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Mary Magdalene: The Fragmented Woman

Mary Magdalene has remained an extremely controversial figure within Christianity. Her title has shifted from whore to wife to saint, and attempts to uncover exactly who she was continue to this day. She's present within all canonical gospels, and she's also seen—sometimes as a major character—within eleven gnostic and apocryphal works (Thimmes 193). Within canonical texts, she's noted as being a main figure in the witness of Jesus Christ's resurrection as well as a close disciple of his, but as of the year 591, when Pope Gregory I called her a “sinful woman”—likening her to a prostitute—her image became conflicted, but agreed upon, for the next fourteen hundred years (Carr 2, Carroll 51). Pope Gregory I's mislabeling went against the canonical Biblical texts, mistaking (with arguably misogynistic intentions) Mary of Bethany—the assumed prostitute—with that of Mary Magdalene, making her the “redeemed whore” and female figure of repentance instead of a “powerful woman at Jesus' side;” this image of Mary was used to support the patriarchal structure of the church, helping to keep women from holding spiritual power and leadership roles (Zakula 14, Carroll 52, 59, Carr 7). It wouldn't be until 1969 when the Catholic church admitted that it had “mistakenly identified [her] as a sex worker,” which only increased demand for women to be allowed to have high-level church positions (Carr 7). Years later, 2016 would see Pope Francis change the “liturgical memory” of Mary to a feast day, titling her as the “Apostle of the apostles,” but she's still misinterpreted as a prostitute by the general public (*Holy See Press Office* 1, Henderson 92). Present through theology and the arts,

Mary's different representations remain a continued search of trying to piece together the entirety of who this woman was. One way to do this has been explorative, using the medium of theatre, and in this essay, three different pieces within the last century will be examined: Maurice Maeterlinck's 1910 play *Mary Magdalene*, the 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and Stephen Adly Guirgis' 2005 play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Overall, it is the patriarchal structure of the church and culture that has fractured the identity of Mary Magdalene, and though her differing representations continue within the theatre, it is the medium itself that has the power to reaffirm or bravely challenge the accepted narrative of who Mary Magdalene was.

In Maeterlinck's 1910 play, *Mary Magdalene (MM)*, Mary's a wealthy Roman courtesan prostitute covered in jewels with a harsh attitude towards slaves: "*dismiss[ing] [her own] with a harsh and imperious gesture,*" suggesting this representation of Mary to be one of some power, but portrayed in a contemptuous and materialistically-oriented way (*MM* 14, 16-17). At first she does not reciprocate Roman General Verus' love; later, she's "*irresistibly drawn*" to Jesus' voice, trying "*fiercely, imperiously*" to see him (*MM* 22, 48-49). The crowd throws things at her, shouting "*The Roman woman! The adultress! Shame!...strumpet!*" but Jesus stops them (the stone story), stating "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her!" (*MM* 51-54). She confesses her love to Verus, but changes her mind when the raised-from-the-dead Lazarus enters, stating "Come. The Master calls you," and she walks forward "*as though walking in her sleep*" but struggles "*to escape from Verus' embrace;*" Verus states, "go, since you love him!" but she says, "It is a different thing!" (*MM* 100-106). Later, she races to a house of Jesus' followers to get them to rally with her and save Jesus from his death, but many leave; she says, "[Jesus] knew the cowardice of those who pretended to love him!...Ah, men are great and heroic and proud!...What am I doing here, among men who will do nothing?" (*MM* 115, 129-132). She

