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Fig. 1: Pacino da Bonaguida, The Last Communion of St Mary Magdalen (detail), c.1340, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 201.4
Images of the Magdalen in late Medieval Florence: Visualising Paradoxes of Female Sanctity

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Over the past quarter of a century scholarship on all aspects of the medieval cult of the saints has flourished. This is especially true in the study of female sanctity, as many scholars have drawn on a wide range of methods and approaches to deepen our understanding of sanctity as it was expressed in texts, visual images and the liturgy.

In the field of art history, the study and interpretation of the artistic monuments of the past, whether in painting, sculpture or manuscript studies has benefited from the insights of a number of diverse disciplines. In addition to such traditional tools as stylistic analysis and iconography, art historians now look to anthropology, gender studies, and literary theory (amongst other disciplines and fields), to enhance our study of the visual culture of the past, including the medieval era. One field that has been somewhat neglected by art historians, is that of theology. As Jeffrey Hamburger reminds us in his recent work, theology has much to contribute to how we shape our study of the past. In our secular age we are inclined to view theology as a monolithic set of truths that demands to be placed at the centre of intellectual pursuits. Hamburger, however, reminds us that in the late Middle Ages at least, there was no single theology, but rather competing ‘theologies’. The intellectual and cultural life of late medieval people was arguably a good deal more complex than we allow.

The cult of the Magdalen in late medieval Florence is the focus of this essay. I explore some of the ways in which theology – in particular patristic theology which continued to exert a steady influence in fourteenth-century Florence – may bring fresh insights to our understanding of late medieval visual imagery. Two of the images to be discussed come from illuminated manuscripts. The third example is from that monumental genre of painting, the multi-panelled altarpiece. Each work exemplifies the peculiar circumstances of its use by the three commissioning communities: the monastics focused on a liturgical book, the lay men and women on a collection of hymns in the vernacular and the mendicants on an altarpiece in the sacristy of their church.

For late medieval Florentines, the Magdalen was a more complex and multi-layered figure than recent scholarship has assumed. For most scholars the Magdalen has been inevitably an exemplar of penitential suffering and remorse. In contrast, Eudes de Chateauroux in the thirteenth-century reminds us that the Magdalen played three roles as Virgin, Spouse and Widow. I shall explore the visualisation of the Magdalen as spouse.

My earliest example represents a narrative episode from the saint’s life (fig. 1). Although this depiction of the Magdalen may puzzle many contemporary viewers, the scene would have been deeply familiar to a late medieval audience. The moment represented, The Last Communion of St Mary Magdalen (see page 164), is one of several cuttings that recently came to light in the Fitzwilliam Museum Collection. The miniature was excised from a Florentine Laudario. These laude were sung by the lay members of confraternities, who would gather together regularly to pray and sing. The Laudario to which this miniature once belonged was made for the Florentine confraternity known as the Compagnia di Sant’Agnese, which was based at the Carmelite church of S. Maria del Carmine. The miniatures attributed to Pacino di Bonaguida, are dated to 1330 to 1340. This Laudario is famous for its extensive illuminations.

The miniature which depicts the final moments of the legendary life of the Magdalen follows the traditional iconography for this scene. The saint appears clothed in her own golden hair which covers her completely. Two angels support her kneeling figure as she hovers miraculously above the ground. She has come to receive the Eucharist, which a priest, the Bishop Maximin is about to administer to her. This illumination presupposes the viewer’s familiarity with the apocryphal life of the Magdalen. What were the sources of her post-scriptural life? And why did visual images of her in late medieval Florence reveal an iconographic richness that set her cult apart from that of most other saints? To answer these questions, some brief remarks about the historical and legendary identity of the Magdalen are necessary.

