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CHAPTER I

DE UNICA MAGDALENA¹

Her of your name, whose fair inheritance
Bethina was, and jointure Magdalo:
An active faith so highly did advance,
That she once knew, more than the Church did know,
The Resurrection; so much good there is
Deliver'd of her, that some Fathers be
Loth to believe one Woman could do this;
But, think these Magdalens were two or three.

JOHN DONNE, *'To the Lady Magdalen Herbert:
of St Mary Magdalen'*²



WE KNOW VERY LITTLE about Mary Magdalen. The predominant image we have of her is of a beautiful woman with long golden hair, weeping for her sins, the very incarnation of the age-old equation between feminine beauty, sexuality and sin. For nearly two thousand years, the traditional conception of Mary Magdalen has been that of the prostitute who, hearing the words of Jesus Christ, repented of her sinful past and henceforth devoted her life and love to him. She appears in countless devotional images, scarlet-cloaked and with loose hair, kneeling below the cross, or seated at Christ's feet in the house of Mary and Martha of Bethany, or as the beautiful prostitute herself, sprawled at his feet, unguent jar by her side, in the house of the Pharisee. Her very name evokes images of beauty and sensuality, yet when we look for this creature in the New Testament, we look for her in vain. All we truly know of her comes from the four gospels, a few brief references which yield an inconsistent, even contradictory vision. These shifting reflections converge, however, on four salient aspects: that Mary Magdalen was one of Christ's female followers, was present at his crucifixion, was

a witness – indeed, according to the gospel of St John, *the* witness – of his resurrection, and was the first to be charged with the supreme ministry, that of proclaiming the Christian message. She brought the knowledge that through Christ's victory over death, life everlasting was offered to all who believe.

In the Christian story, Jesus Christ, son of God made man, was born of a virgin, crucified, died and was buried for the salvation of the human race, and in fulfilment of the Scriptures. Three days after the crucifixion, he rose from the dead, signifying his triumph over death. Belief in the resurrection, the central message of Christianity, is reiterated in the beautiful words of the Nicene Creed, formulated in the fourth century, and chanted at every mass or service ever since:

*Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis.
Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine; Et homo factus
est. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis: sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est.
Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas . . .*

(Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man. And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures . . .)

Every Easter, Christians celebrate the Passion, death, and especially the resurrection of Christ, seeing in the festival not only a commemoration of the events of the gospels, but also their own spiritual regeneration, through their baptism into the Church, with Christ, and their delivery from time, sin and death.³ Easter was the earliest and most important of all the Christian feasts, lauded by Pope Leo the Great (c.400–61) as the *festum festorum*,⁴ although in modern times it has been overshadowed by the celebration of Christmas. In its earliest years, it may have been observed in conjunction with the Passover, the chief Jewish festival at the time of Christ, which celebrated Israel's delivery from Egyptian slavery and her exodus to the Promised Land, but, by the end of the second century, all Christians, except those of Asia Minor, commemorated Christ's resurrection on the Sunday after the Jewish feast.⁵

The Easter story is where the story of Mary Magdalen begins, for it is here, at the climax of Christ's life on earth, that she makes her first appearance. Accounts of Christ's life and death were passed down orally

from those who had been witnesses of the events or, as Luke tells us, 'which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word' (1:2), until the point when, some time before the beginning of the second century, and probably within fifty years of Christ's death, they were written down in what were to become the four canonical books of the New Testament, the gospels.⁶ Three of these accounts, by Matthew, Mark and Luke, are so close in form and content that they are called the 'synoptics', from the Greek word *synoptikos*, meaning from the same point of view. The authorship of the fourth and later gospel, which is entirely different in style and approach, is still a matter of scholarly dispute, although it is traditionally attributed, together with that of the Book of Revelation, to the apostle John, who is also identified with the 'beloved disciple' who leant against Christ's breast at the Last Supper (John 13:23). According to a much later myth, this figure was to have a remarkable part to play in the legendary life of Mary Magdalen.⁷

It is to these earliest of Christian writings that we have to turn in order to discover the true identity, and consequently the prominence and importance, of the historical figure who very quickly gave way to the mythical creature we know today.



