appear on capitals, arches and as wall reliefs which were originally located in ecclesiastical contexts even though over the centuries they have been gradually defaced and removed from their original locations.

There are a total of five Sheela-na-gigs in Denmark and England known to be carved for the baptismal setting; four are carved on baptismal fonts. On the Vester Egede font (Næstved, Denmark), there is an upside down Sheela-na-gig who has just given birth; on the Vendsyssel font (Denmark) there is a Sheela-na-gig who is about to give birth (Rump 1976: 40-48; Noerrellykke 1977: 34-37). In the case of the Danish fonts, the parturient connections with Baptism were clearly important, but not necessarily the most important ideas being stressed. The inclusion of serpents at the breasts introduces the ideas of carnal lust, the theme of *Luxuria*, and human mortality, as expressed by the pain of childbirth, which in the eyes of the Church was caused by Eve's transgressions (Fig. 20). The concept of the font as the womb of the *Ecclesia* sanctioned the typographical placement of the Sheela-na-gig or similar motifs on the exterior sides of the basins as allegorical references to Eve, the antithesis of *Ecclesia*. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting aspects of female sexuality was typical of how symbolism functioned in the Romanesque repertoire. The bi-polar relationship between death and rebirth in the baptismal context is one of the first clues in helping us to understand why Sheela-na-gigs were considered appropriate motifs for a baptismal font (cf. Rom. 6.3-6). In the Gelasian Sacramentary the prayer for the consecration of the font describes the fecundity of the blessed water and sacrament of rebirth:

Holy Spirit by the secret admixture of his light give fecundity to this water prepared for man's regeneration, so that, sanctification being conceived therein, there may come forth from the unspotted womb of the divine font a heavenly offspring, reborn into a new creature...into a common infancy (Whitaker 1970: 186-87).

The Sheela-na-gig placed on the southern nave wall in the Church of St Peter in Ampney (Gloucestershire, England) was purposefully placed at eye-level one meter above the baptismal font. This Sheela has experienced mutilation of the abdominal area suggesting that pregnancy at one point may have been indicated in addition to the splayed legs and exposed pudenda (Freitag 2004: 147). This is a good example that demonstrates how artisans juxtaposed the theme of human pain and parturition next to humanity's spiritual rebirth in the womb of *Ecclesia*.³³

32. According to the published inventories there are currently about 101 in Ireland, 38 in England, 2 in Wales, 5 in Scotland, 11 in France, and 1 in Germany; see McMahon and Roberts 2001: 111-75 and Anderson 1977: 139-53.

33. Next to the Sheela-na-gig at Saint-Quantin-de-Rançannes, Charente Maritime, a beard-puller signifies physical pain; see Anderson 1977: 140.

The writings of medieval theologians, based on Gen. 3.16 ('Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'), reinforced the idea that Eve was the first to experience the pain of childbirth, in comparison with the Virgin Mary who felt no pain at the time of Christ's birth, synonymous with the spiritual experience of rebirth in the womb of Ecclesia.³⁴ The hierarchical zones of the font offered artisans different areas, some more sacred than others, for expressing our mortality, such as the pain of childbirth, a deeper reference to human existence. The exterior sides were ornamented with sexual imagery in opposition to the inner basin of the font which contained the blessed water. Like the two Danish fonts, the Winterbourne Monkton font in Wiltshire (Fig. 19) dated to the late twelfth and early thirteenth century belongs to the Sheela-na-gigs associated with parturition, Eve and Luxuria. The Sheela-na-gig is small and hidden in the vegetation bordering the chevron motif around the upper rim. She is naked and positioned with splayed legs. The evidence suggests that a serpent may have been suckling her left breast, as seen in the representation of Luxuria on the Rebenal de Las Llantas font who is carved opposite Eve. The Winterbourne Sheela is connected with depictions of Luxuria (or the 'Snake-woman'), a popular motif on baptismal fonts from this period (Fig. 20). Her submergence in the unyielding vegetation around the rim of the font denotes associations with the uncivilized, the untamed and the wilderness, much like later motifs of the 'Wild Man' or the 'Green Man'. Connections between the Sheela-na-gig motif on the baptismal fonts and Eve accentuate the physical state of human existence versus spiritual salvation.

