



Mary Magdalene and Female Saintly Authority: Spiritual Agency During the Middle Ages

Dottoranda: Nieve Anne Cassidy

Abstract

This project will investigate the historic and artistic reception of female saints during the Middle Ages (c.800-1400), through the analysis of textual and visual representations of Mary Magdalene (along with notable female figures) in the West and in Byzantium. Against the feminist approach, I will demonstrate that the spiritual authority of female saints and especially of Mary Magdalene, had not only grown in importance by the late Middle Ages, if not earlier, but appealed also to male believers, as the reverence of Teobaldo Pontano (d. 1329), Bishop of Assisi demonstrates. This will ultimately allow me to revise decades of female scholarship on female sainthood. Themes of female suffering, susceptibility to demonic attack and elevation to sainthood through personal reflection and initiative will be a core theme of this artistic analysis. Whereas the Virgin was worshipped as the 'ideal' woman through the birthing of Christ the Saviour, feminist scholars have argued that other female saintly figures often served as cautionary tales or had to earn spiritual respect through their suffering. However, the Magdalene achieved a high status in the hierarchy of saints by regaining her lost spiritual virginity through repentance, compunction and the passing on of *caritas*, thus reversing the Fall of Genesis, brought about by Eve. Analysis of textual evidence in Latin, Greek, and some old English, as well as visual evidence from the medieval West and Byzantium pertaining the figures of Mary Magdalene and a selection of female saints will allow me firstly to trace how they were perceived and portrayed in relation to one another; secondly, I will aim to articulate that the Magdalene was able to transcend her identity as a reformed sinner and occupy spheres of worship traditionally occupied by virginal saints, such as St Margaret of Antioch. Among the visual evidence I will use, the frescoes which adorn the walls of the Magdalene chapel at Assisi (completed c. 1320), attributed to the workshop of Giotto, will be used as major case study to discuss elements of spirituality which have not been previously addressed in thorough detail.

Achievements thus far

- Carried out research of primary and secondary sources (church iconography, texts and illuminated manuscripts) in London (Warburg Institute, British Library)
- Visited museums and sites in Italy (e.g., in Florence, Salerno)
- Begun formulation of *Status Quaestionis* (including analysis of the impact of feminist scholarship)
- Begun a re-assessment of theological concepts regarding the body and soul based on writings of St Augustine, Anthony of Padua and Symeon the Theologian, to aid analysis of iconography
- Academic experience: Attended annual CISAM Settimana in Spoleto (received scholarship)

Current Objectives

- To undertake further analysis of the visual communication of the assumption and *caritas* of the Magdalene in comparison to the Virgin
- To investigate the ideology behind a sermon written by the Dominican Giovanni da San Gimignano (d. 1333), which suggests that the two women provided respective pathways to salvation (as seen in an illuminated manuscript by Niccolò da Bologna, c.1392-1402, previously undiscussed in the scholarship, in which the assumptions of both saints are depicted)
- To demonstrate, using artistic evidence as well as textual, that the Magdalene was not simply subordinate to the Virgin, but occupied her own celestial space and role in the salvation of Christians



© The J. Paul Getty Museum, Assumption of Magdalene, Ms. 115, Initial G, c.1392-1402, Niccolò da Bologna (2017.122)

Select Bibliography

- Bonaiuti, E and La Piana, G. 'The Genesis of St. Augustine's Idea of Original Sin,' *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 10 (2) (1917), 159-175.
- Hodne, L. *The Virginity of the Virgin: A Study in Marian Iconography* (Rome, 2012).
- Jansen, K.L. 'Like A Virgin: The Meaning of the Magdalen for Female Penitents of Later Medieval Italy,' *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Vol. 45 (2000), 131-152.