Mary Magdalen is first referred to by name in Chapter 15 of St Mark's gospel, towards the end of his account of Christ's crucifixion on Golgotha, 'the place of a skull', the Hebrew name for Calvary, just outside Jerusalem. Mark's gospel, probably written about AD 66–8, is now agreed by most scholars to be the source for those of Luke and Matthew, the latter traditionally thought to have been written first.⁸ Mark describes the scene: Christ, crucified between the two thieves, forsaken by his male disciples (14:50), and alone except for the 'women looking on afar off', has just died on the cross in that desolate place. Among the women who stayed after the men had fled were 'Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome' (15:40). These women had followed Christ in Galilee and had 'ministered unto him' (v.41), and they now stood together with the 'many other women which came up with him into Jerusalem'. Christ's body

is then taken down from the cross, and Joseph of Arimathaea, 'an honourable counsellor' of the Sanhedrin (v.43),⁹ who had earlier refused to condemn Christ (Luke 23:51), requests it of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judaea. He wraps it in fine linen, and lays it in a sepulchre which he closes with a stone. As the following day is the Sabbath, during which all Jews have to rest, the burial ceremony cannot take place until the day after, when, according to Jewish custom, the body will be buried outside the city walls in a tomb hewn out of rock.¹⁰ At the end of the chapter, Mark tells us that Mary Magdalen and Mary the mother of James 'beheld where he was laid' (15:47).

Immediately following this, in Chapter 16, the evangelist describes the events central to Christian belief, in which Mary Magdalen has an integral role, one often ignored and eclipsed when seen in relation to the legendary aspects of her 'life'. Early on the morning after the Sabbath, she and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, take to the sepulchre sweet spices bought before the Sabbath to anoint Christ's body in preparation for burial, a ritual traditionally carried out by Jewish women. Mark's description of the women rising 'very early in the morning the first day of the week', to reach the sepulchre 'at the rising of the sun', became from the earliest centuries of Christianity a focal point for artists and sculptors who sought to represent the drama of the resurrection. Arriving at the tomb, the women discover that the stone placed in the tomb's entrance has been rolled away, and that a young man clad in a long white garment is sitting within. They are terrified, but he tells them not to be afraid as Christ has risen, and that they should relay the message to the disciples 'and Peter' that they will see Christ again in Galilee. According to Mark, the women flee 'quickly', and trembling, so frightened that they tell no-one. However, in verse 9, in what is now known to be a later addition,¹¹ further information is given about Mary Magdalen, which introduces an element, her 'possession' by devils, used later in the creation of her mythical character:

Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.

And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept.

And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not (16:9-11).

Matthew tells much the same story: Mary Magdalen is among the many women watching the crucifixion 'which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him' (27:55), together with 'Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's children' (v.56). Joseph of Arimathaea, this time described as a rich man and one of Christ's disciples, takes the body, wraps it in linen cloth, and places it in his own tomb, against which he places a great stone. Mary Magdalen and a woman described as 'the other Mary'¹² sit beside the sepulchre (v.61).

In Matthew's account, the chief priests and Pharisees, afraid that Christ's disciples might steal the body to claim a false resurrection, ask Pilate to set a watch until the third day, the day that Christ had prophesied that he would rise from the dead (16:21; 17:23; Mark 8:31; 9:31). In Chapter 28, Mary Magdalen and 'the other Mary' come to the sepulchre. Unlike Mark's account, there is no mention of spices or anointing; the women have come to look. There is an earthquake, and an angel, his countenance 'like lightning, and his raiment white as snow' (v.3), descends, removes the stone from the grave opening and seats himself upon it. Like the young man in white in Mark's account, the angel tells the women not to be afraid, that Christ has risen and that they will meet him in Galilee. But again unlike Mark's account, we hear that on their way back to tell the disciples, in 'fear and great joy', the women meet Christ himself, who greets them with the words, 'All hail', and they fall to the ground, clasping his feet and worshipping him. He too bids them not to be afraid and to tell the disciples that they will meet him in Galilee (v.10).