The Cleckheaton font in West Yorkshire (Fig. 13) dated to c. 1120 introduces the themes of sin, death and disorder from an apocalyptic perspective. The Cleckheaton font has been badly mutilated over the centuries but it is still possible to see on it that a male figure stands to the right of the Sheela-na-gig motif; opposite the Sheela-na-gig couple on the other side of the basin is a second couple, two bearded men. The identities of the two bearded men are uncertain, but they are clothed and probably represented clerical authority in the program. However, the presence of a male figure next to the Sheela-na-gig suggests that this couple had an association with Adam and Eve.

Both the Vilac woman and the Sheela-na-gigs on the baptismal fonts stem from the same origin, the diametrically-opposed attraction and fear of the female vagina, which gave birth and evoked carnal lust. In the case of the Vilac woman her fleshy body accentuates the carnal aspects of female sexuality; in contrast, the Sheela-na-gig on the Cleckheaton font, whose vagina is reduced to a thin slit, speaks to the fears associated with the female pit

34. Neff 1998: 255.

or *fovea*, the darker side of Sheela-na-gigs, where regeneration is death. As Isidore of Seville wrote, Eve was understood as life itself, all that was woe-ful, painful and indeed comprised death, connections that continued to be explored by theologians.³⁵ In the monastic literature from the eighth to the twelfth centuries references to the female *fovea* symbolically link biblical references to the *fovea* with female sexuality, ideas of death and misery. The Old Testament references to the *fovea* such as Prov. 22.14, 'the mouth of a strange woman is a deep pit' or the abode of the dead in the the Book of Isaiah (14.15) and apocalyptic literature (Rev. 9.1, 2, 3, 11 and 17.8) are more suggestive than direct associations.³⁶ In Num. 16.30-35 the abyss or subterranean abode of the dead, *Sheol*, is personified as female, a pit in the earth, 'the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up' (16.32), and is gradually associated with a place of punishment, similar to Hell, in the Jewish apocryphal text of Enoch (Brown *et al.* 1968: 538). Monastic writings integrate the Old Testament references to the *fovea* and, indirectly, to the female vagina with humankind's fall and Eve's transgressions. In the eighth-century writings of Bede the Venerable and the later writings of Rabanus Maurus, Peter Lombard and Bernard of Clairvaux, the Old Testament references to the female *fovea* are discussed in conjunction with man's fall, temptation and sexual sin.³⁷ In fact Bede refers to the deep pit as a harlot (*fovea profunda est meretrix*) in his text *Super parabolas salomonis allegorica expositio* (PL 91: 1007D). By the mid-twelfth century, as seen in the writings of the Cistercian Isaac Stella, the female pit of sin (*fovea peccati*) had become a theological metaphor, resembling the carnal vices (*per similitudinem carnis peccati*) which he discusses in his treatise dedicated to the season of Lent.³⁸ These are some of the theological sources which help us understand

35. Isidore of Seville 2006: 162. 'Eva can be interpreted as "life" [*vita*]; or as "disaster" [*calamitas*] or "woe" [*vae*]; as life, because she was the origin of being born; calamity and woe, because by her lying she became the cause of death—for "calamity" (*calamitas*) takes its name from "falling!" (*cadere*)'.

36. Cf. Dante's *Inferno* which makes reference to the female pit, *fovea profunda*, as a prostitute as written in Proverbs 23 and 30. For more discussion on Dante's similar associations with female sexuality for the term *fovea*, see Gittes 2005: 16.