powerfully asks Verus—who could help Jesus escape—for aid, but he demands that in return, she give herself fully to him—calling Jesus his “rival”—but doing so would go against everything she’s now sworn to live by, thus harming Jesus and the religion, so out of frustration she states, “And to think that scarcely any one, not even those who loved him, would understand better!...Am I then the only being that has seen into his soul?...And yet it is not so very difficult!...I know all that he is so completely as though I were within him”(MM 143-152, 151-152). She refuses Verus, who calls her “harlot,” and tells the followers that he offered to save Jesus, but Mary “said no. She orders his death;” Mary sits “*motionless, gazing blindly into the distance,*” as followers shout, “She...has sold him!...Harlot! Soldiers’ wench! Strumpet!...The seven devils whom he cast out have entered her body again!” but then, Jesus bleeding through the street, falls and looks at the house they’re in, and Mary “*without stirring...without anger, simply, in a voice from another life, full of peace, full of divine clarity and certainty...*[states] Go!...” and Jesus rises and continues walking; as Verus leaves, it ends as Mary “*remains motionless, as though in ecstasy and all illumined with the light of the departing torches*” (MM 166-167, 168-179). Though it sees Mary as a Roman prostitute, the rest of the play has ties to what’s assumed canonically true. She travels with Jesus, and in *Luke*, the women often “provided for” him and the group—suggesting monetary support and that they were respectable figures—and also that they’d been cured of an ailment; for Mary, it was the “seven demons” within her; the play references her seven demons and wealth (Thimmes 198-199, Carroll 6-8). The play’s stone scene reflects a generally accepted misinterpretation of this story (Mary wasn’t the woman here), but other stories exist of a woman with loose hair (at the time an “erotic” immoral symbol) who either wept and anointed Jesus, or poured expensive ointment onto him, seen as wasteful, though in both stories Jesus defends the woman; in the play, Mary’s hair is loose and she anoints him, so the play aligns with these

stories' views of a woman as an example of sexual and fiscal immorality and repentance, furthering Mary's misrepresentation as a repentant and wealthy whore (Carroll 9-18, 19, *MM* 103, 151-152). In contrast, the play boldly shows Mary to match the arguably most reliable canonical representation of her—seen in all four Gospels—where she's identified as “one of the women who refused to leave [Jesus]” at his death (Thimmes 197, Carroll 23). Additionally, in *John* she's the first witness to Jesus' resurrection, and instead of the male followers who cowardly abandoned Jesus, she loyally stayed (Carroll 23). The play thoroughly shows this loyalty: she's the only one of all the followers to try to save Jesus. In the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, an apocryphal text that exists outside the canon of the New Testament and was shunned aside in the 4th century, Mary's written as not just being a part of Jesus' following, but as being “one of its most powerful leaders;” it's argued that this Gospel's exclusion was due to neglect, but more likely, suppression, in order to enforce the church's patriarchal structure (Carroll 40-41). Further, the fact that the Gospel of Mary was written suggests that “women were active, public participants, preachers, teachers and spiritual guides in some early communities...[who] chose to give voice to the memory of Mary” (Thimmes 222-223). However, it was at this time that the misrepresentation of Mary as the repentant whore figure was cemented, so women started to disappear from the “church's inner circle” (Carroll 40-41). The play parallels this poignantly, as Mary's shown to take on a leadership position by setting up a plan to rescue him, but in the end, Verus—a man—prevents her from doing so, as she will not stray from her religious vows, followed by the harassment from the cowardly male followers; they and the powerful pagan male simultaneously condemn what Jesus stands for while tearing a woman who truly followed him down. The Gospel of Mary portrays her as the “only disciple who truly understands Jesus' spiritual message,” where Peter asks, “we know that the Savior loved you