The cult of this biblical saint flourished in Italy and throughout Europe, where she was one of the most popular female saints in the late medieval period. The woman whom for centuries the Western Church honoured as a converted sinner, and the first person to whom Christ appeared after the Resurrection was in
fact a conflation of three women mentioned in the Gospels. This fusion of several identities can be dated to a sermon preached by Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century. Pope Gregory identified the unnamed sinner in Luke's Gospel (7:37-50) with two other women – Mary of Magdala (Luke 8:2-3) and Mary of Bethany (John 11:1-45; 12:1-8). This blending of three identities formed the basis of the Western Church's construct of Mary Magdalen until the Reformation. The traditional identification of the Magdalen as the penitent whore traces its origins to Gregory's sermons. As early as the ninth century, stories narrating the Magdalen's post-biblical life as a desert-dwelling contemplative appeared. In these accounts her identity was fused with the fourth-century former prostitute and recluse Mary of Egypt. Eventually accounts of the Magdalen's life – both scriptural and legendary – appeared as a seamless narrative in The Golden Legend, a vastly influential compilation of saints' lives originally written in Latin around 1260 by the Dominican and later bishop of Genoa Jacobus de Voragine. Thus episodes from the Magdalen's life, such as her post-resurrection missionary activities in Provence and the thirty years she supposedly spent in the wilderness, became a staple of paintings, fresco cycles, sermons and sacre rappresentazioni. The image of the Magdalen that dominated late medieval popular imagination and visual culture was a figura, that is a figure that stands not only for itself, as a historical personage, but also for 'a hidden truth'. The medieval Magdalen, however, was more than an historical figure with a rich and dramatic life and legend. She functioned as a figura of a number of abstract ideals and states, including the contemplative life, and the Church. Like that of many other artists Pacino di Bonaguida's work reflects or encompasses this interweaving of legends. For him and his audience the Magdalen in the desert epitomises the Magdalen's union with Christ here represented through her Eucharistic encounter.

In contrast to this illumination, another illustration comes from a type of book that was used in the celebration of the Mass (fig. 2). The Gradual was one of the staple requirements of any religious house for it contained all the choral parts of the Mass. Such books were frequently illuminated and this historiated initial from a Gradual once owned by the Florentine monastery of S. Maria degli Angeli is a notable example. The monks for whom the book was made belonged to the Benedictine reform known as the Camaldolese. Many of the initials including this one, were illuminated by a member of the Camaldolese order, Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci. The manuscript contains just over thirty-eight illuminations, which are dated to around 1371.

The historiated initial which introduces the text of the introit for the Feast of the Magdalen on July 22 depicts the saint half-length. Golden hair falls in long locks from her head effectively expanding her figure so that she fills the initial. She faces the viewer with her hands raised in prayer. In the space between her throat and lifted arms the illuminator has inserted a small image of Christ's face. Repetition of form, including the halos surrounding both the Magdalen and Christ's head, draws our attention to this diminutive portrait of Christ, which the Magdalen carries literally on her breast. This Florentine example of the Magdalen as Christ-bearer embodies a little studied aspect of the traditional iconography of the saint: Mary Magdalen as spouse.

Which moment(s) of the Magdalen's vita or aspect of her cult does the illuminated initial evoke? As she appears veiled in her own hair such visual representations recall her withdrawal to the desert where for thirty years the Magdalen lived as an ascetic recluse. This image of the Magdalen is devoid of any hint of setting, thus our attention focuses on the absolute frontalität of her figure. Our intersecting gazes remove her and us from an awareness of a specific narrative moment. Instead we gaze, beckoned by the icon-like stasis of her pose, to meditate on the relationship between the Magdalen and Christ. This iconographic type originates in the fourteenth century and most examples of the Magdalen as 'Christ-bearer' are Italian. The visual source of this unusual image lies in Byzantine art – the icon of the Virgin known as the Virgin Platytera, or Blachernitissa (fig. 3). The bust of Christ on the Magdalen's breast has been interpreted as a sign of her 'burning love for Christ'.

To my knowledge there is no incident in the biblical or legendary accounts of the Magdalen's life to explain this unusual and rare iconographic motif.

Furthermore, while the related type of the Virgin Platytera depicts Mary bearing or carrying the Christ-child, in this adaptation of the motif the original pose and arrangement of the mother and child is quite different. In all examples of the Magdalen as Christophoré known to me, Christ appears in the traditional form known as the Vera Icon or Holy Face, in which the head of Christ is surrounded by a triple nimbus. Here the Magdalen is not carrying the Christ child. Instead she bears an image of the adult Christ upon her breast. This example of the Magdalen as Christ-bearer from the Gradual has much in common with other versions of the subject. In fact the location of the image of the Holy Face on the Magdalen's chest, just above her breast, is more suggestive of a pendant or seal. Might we understand the relationship between the saint and the emblem of Christ she wears as a visualisation of her role as the mystical bride of Christ? This iconographic formula of the Magdalen as Christophoré represents a union that is both intimate and conventionalised. Such an image of mystical and physical proximity may well have suggested to a contemporaneous late medieval viewer this verse from the Song of Songs: 'Place me as a seal upon your heart' (7: 6). As a
unquita tem serunt

impe e go autem ima

datis tu is erete bar

ut nos confundar.

