

The Peregrinations of Saint Mary of Magdalen

MARIE-FRANCE HILGAR

The recent American productions of the *Last Temptation of Christ* and of *Jesus Christ Superstar* have done nothing in this country to revive interest in Mary of Magdalen, sister of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead, companion of the Virgin Mary, assisting Our Lord at the foot of the cross.

The veneration she has always received in France stems from the fact—some will say the legend—that Mary-Magdalen, with her sister Martha, and her brother, settled in Southern France where she preached the gospel with Maximin, first bishop of Aix-en-Provence, before retiring to a cave, now known as la Sainte-Baume, where for thirty-three years she prayed for the forgiveness of her earlier sinful life.

When she died, the bishop of Aix buried Mary-Magdalen in the town which now bears his name, Saint-Maximin, and from the fifth century on, her tomb brought many pilgrims to the region. On the site of the Merovingian Church was built, slowly, from the XIIIth to the XVIth centuries, the basilica of "Sainte-Madeleine" which still stands today and which houses, in its gallo-roman crypt, relics of the holy woman.

Another, and even more famous, basilica dedicated to Sainte-Madeleine is found in Vézelay, more centrally located. Benedictine monks claimed also to have in their possession relics of Saint Mary-Magdalen. In Vézelay, during Easter of 1146, Aliénor d'Aquitaine and Louis VII heard St. Bernard preach of behalf of the second crusade.

Reports of Mary-Magdalen's miracles multiplied, monuments were dedicated to her, painters and sculptors often used their art to represent her, either at the apogee of her beauty, or skinny and pitiful after years of fasting, but almost always with luxuriant hair flowing down to her knees. The iconography of Saint Mary-Magdalen could fill many volumes. Mary-Magdalen soon replaced the apostles and even Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a venerated saint, probably because of the number of possibilities for literary romanesque developments.

The first texts found in France are in fact written in Latin. The many plays representing the Resurrection included, of course, Mary-Magdalen. She is shown as the woman closest to Jesus Christ. One example we have is the Easter play of Tours, which

dates back to the 12th century¹. The Gospel's account of the visit to the tomb by the Marys to discover that Jesus has arisen is expanded to include the recognition scene between Mary-Magdalen and the Christ, as found in the Gospel of Saint John. The scene treating the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary-Magdalen is lost from the manuscript but in the extant parts of the play, a further enlargement of her role is shown. She is privileged to explain to the male disciples the mystery of the Christ's Resurrection.

At the peak of the Magdalen cult, in the thirteenth century, the "life" of Saint Mary-Magdalen appeared in Jacobus' *Legenda Sanctorum*². The author opens his story with the narration of her repentance, concentrates on her mission in Marseilles, where she converts the king and his wife, and the many miracles she performs there before and after her death. At the beginning Jacobus follows the Gospels. He tells of Mary-Magdalen going to the house of Simon the Leper to wash Jesus' feet, wipe them with her hair and anoint them with expensive ointment. Jesus reproaches Simon for his insult to the woman and forgives her "because she loved much."

Jacobus goes beyond St. Luke to point out the close bond of love between Mary-Magdalen and Jesus and he enumerates the many favors that Christ bestowed upon her. She is the first one to whom He appeared after His Resurrection and she is chosen by Him to be "apostle to the apostles". Fourteen years later Mary-Magdalen goes to Marseilles where the king and queen have been hoping to have a son. Mary-Magdalen prays and the queen is instantly pregnant. The king decides to go to Rome to question Peter. The queen insists on accompanying him. A storm almost wrecks the ship. The queen gives birth before term and dies and the baby is left to die of hunger while the king continues his journey to Rome. Peter takes him to Jerusalem to be instructed in the Roman Catholic faith. When the king returns he finds that the Magdalen has resurrected his wife and taken care of his son. The temples of Marseilles are destroyed and replaced by Catholic churches. Lazarus becomes bishop of Marseilles as Maximin goes to Aix. Mary-Magdalen spends thirty years at La Baume. When she dies her soul flies to heaven. She is buried with great pomp, but in the year 769 she appears in person to give permission to a monk to remove her bones from her tomb in Saint-Maximin and to take them to Vézelay.