more than all other women. Tell us the words of the Savior that you remember, the things which you know that we don't because we haven't heard them," and she describes her vision, "a kind of esoteric description of the ascent of the soul," but Peter grows angry that Jesus gave Mary—a woman—a vision, stating, "Did [Jesus] choose her over us?" but Levi responds "If the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her?" (Carr 10, Nicolaides 12-13, Carroll 42-46). This suggests that Mary understood Jesus in a way the other male disciples didn't, threatening the patriarchal structure of the church that excludes women from holding power (Carr 13). The play shows this explicitly: rendered helpless by the male powers that be to save Jesus, her words are: "Am I then the only being that has seen into his soul?...And yet it is not so...difficult!...He has spoken to me only three times...but I know what he thinks" (*MM* 143-152). In only three exchanges, she knows him more than the other followers (*MM* 178-179). The Gospel of Mary shows a post-resurrection vision "mediated through the spiritual authority of a woman:" Mary; the play sees Mary hold this authority, as she speaks of Jesus' teachings to his followers, and to him directly: functioning on her word alone, he moves (Thimmes 211, *MM* 178). The play's theme of Mary being "*irresistibly drawn*" to Jesus implies a closeness between them; her final moments of "*ecstasy*" suggest a sort of spiritual intimacy (Carroll 9-18, *MM* 48-49, 179). However, Verus often refers to Jesus as his love rival for Mary, but as she states he's spoken to her just three times, asserting, "It's a different thing!" than romance, the play illustrates that rather than a romantic relationship, this "ecstasy" is a religious closeness that she, as the Gospel of Mary also asserts, experiences much more deeply than other disciples, who in the end of this play, turn against her despite their so-called understanding of Jesus' teachings. Perhaps the love triangle Verus asserts exists serves to represent that Mary can only exist as a prostitute seeking redemption or a sexual temptation for men, making—as Verus does—her closeness to Jesus

something immoral, rather than holy. In this way, Verus parallels the patriarchal church and their commitment to Mary being represented as sacrilegiously immoral (Brown 292). Though it reaffirms the prostitution, stone, and loosened hair misinterpretations, this play radically pushes the boundaries for the early 1900s by likening Mary to her Gospel of Mary representation, showcasing her heightened authority and spiritual closeness to Jesus.

In the 1988 film, *The Last Temptation of Christ (LTC)*, Mary's a symbol for immoral temptation. She's a prostitute, shown having sex with many men (*LTC* 0:17:40-0:22:35). Jesus tries to convert her, and it's established that they were childhood friends who might've been romantically attracted to each other (*LTC* 0:21:55). She describes his attachment to her, stating "If you weren't hanging on to your mother, you were hanging on to me. Now you're hanging on to God...Whenever I see you, my heart breaks," and later seductively touches his face with red painted nails and tattoos, stating, "All I ever wanted was you. Nothing else," to which Jesus states, "What did you think I wanted?"—somewhat rhetorically—to which she states, "Please. Stay...Is it so bad sharing a prostitute's room? I won't touch you, I promise," and then he leaves her, apologizing, but visibly tempted by her offer (*LTC* 0:21:21, 0:21:40-0:22:05). Later, the stone scene occurs, he saves her, and she clings to him; he later wipes her feet caringly (*LTC* 0:33:17-0:37:06, 0:40:43-0:41:45). Talking to Judas, Jesus questions how he could be the Messiah, stating, "When those people were torturing Magdalene, I wanted to kill them. And then I opened my mouth, and out comes the word 'love.' Why? I don't understand" (*LTC* 0:45:55-0:46:10). Jesus' questioning of himself in this scene is propelled by his love, or rather, temptation, of Mary; she's responsible for his doubts about whether he's truly a holy being, thus she's shown to negatively affect him, despite his honest love for her; she remains a temptress, nothing more. Later, when Jesus is being tested by God, a snake comes forward with the voice of