Luke's first reference to Mary Magdalen occurs earlier, in Chapter 8 of his narrative, during his account of Christ's travels around the countryside preaching, accompanied by the twelve disciples, and 'certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities'. Among these are 'Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, And Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance' (vv.2-3). In Chapter 23, in Luke's account of the crucifixion, the number of people around the cross has grown to include: 'all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, [who] stood afar off, beholding these things' (v.49). Again Joseph of Arimathaea takes the body, 'And the women also, which came with him from Galilee, followed after, and beheld the sepulchre, and how his body was laid. And they

returned, and prepared spices and ointments; and rested the sabbath day according to the commandment' (vv.55-6).

In Chapter 24, these women – so far unspecified – go to the sepulchre with their spices very early in the morning. In place of the single angel of the earlier accounts, they find two 'men [standing] by them in shining garments' (v.4), who ask them why they seek the living among the dead, showing that the women had not truly understood when Christ had foretold his resurrection (vv.5-7). Luke now confirms that 'It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the apostles' (v.10). As in Mark, the women's words 'seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not' (v.11). Some lingering doubt, however, seems to impel Peter to go to the sepulchre and see for himself the discarded grave-clothes, where he is amazed, and wonders what has taken place.

The story of the events after the crucifixion as told by Mark, Matthew and Luke are thus synoptic – narrated, with variations, from more or less the same point of view. With minor variations, the same women are present, and the body is taken by Joseph of Arimathea, who appears in no other episode in the New Testament.¹³ In Mark and Luke, the women go to the tomb with the purpose of anointing the body, and in Matthew they come to visit the tomb only as it has been sealed and guarded under Pilate's orders. In Mark, initially Mary Magdalen alone sees the risen Christ (and no-one believes her); in Matthew, Mary Magdalen and the 'other Mary' return to the disciples and meet Christ on the road; and in Luke, the women tell the disciples and are not believed.

In the gospel of John the story is quite different. Gone are the women mourners who watch from afar, and in their place, in Chapter 19, the fourth evangelist states clearly, 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene' (v.25).¹⁴ The body is taken down and Joseph of Arimathea, this time with Nicodemus, who has brought myrrh and aloes and appears in no other account, winds linen round Christ's body and lays it in the sepulchre.

In the following chapter, John writes: 'The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark' (v.1). On discovering that the stone has been moved and that the sepulchre is empty, and fearing that the body has been stolen, or removed by the Jews,

Mary Magdalen 'then [. . .] runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved', to tell them of her discovery. Here, she is quoted as saying, 'They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him', making it ambiguous as to whether at this point she went to the sepulchre alone, or with the other women. The two men run to the sepulchre, and the 'other' disciple outruns Peter, reaches the tomb first, and stoops down to look in, and sees the cloths in which the body has been wrapped, but does not go in. Peter, however, enters, sees the wrappings and the sudarium, and is then followed by 'that other disciple' who in John's words 'saw, and believed'.¹⁵ This incident, known as the 'race' to the tomb, was to be re-enacted as part of the Easter ceremony in the Middle Ages, and became one of the 'witness' themes of medieval mystery plays. It was John's emphasis on the word 'believed' which, according to later commentators, distinguished the 'other' disciple's belief in the resurrection from the doubts of the rest of the group of followers.

The disciples then return to their houses, leaving Mary Magdalen to a lonely vigil by the sepulchre. As she stands weeping outside, she stoops down to look into it and sees two angels in white sitting at either end of the place where Christ's body has lain. When asked by them why she weeps, she replies, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him' (v.13). In her grief she seems not to have noticed the grave-clothes left lying in the tomb, and assumes that the body has been taken away. Then comes the beautiful and dramatic scene of recognition in the garden, so often depicted in paintings and sculpture from the early Middle Ages onwards:

And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself and saith unto him Rabboni; which is to say, Master (20:14-16).