Jacobus pictures the Magdalen as Christ's feminine counterpart. She has been taught, by Jesus Himself, the mysteries of healing the blind and restoring the dead to life. But it is never forgotten that she was at one time a prostitute and the medieval Magdalen will serve as a model for the many repentant courtesans who during later centuries will figure in plays, romances, novels and films.

The Tours Easter plays is the first one, it seems, which isolates the Magdalen to give her special attention. Jean Michel, in his fifteenth century *Mystère de la Passion*³ represents the seductive woman, devoted to adorning herself to attract lovers. She is interested

in Jesus' physical appearance. She stands apart from the crowd, hoping she will attract the attention of the good-looking Preacher and that He will find her irresistible. At the end, however, it is Mary-Magdalen who finds Jesus' words irresistible. The suddenly converted young woman puts a handkerchief on her head, goes to Simon's house where she washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon is unhappy about the presence of the sinful woman, but Jesus forgives her past sins. The rest of the play follows Saint John's account of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jean-Michel's innovation consists in his having the Magdalen set out to bewitch Jesus. She clearly serves as an outlet for the medieval playwright's individual creative imagination who often enjoys concentrating on the seductive Magdalen and stressing the incongruity of her role as a temptress in a religious play.

Marjorie Malvern claims that "the mythical Magdalen falls into decline as religious reform rises" but that she "manages to survive through the ages to centre the stage of twentieth-century theatre."⁴ However in 1954 when Jean Rousset⁵ affirms that La Madeleine had been the great saint of the seventeenth century, he is only confirming what Raymond Toinet⁶ and Henri Brémond⁷ noticed before him. "Mary-Magdalen was the preferred heroine of the XVIIth century," wrote the first one in his *Quelques recherches autour des poèmes héroïques-épiques français* and Father Brémond in *l'Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* talks about three generations of poets who were on their knees in front of Mary-Magdalen. He adds that she is everywhere: in odes, stanzas, sonnets, hymns, epic poems, sermons, devotional books, books of morality. Changes, transformations, metamorphosis, being favourite figures of baroque literature, it is not surprising that the one-time courtesan turned into an exemplary penitent should become the theme of predilection of the post-tridentine-counter-Reformation Church. The Jesuits were particularly preoccupied by their most urgent mission, that of bringing back souls to God and they found in the beautiful sinner, converted by the love of Jesus and retired from the world to adore the Lord, the best example to offer to the sinners of their time.

The proliferation of Magdalenian texts can be perceived in the list given in appendix. It is far from being exhaustive, many poems being found in books simply entitled *Oeuvres*,⁸ as is the case for Siméon Guillaume de la Roque who in 1609 presents "la belle Dame orgueilleuse et mondaine" (text in appendix). With its many antitheses, the sonnet is a perfect example of baroque style transformations. The mirror is replaced by a (pious) book, the beautiful golden palace by a cave, her fine clothes by a robe made of rough material, her eyes turn into fountains, no more joyous conversations come from her lips, only "funébres discours". Painters and authors are haunted by the picture of Mary-Magdalen sitting in a cave, surrounded by a crucifix, a skull, a book and sometimes a basin containing the Christ's blood.

The Magdalen's popularity wanes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but Maurice Maeterlinck, in one of his last plays written early in the twentieth century, gives Mary-Magdalen all his attention, so much so that the Nazarene, as Jesus is consistently called, never appears on the stage. It is through the Magdalen that His presence is felt. Maeterlinck's Mary-Magdalen is beautiful, has long golden hair but she is harsh and haughty. She never enjoys a laugh with her companions. It is her internal struggle as her soul strives for knowledge that the author chose to dramatize.

Mary-Magdalen lives in a beautiful Roman villa. Two doors down is the home of Simon the Leper who has been healed by the Nazarene. The destiny of Jesus lies in the hands of Verus, a Roman soldier sent to help Pontius-Pilate keep the peace, the Magdalen's lover.

As soon as the Magdalen hears Jesus' voice, a voice of a peculiar and penetrating sweetness, she is spellbound. As she tries to resist the divine call, she throws herself in Verus' arms, sobs, swears she loves him, pushes him away. Verus is convinced that the Magdalen and the Nazarene have made love together. He feels it is his duty to protect her from the barbarous witchcraft and childish spells of the Nazarene and he soon becomes furious with jealousy. He places full responsibility, and it is Maeterlinck's originality, for saving the Nazarene's life on Marie Magdalen. If she gives herself to Verus, he will save Jesus. She throws herself at his feet and begs for both Jesus' life and her soul, but Verus announces to the crowd outside that the Magdalen has betrayed their God. While reports of Jesus' way to the Cross are heard through the open windows, the Magdalen stands against a column in the middle of the room, motionless, but giving Him, miraculously, the strength to endure His Passion while she undergoes her own "passion."