37. See Rabanus Maurus, *De sepulcris*, c. XXVIII in *De universo libri viginti duo. liber quartus decimus* (PL 111: 409D); Peter Lombard, *Commentary on the Psalms* (PL 191: 110C, 316A); and Bernard of Clairvaux, *S. Bernardi abbatis de gratia et libero arbitrio tractatus, ad Guillelmum abbatem sancti-theoderici. caput vii. Utrum primi homines in paradiso trina illa libertate praediti fuerint, et post peccatum* (PL 182: 1014C).

38. Isaac de Stella, *Sermo X. In eodem festo II* (PL 194: 1723D): 'migremus a *fovea peccati*: in quam descendere non potuit, nec debuit; et occurramus ei in similitudinem carnis peccati, ut ibi misericordia et veritas obvient sibi, iustitia et pax os culentur. Transmigremus ad formam Dei a *fovea peccati*, *per similitudinem carnis peccati*, ad Dominum a peccato per poenitentiam'. Paraphrased in English, Isaac de Stella's words

why Sheela-na-gigs would be sanctioned imagery and considered appropriate for the ornamentation of baptismal fonts made in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It also explains why Sheela-na-gigs were personified representations of death, misery and physical pain.

Conclusion

The extensive damage that baptismal fonts have suffered over the centuries due to changing fashions, wars and simple neglect in many regions suggests that the pictorial language of female sexuality may have been more prominent and widespread than the evidence shows us today. Scholars such as Emile Mâle and Jørgen Anderson have sought to tie depictions of the Sheela-na-gig with representations of the snake-woman and Luxuria in Ireland, England, Sweden, Denmark, France and other regions of the Latin West together with a common, pictorial origin and meaning, acknowledging the widespread legacy.³⁹ Applying the same meaning to related motifs often in different contexts has, however, not always been successful and is often fraught with unresolved issues. Nevertheless, as these authors suggest, these women were part of a larger corpus of sexually explicit imagery that criss-crossed the boundaries of Christian faith, apotropaic beliefs and superstitious folklore. The baptismal font, gendered as female by its association with the *vulva matris* and *uterus ecclesiae*, provided the ideal context for such imagery and the ritual of Baptism, a form of rebirth, only supported these symbolic associations. The Church established a sanctioned and fertile environment in which artisans were able to simultaneously oppose and explore all aspects of the female persona and physique, taking particular delight in genitalia, the female *fovea peccati* as justified by the parturitive nature of Baptism, procreation and carnal knowledge. A pictorial repertoire of female identities, some sanctioned and others condemned, emerged during this period that gave shape to abstract concepts and, at the same time, marked and segregated women within medieval society. The brazen corporeity of some of the female sexuality evident on many fonts from this period was a powerful, pedagogical tool that would have engaged viewers congregating in the parish churches and the clerics giving the sermons. For teaching tools to be effective, they have to be a

are an encouragement to migrate out of the pit of sin, which he compares with the carnal vices, and migrate toward God's likeness through penance.

39. Early scholarship on Luxuria or the snake-woman by Emile Mâle suggested these motifs originated and belonged to monastic environments; see E. Mâle 1978: 372. There is a large body of popular literature which has inventoried depictions of Sheela-na-gigs (Costello 1936; Freitag 2004; and Feehan and Cunningham 1978), but for discussions from a theological perspective see Anderson 1977: 104-105, 107-108, 113-19.

relevant part of one's reality and it was no different in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when female sexuality acquired a prominent presence in the visual language of the Middle Ages.⁴⁰

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40. See Pitra 1888: 192 and Jacobus de Vitriaco 1890, 1967: xli n: 'Relictis enim verbis curiosis et politis, convertere debemus ingenium nostrum ad edificationem rudium et agrestium eruditionem, quibus quasi corporalia et palpabilia et talia que per experientiam novunt frequentius sunt proponenda. Magis enim moventur exterioribus exemplis quam auctoritatibus vel profundis sententiis'.

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