In recognising Christ, Mary Magdalen calls him *Rabboni*, the Hebrew for 'teacher', a word which had a more solemn resonance than the usual term 'rabbi', and which was usually reserved for God; John thereby infers that she was acknowledging Christ's new role within the Christian

story of salvation.¹⁶ Joyfully, she obviously then attempts to embrace him or to seize his feet (as in Matt. 28:9, and as she is later usually shown in the numerous depictions of the scene) for his next words are 'Touch me not' or, as they are better known in the Latin of the Vulgate, 'Noli me tangere'. However, the words of the Greek text, 'me mou aptou', imply rather the sense of 'do not seek to hold onto, cling to, or embrace me', and sound less brusque or unkind than do their Latin and terse English translations.¹⁷ Christ explains why she should desist from holding him with the words 'for I am not yet ascended to my Father', from which Mary Magdalen is to infer that her relationship with him has now changed, that any kind of physical contact which she might have had with him formerly is no longer appropriate, and that she should cease from worshipping him in a human, corporeal sense. Christ then tells her to tell his 'brethren', 'I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.'¹⁸ The sequence ends with Mary Magdalen telling the disciples that she has seen Christ, and delivering his message. Only John gives words to her speech: the Greek New Testament reports that 'Comes Mary the Magdalene announcing to the disciples, I have seen the Lord, and these things he said to her.'¹⁹ In John's gospel, there is, however, no intimation that her word is disbelieved; the episode is followed by Christ's appearances to the disciples and then to doubting Thomas (vv. 19–29). It is, however, here, in the gospel of John, that Mary Magdalen appears as one of the several women of faith, and unequivocally as the first witness of the Empty Tomb and of the Risen Christ, the cornerstone of Christian belief; the first recipient of an apostolic commission, she becomes not only the herald of the 'New Life', but also the first apostle.²⁰

These few accounts in the gospels tell us all we can claim to know about Mary Magdalen. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Acts 1 tells us that after the resurrection, Christ showed himself 'to many during forty days'; after the ascension, the disciples meet in an upper room to pray and supplicate (v. 14), 'with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brethren', and we may infer, although she is not specifically named, that Mary Magdalen was included in the group of women. But it is immediately clear from the gospels that the evangelists are careful to name her precisely, setting her apart from the several other Marys in their texts and, in every account of the crucifixion except John's, placing her at the head of the list of Christ's female followers. This prominent

position has naturally engendered much speculation about Mary Magdalen's exact role and place within the group of women followers, but there has recently been a growing tendency to see her as its leader.²¹ And, of course, it has given rise to the tantalising mystery of Mary Magdalen's precise relationship to Christ himself, which has been a source of fascination from the very beginning of the Christian era. But the texts themselves yield nothing more than the barest of bones; every interpretation which has accumulated around her reflects only the imagination of subsequent writers and their own historical context. From the gospels, however, we can at least deduce her importance to the evangelists themselves, and therefore to the small Christian community in the century following their leader's death. It is a prominence more readily attributable to the unequivocally significant part she played as a devoted disciple in the Easter events and as first witness to the resurrection than to the faith and the service she rendered Christ in his lifetime, or to her importance, whatever that might be, within the group of women. That said, judging from the way she is introduced by name first, she seems to have been the most important woman follower, but the fact that the women only appear at the *end* of all the gospel narratives – except Luke's – at the crucifixion and after the burial, would suggest that their relevance and importance, and particularly that of Mary Magdalen herself, is as witnesses, believed or not, to the resurrection, the central tenet of Christianity.