Maeterlinck is not the last francophone author who gave a Mary-Magdalen to the public. Louis Artus, a now forgotten writer, but who was quite successful in the first half of our century published in 1945 *La plus belle histoire d'amour du monde*¹⁰ for which he used primarily the accounts recorded by the four Evangelists and the findings of his research conducted at the Bibliothèque de l'Alliance Israélite. His book, tells us, is neither a biography, nor an agiography, nor a "vie romancée", even less a novel. Using the rather thin documentation available, Artus suggests adventures of Sainte Mary-Magdalen which logically tie together episodes of her life which are found in the Gospels and which he quotes. He also used *Les Révélations de Catherine Emmerich* whose visions, he said, have never been found erroneous. Marcelle, a servant in Lazare's household wrote down the events which she witnessed. Her reports were available to the early Christians but disappeared in the third century. Catherine Emmerich tells of Lazare and his sisters being put in a boat without rudder, how a storm pushed them into Massilia (Marseilles) where they converted the people, and the decision of Mary-Magdalen to retire to the solitude of her cave. Louis

Artus does not take his story any further. The Catholic author manages to give a moving story, full of people and full of life, without taking any liberties with the Scriptures because he has too much respect for the Divine Person who was the sublime partner of his heroine, and because of the character of sacred intangibility of the only historical document which is available about Mary-Magdalen.

The definite story of Sainte-Marie Madeleine is not found in the profane—some would say the blasphemous—*Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Last Temptation of Christ*. It is yet to be written, as suggested by the question mark in the title *Sainte Mary-Magdalen: Quelle est donc cette femme?*¹¹, a book written by the Franciscan Damien Vorreux in 1963.

The controversy concerning the Magdalen continues.

Notes

- ¹Tours Easter Play. In Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*—Vol. 1, 1933. Reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- ²Jacobus A. Voragine. *Legenda Aurea: Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta, ad Optimorum Librorum Fidem*. Ed. Th. Graesse. 1850 3rd ed. 1890. Reprint. Osnabruck: Otto Zeller, 1965.
- ³Jean Michel. *Le Mystère de la Passion*. Ed. Gustave Cohen. Paris. 1925.
- ⁴Majorie M. Malvern. *Venus in Sackcloth*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1975, p. 125.
- ⁵Jean Rousset. *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France: Circé et le paon*. Paris, J. Corti, 1954.
- ⁶Raymond Toinet. *Quelques recherches autor des poèmes héroïques-épiques français du dix-septième siècle*. Tulle: Crausson, 1899-1907.
- ⁷Henri Brémond. *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*. Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916.
- ⁸S.-G. La Roque. *Les Oeuvres*, Paris: Vve. Cl. de Monstr'oiel, 1609.
- ⁹Maurice Maeterlinck. *Mary-Magdalen*. Trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1910.
- ¹⁰Louis Artus. *La plus belle histoire d'amour du monde*. Paris: Denoel. 1945.
- ¹¹Damien Vorreux. *Mary-Magdalen: quelle est donc cette femme?* Paris: Editions Franciscaines, 1963.

University of Nevada,
Las Vegas, Nevada 89154

“Enfin la belle Dame orgueilleuse et mondaine
Changea pour son salut et d'amant et d'amours,

Ses beaux palais dorez aux sauvages séjours,
Sa faute au repentir, son repos à peine,
Son miroir en un livre, et ses yeux en fontaine,
'Ses folastres propos en funèbres discours,
Changeant mesme d'habits en regrettant ses jours
Jadis mal employez à chose errante et vaine.
Puis ayant en horreur sa vie et sa beauté,
Mesprise le plaisir, l'aise et la vanité,
Les attraits de ses yeux, l'or de sa tresse blonde.
O bienheureux exemple! Ô sujet glorieux!
Qui nous montre icy bas que pour ganger les Cieux
Il faut avant la mort abandonner le monde."

Guilume de la Roque. 1609