Mary, tempting him to “look at my breasts, don’t you recognize them, just nod your head and we’ll be in my bed together” but he rejects it, and then the next test, a lion, asserts he’s “passed the small temptations of a woman and a family” (*LTC* 0:55:20-0:57:20). This illustrates Mary’s existence as a temptress, but also as an overall insignificant, lesser temptation. Later, Mary joins his following, covered up in shawls, but she’s not lawfully allowed entry to a wedding due to having been a prostitute, but Jesus brings her, stating, “The law’s against my heart;” this could suggest that he has feelings for her, but more likely, his heart has given her redemption, and she exists now as the repentant whore (*LTC* 1:12:02-1:12:40). Mary’s present at Jesus’ crucifixion, and in his mind, he asks “Mother? Magdalene? Where are you?...Father, I’m sorry for being a bad son” (*LTC* 1:45:11-1:47:01, 2:01:06-2:01:43). His want of his mother–virgin image—and Mary–whore image—coupled with his apology to God suggest that both women are worldly temptations to him, of which he’d prefer to be near. On the cross, Mary looks at him steadily with unshed tears, and he looks back at her (*LTC* 2:04:04). Then, a guardian angel asserts God has given Jesus life, and he proceeds to marry Mary, they have sex, and she becomes pregnant, but dies, the angel stating “God took her away when she was happy. Now she’s immortal. She won’t see her love die or body decay,” suggesting that Mary’s sole purpose was not even a relationship with Jesus, but one that ended in early death (*LTC* 2:10:17-2:15:50). Jesus is upset, but the angel states, “Trust God’s way...There’s only one woman in the world. One woman with many faces. This one falls, the next one rises. Mary Magdalene died...but Mary, Lazarus’s sister, she lives. She’s Magdalene with a different face. She’s carrying your greatest joy inside her. Your son” (*LTC* 2:16:48- 2:17:38). The angel asserts that women are not just different from men, but that all women are essentially the same and meant for procreation, lessening Mary even further than before; she is not just dead, but she is replaceable. He marries and starts a family with the

other Mary, and the angel repeats, “There’s only one woman in the world,” about Martha (other sister of Lazarus) (*LTC* 2:21:23). At the end, Judas exclaims to Jesus, who’s grown old and has had many children, “What business do you have here with women, with children? What’s good for a man isn’t good for God. Why weren’t you crucified?” and it’s revealed that the angel was actually Satan, to which Jesus says, “I didn’t fight hard enough,” showcasing that there’s a difference between man and God, and that women and children—having a family—are worldly temptations that in the film, lead to Jerusalem burning (*LTC* 2:34:30, 2:35:13). Begging for forgiveness from God to be crucified to save Jerusalem and beat temptation, he’s seen back on the cross, and he glances over to see Mary and the women, then looks away—seemingly, away from temptation—and succeeds in dying as the film ends, not showing his resurrection (*LTC* 2:38:11). This film showcases women, with Mary as the prime example, to exist as an immoral Satanistic temptation that’s dangerous to Jesus, and thus the Christian religion. This reaffirms the misrepresentations of Mary by the patriarchal structure of the church, because if women are temptation, and a part of the world of man, they cannot be a part of the world of God, and thus cannot hold high positions or roles of authoritative leadership within the church, thus keeping the patriarchy stable and thriving. The film supports the idea of the “powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity [that] associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh...and represents Christianity’s fear of women, its identification of physical beauty with temptation” (Thimmes 222). The film’s women are worldly temptations, and as the flesh/body leads to committing sins, then so too do women. The film’s portrayal of Mary, especially her sex scenes, has been described as “hyper-sexualized and degraded characterization,” that “imprisons her in popular culture’s collective consciousness as a reformed prostitute with no apostolic authority, a woman whose agency is usurped by patriarchal discourses” (*LTC* 0:17:40-0:22:35, Bolton

30-31). The choice to have Mary covered in Henna tattoos “perpetuated–[even] heightened–the image of Mary...as a sexually threatening woman, humiliated and punished by patriarchy” (Bolton 31). This portrayal of Mary reaffirms misinterpretations, and as films are often more accessible than plays, the misinterpretations are absorbed and thus perpetuated by a larger public audience. The film’s controversy was due to the depiction of Jesus engaging in sexuality with Mary—watching her have sex and fantasizing about it, marrying, and having children—was heresy to the church. In the apocryphal Gospel of Philip, Mary’s a “companion” to Jesus; he “[loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her...The [disciples asked] ‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’ echoing Peter’s aforementioned outburst in the Gospel of Mary (Thimmes 213, Nicolaidis 12-13). This encourages a romantic relationship, which the film somewhat supports. However, in gnostic texts, kissing didn’t stand for sexual intercourse, rather, “it implied sexual intercourse [that’s] purely spiritual and metaphorical in nature,” a kiss would “indicate kinship between people or...serve as an outward sign of reconciliation;” further, interpreting Jesus as romantically kissing Mary raises the question of “why...male disciples [would] be jealous of Jesus’ [romantic] love for her” (Thimmes 214). Instead they’re likened to having a “spiritual consortium...Together they [show the]...union between Christ and his Church...[Their] relationship...is purely spiritual (Thimmes 214). Thus, the film’s portrayal of Mary not only supports the historical misrepresentations of her, but it aids the patriarchal structure of the church, and doesn’t allow Mary to be shown having a deeply religious experience with God, thus not allowing women to be seen as being able to connect with God as deeply as men (be it Jesus’ own disciples, or the powerful male figureheads of the church).