Audemus om

nes vndomi
metaphor for the love between Christ and his bride Ecclesia, this verse recalls the union of spouse and the beloved that the Church for centuries had applied to Christ and his mother. However, the title of mystical spouse was also applied to other women, including Mary Magdalen.

The identification of the Magdalen with the bride in the Song of Songs is ancient. A commentary on this text attributed to Hippolytus of Rome written in the mid-third century, evoked the Magdalen as a type of the bride searching for her beloved. This illumination of the Magdalen as Christophorē in a book destined for use in a monastic house, portrays the Magdalen as an ascetic and mystical spouse, roles which were at the heart of the cloistered life. The iconographic formula Gherarducci employed to suggest this union relies on simplicity, it also captures the corporeality of the Magdalen’s union with Christ. If, as I suggest, it is the Magdalen’s relationship as mystical spouse that is highlighted in this illumination, is it possible that her role as the bride of Christ awaits recognition in other Florentine images?

Fig. 3: Cameo with the Virgin Platytera, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, A.4-1982. © V & A Images

Fig. 4: Giovanni del Biondo, Altarpiece of the Virgin and Child with Saints, polyptych, Florence, Rinuccini Chapel, Santa Croce
Two Florentine altarpieces made within a decade of each other depict the Magdalen together with other saints. The polyptych known as the Rinuccini Altarpiece was commissioned for the altar of the chapel of the same name, in the sacristy of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, where it remains in situ (fig. 4). This multi-panelled altarpiece dated to c.1370-71 was painted by the Florentine artist Giovanni del Biondo. The Magdalen who appears with three male saints is shown standing full-length on the outermost panel on the viewer’s right. In Jacopo di Cione’s Coronation of the Virgin, dated 1379, she appears in the left wing of this now dismantled work (fig. 5). The altarpiece was commissioned to be placed on the high altar of the church of the female Benedictine convent of San Pier Maggiore. In neither altarpiece is the fact of her inclusion remarkable; rather it is the prominence of an unusual decorative motif on her costume that merits our attention. In both works her red cloak bears a repeated
pattern of the traditional monograms of Christ's name, known as the Holy Name. In the San Pier Maggiore altarpiece she wears a cloak that is decorated in gold leaf with monograms for Christus and Jesus—XPS and IHS. Likewise the cloak draping her figure in the altarpiece from the Rinuccini chapel features in gold the monogram IHS. Figuratively and literally the Magdalen is shown as having clothed herself in Christ. Thus, in these two works from the late trecento, Mary Magdalen's brilliant red cloak proclaims her status as Christ's mystical partner. The ointment jar that she carries reinforces this interpretation. This vessel, one of the Magdalen's traditional attributes, reminds us of several of her scriptural encounters with Christ.

Gospel narratives dramatise the kind of intimate bodily contact that occurred through the agency of the unguent jar. In Luke's Gospel (7:36-50) an unnamed woman traditionally identified as the Magdalen washes and anoints Christ's feet with 'an alabaster flask of ointment'. The second time the Magdalen appears with the ointment jar is at the scene of the Resurrection. In the visual tradition the Magdalen alone or accompanied by the other Maries brings precious spices to anoint Christ's body. The image of the Magdalen and the other women bringing fragrant oils to the tomb was from the tenth century enshrined in the Easter liturgy, in the trope known as the Quem quaeritis. Customarily we associate the unguent jar with the Magdalen in her traditional role as penitent. However, is it possible that the original viewers of these two late trecento Florentine altarpieces also venerated the Magdalen as the mystical spouse of Christ? Visual, liturgical and devotional traditions kept alive the ancient exegetical tradition of the Magdalen as the sponsa familiar to us from the Song of Songs. The image of the beloved pouring forth oils over her bridegroom is amongst the most erotically charged images of desire. These twelfth-century lines from a Vita of the Magdalen, once attributed to Rabanus Maurus, evoke the sensuality of the Magdalen's anointing: 'Having sprinkled the feet of the saviour with the precious nard, she spread it over them and massaged them with her hands and fingers; then she wrapped them gently in her hair, which was of surpassing beauty. Drawing them to her breast and lips, she tenderly washed them. She held them and caressed them for a long time, then let them go.'

For centuries Christian exegetes had noted the parallels between the bride of the Song seeking her beloved and the Magdalen seeking Christ at the tomb. The Christ monogram and the Jesus monogram woven into the Magdalen's cloak in our two altarpieces make visible an intimacy with Christ equivalent to that symbolized by the unguent jar.