In Guirgis’ 2005 play, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot (LDJI)*, Mary’s only seen briefly—two pages of one-hundred and eleven—and once referenced, but this brief instance is

arguably the most boundary breaking portrayal of Mary in the three examined pieces. The play is a trial of Judas Iscariot that shows many different historical characters who either testify or monologue about themselves and Judas, all written in casual vernacular. St. Monica's the one to introduce Mary, notable because she's portrayed as a very powerful female character: the only one able to "nag" successfully to God in order to get Judas a trial (*LDJI* 16-20). Later, she states, "This is Mary Mags—she the only bitch I let hang with me up here," suggesting that Mary's the only one equal in power to that of the most powerful character in the play, aside from God and Jesus (*LDJI* 59). Mary introduces herself: "I was a disciple of Jesus, I was present at the crucifixion, and I was the first person He appeared to after the resurrection," St. Monica responds, "Bitch got *clout!*" (*LDJI* 59). Not only has Mary not been misrepresented, but St. Monica's response affirms that Mary is powerful; neither of the other two pieces have had Mary directly affirmed. Mary then states, "I was one of the founders of the Christian faith, and I was known for my ability, in times of difficulty, to be able to turn the hearts of the Apostles towards the Good...Some people think I was a whore," to which St. Monica states, "Misogynist bitches!" and Mary says, "Other people think Jesus was my husband," to which St. Monica states, "Femin-o-tic bitches!" affirming both the debate and degradation of her character (*LDJI* 59). Mary continues, "I was not a whore...I was an unmarried woman in a town of ill repute...I was not the wife of Jesus either...But, I am pretty sure that I was his best friend. We shared an intimacy that I cannot put to words except to say we saw into each other's hearts and were in love with what we found" (*LDJI* 59). This echoes back to the interpretation of Jesus and Mary sharing an intimate spiritual relationship. She speaks of closely knowing Jesus' relationship to Judas, stating "Out of the Twelve, he was the most moody and the most impetuous, and yet, he was my favorite...in some ways, I think he was Jesus's favorite too...Judas was almost an

alter-ego to Jesus—he was the shadow to Jesus’s light...They often walked together, more often than not arguing—no one could get a rise out of Jesus like Judas could. I can remember times when Jesus emerged from an argument with Judas positively furious...and he would tell me what they had been fighting about—still agitated—but, inevitably, he would end up staring into space and sighing—smiling. I think that if someone were to say that Judas was good for Jesus that they would not be mistaken...When I think of Judas, my heart breaks.” (*LDJI* 60). The tone of this anecdote showcases how close Mary was with Jesus, and arguably Judas. Further, the imagery of Jesus coming to Mary and animatedly talking to her implies that Mary was both an independent figure as well as someone Jesus closely confided in; he came to her. This repeats, as she states, “Jesus never talks about [Judas]. That’s how I know His heart hurts worse than mine” (*LDJI* 60). Again a deep friendship is suggested, while also implying their closeness has been maintained. Later, St. Thomas’ states, “Jesus liked [Judas], liked him a lot, in fact. Judas was right up there in the top three with Mary Magdalene and Peter, who by the way, could also be a dick sometimes” (*LDJI* 79). Not only does this affirm Mary’s importance, it recalls Peter’s aforementioned anger at her relationship with Jesus. By portraying Mary, Judas, and Peter as being Jesus’ ‘top three,’ it’s easier to imagine a kind of “jealousy” from Peter, while Mary and Judas seem to have had a good relationship in this play (Ricci 133). Historically, “disciples who, even when living with Jesus, did not understand his openness towards women, in the context of an androcentric society with little regard for women, [they] found it easy to increasingly neglect the memory of the facts concerning [Mary] and to seek to base future tradition of the recognized authority of men” as well as “determine[d] the obliteration operated by...male disciples, primarily Peter, against [Mary] and her memory,” resulting in Mary—among other female disciples—to have their presence “disappear” in canonical texts, suggesting that the little we know of Mary might’ve been much

more if not for the misogyny stemming from the disciples themselves, if not for Peter being “a dick sometimes” (Ricci 133, 135). Perhaps most critical in this portrayal of Mary is her expressing her relationship to Jesus as being “his best friend” (*LDJI* 59). Instead of painting her a whore, or married to Jesus, Mary exists in this play as having autonomy. It expands upon Maeterlinck’s Mary’s exclamation of “It’s a different thing!” for her relationship to Jesus (*MM* 104). By being portrayed as Jesus’ best friend, she simply is a woman openly committed to her religion and to God, opening the door for women in the real-world to be able to have this relationship not as lesser-beings, but as an equal to other religious men. Thus, this play shifts immoral representations of Mary—whore, temptress—into a woman having the right to have a close relationship to God. This play also asserts that she had great understanding of Jesus, that “[they] saw into each other’s hearts and were in love with what [they] found” (*LDJI* 59). The play implies neither a romantic or redemptive relationship, but that of platonic love. This play challenges the patriarchal view of Mary the ‘redeemed whore’ and Mary ‘the wife,’ instead aligning with the Gospel of Mary representation (Nicolaidis 6). Being Jesus’ best friend asserts that women are welcome to have a religious closeness to Christ, that they don’t have to be relegated to being only condemned or only wives. In this play, the conversational dialogue helps to clearly illustrate this woman as a person. However, Mary’s role in this play, though boundary breaking, was extraordinarily brief; half of her appearance exists to talk about Judas, and in this way, she’s been compartmentalized. If this play was able to grant Mary an in-depth exploration of her character, delving further into new and less-known interpretations of her, it could be even more of an influential account of Mary than it already is.

To conclude, all three plays showcase various interpretations of Mary Magdalene that either support patriarchal misrepresentations, or challenge them, using theatre. Theatre in

particular offers the ability to take a “multifaceted approach to account for the...complexity of [Mary’s] image,” allowing the audience to try to form Mary into a multidimensional person (Bolton 39). Though many misinterpretations have persisted within Christian history to control, reduce, weaken, and disempower Mary by over-sexualization (*The Last Temptation of Christ*), prostitution work (Maeterlinck) and erasure, all to make her less of a threat to the patriarchy and to prevent women from competing with men for power within the church, she still—through canon writings or otherwise—subverts patriarchy in all forms: from proving her loyalty and utmost faithfulness to Jesus to being the witness to go forth and proclaim his teachings, she’s a striking example for women who want equality within the church (Clark 9-11, Carroll 46, 56, Brown 315, Nicolaides 6). Maeterlinck’s play contained elements that challenged misinterpretation, and Guirgis’ play ninety-five years later furthered it, showcasing Mary as a feminist icon. However, though theatre is perhaps the most helpful way to try to piece together the fragments of Mary’s identity, as the performance of text—alike to the church’s own sermons—engages audience discussion, Mary Magdalene still remains too distorted to be fully rendered whole (Carroll 26, Goodwin 2). She’s been split and mangled into re-imaginings to “serve various patriarchal purposes,” but despite being unable to ever fully reconstruct her, Mary never fails to represent “female liberation” and stands as a hopeful symbol for current women oppressed by the patriarchy in worship fields and otherwise (Goodwin 11). The patriarchy has used her, but so too has it all the more defined her resistance, and thus, the many fragments present within these plays and the film together managed to reflect, despite their differences, a woman who persists.

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