In order to visualise this little studied theme of the Magdalen as mystical spouse, artists evoked the saint in such a role by drawing on the visual imagery of mystical marriage. The predella from the Rinuccini Polyptych includes a scene that has been described as The Assumption of the Magdalen (fig. 6). The artist has represented the Magdalen in a moment of ecstatic rapture. The source of her miraculous condition is Christ who appears to her in her desert retreat. The scene is unusual in representing the stag that is located above the Magdalen, directly opposite Christ. The presence of this animal is surely no accident, for the stag was a traditional symbol of Christ. Moreover the context for this symbolic reading derives from one of the most familiar biblical texts: the Song of Songs. In chapter two verse nine we read how the lover compares her beloved to a young stag: 'Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away".' For centuries theologians had drawn on this erotic imagery to evoke the love of Christ and his spouse. Gregory the Great early in his pontificate drew on this image of Christ in a most startling way. He imagines the Lord as the thirsting stag who finds nourishment and rest in the love of the penitent woman whom he identified as the Magdalen. 'Hence in the Song of Songs holy Church says to the One she is seeking under the figure of a young stag, Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you lie down at noon ... .' The imagery of mystical union evoked through the Magdalen's encounters with Christ in both the main section of the altarpiece and the predella, finds a counterpart in the figure of St Francis. The founder of the Franciscan order stands opposite the Magdalen on the outermost panel of the central section of the polyptych. His appearance accords with iconographic conventions—the marks of the stigmata appear as fiery wounds upon his body. The artist (perhaps on the advice of his patron or a Franciscan adviser) has inserted another figure into the narrow space of the panel. A diminutive woman floats towards St Francis. The saint who gazes towards her, places a ring upon a finger of the woman's outstretched hand. The tiny figure must represent Lady Poverty. The representation in the wing of an altarpiece of the Mystic Marriage with Lady Poverty is highly unusual. In the predella scene St Francis is shown receiving the stigmata. Like the Magdalen in the scene of her Assumption, Francis is represented alone when Christ appears to him. Francis was believed to have become an alter Christus, through suffering the wounds of the stigmata. Significantly he achieves this complete identification with Christ in a mystical experience in which his body becomes the visible expression of union with Christ. Just as the Magdalen's cloak decorated with Christ's monogram symbolized her physical embrace of Christ as she anointed his feet in the house of the Pharisee, Francis's marriage to Lady Poverty captures, in the allegorical language of the mystical wedding, his union with Christ. The use of the gendered
Figs. 6a–b: Giovanni del Biondo, The Assumption of the Magdalen, from the predella of the Altarpiece of the Virgin and Child with Saints, polyptych, Santa Croce, Florence
imagery of spousal union to evoke Francis’s union with Christ reminds us that in the late Middle Ages such imagery often pointed beyond gender.14

This essay has briefly explored the image of the Magdalen as mystical spouse. As suggested earlier this role is one of several that has gone largely unnoted by scholars. Indeed it is hardly surprising that this saint, one of the most revered in the Christian tradition, should prove in many ways such an elusive figure. More than that other woman in Christ’s life, the Virgin, the Magdalen in her historic and legendary lives accumulated highly diverse identities and roles. Exegetes could not resist the appeal of her polysemy. As we grapple with her multiple identities and paradoxical personae, we must remember that, as Giles Constable posited, the Magdalen for the Middle Ages was both a figura and an historical figure. It is her figura that generates her power as an allegorical personification across the centuries. The images presented here show how her figura can lead to fresh understandings of her cult in the late Middle Ages.

NOTES:


3. Ibid., 4.


10. Jansen, op.cit., 3 claims that in the later medieval period she was the most popular female saint after the Virgin.


15. On the monumentalisation of the figure see G. Freuler, 'Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci', in L. B. Kantor et al, Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance Florence, 1300-1450, op. cit., 136.


17. Ibid. col. 537.


28. Offner, op. cit., 77. This episode is also referred to as The Elevation of the Magdalen.


31. To my knowledge this emphasis on bridal imagery in the altarpiece has escaped the notice of scholars.

32. As noted by Offner, op.cit., 77.

33. Scholars have interpreted the pairing of the saints in images like the Crucifixion as an expression of penitential devotion. See K. Neil, 'St. Francis of Assisi, the Penitent Magdalen, and the Patron at the Foot of the Cross', in Rutgers Art Review, IX-X (1988-89), 83-110.

34. Neil cites Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure who both describe Francis as a spouse of Christ, ibid., 108.