One of the most striking aspects about the gospel accounts is the role given to Christ's female followers as supporters and witnesses during the events of that first Easter. Their faith and tenacity were acknowledged by early Christian commentators, but later cast into the background as new emphases and interpretations increasingly reduced their importance. The true significance of their witness was for the most part ignored, while Mary Magdalen herself was in the late sixth century recreated as an entirely different character to serve the purposes of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This refashioning by the early Church Fathers has distorted our view of Mary Magdalen and the other women; we

need therefore to turn again to the gospels in order to see them more clearly.

Mark tells us that Mary Magdalen was among the women who when Christ was in Galilee 'followed him and *ministered* unto him' (my italics; 15:41; see also Matt. 27:55). 'To minister' is translated from the Greek verb *diakonein*, to serve or to minister. It is also the root of the word 'deacon', which establishes the important function given to the women within the group of both female and male disciples.²² Luke, from whom we also hear that the group has been part of Christ's entourage for some considerable time before the crucifixion (8:1-4), corroborates their ministering role, and amplifies it with the words 'of their own substance' (v.3). This role has often been assumed to have been domestic, as women's lives in Jewish society of the first century AD were circumscribed within their traditional household environment. They carried out such tasks as grinding flour, baking and laundering, feeding children, bed-making and wool-working.²³ Until modern times the role of the women amongst Christ's followers has also been taken to have been merely domestic, and therefore less important, an assumption which has only recently been questioned by scholars. But 'of their own substance' indicates that the women contributed the means to enable the travelling preachers to carry out their work. Whilst women are known to have supported rabbis with money, possessions and food, their participation in the practice of Judaism was negligible.²⁴ Although they were allowed to read the Torah at congregational services, they were forbidden to recite lessons in public in order to 'safeguard the honor of the congregation'.²⁵ In the first century AD, one Rabbi Eliezer was quoted as saying, 'Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman!'²⁶ It was for much the same reason that in the synagogue itself, women were seated apart from the men. They were restricted to a gallery above, unable to wear the phylactery – the small leather box containing verses from the Old Testament attached to the head and arm by leather thongs – or to carry out any liturgical functions. Their exclusion from the priesthood was based on their supposed uncleanness during menstruation, as defined in a Temple ordinance (Leviticus 15), a taboo which was also invoked by the Christian Church and still used until recently as a powerful weapon against the entry of women into ecclesiastical office. A priest, according to Leviticus 21 and 22, was to be clean and holy at all times to offer sacrifice.²⁷ Women were, nonetheless, allowed to be prophetesses, as the Old Testament bears witness, and

even, as in the case of Anna, daughter of Phanuel, celebrated as such in Christ's day (Luke 2:36-8).

It is in this context that Luke's phrase has a special significance, as it suggests that Christ's women followers were central to the group as a whole, in that they donated their own property and income to provide Christ and the male disciples with the means to live as they travelled around the countryside preaching and healing. This, in turn, sheds further light on the women, since their ability to dispose of their money presupposes their financial independence, and possibly their maturity, which is corroborated by the statement that one of the Marys is the 'mother of James', presumably referring to the apostle (Mark 15:40 and 16:1). Even more important is the recent suggestion that, contrary to a general assumption that the women disciples did not preach, and in this way differed from their male counterparts, they may well have done so, since the term 'to follow' as used by Mark to describe those at the crucifixion – 'who also when he was in Galilee followed him, and ministered unto him' (15: 41) – was used technically to imply their full participation, both in belief and in the activities of the travelling preachers, as is borne out by the accounts in Acts and in Paul's letters of the women's involvement.²⁸ Nowhere in the texts is there any indication that Christ regarded the women's contribution as inferior or subsidiary to that of his male disciples. Indeed, it could be argued that the women's contribution both during and after the crucifixion showed greater tenacity of purpose and courage, though not necessarily greater faith, than that of the men who fled. Unlike the eleven male disciples who feared for their own lives, the women disciples followed, were present at the crucifixion, witnessed the burial, discovered the empty tomb and, as true disciples, were rewarded with the first news of the resurrection and, in the case of Mary Magdalen, the first meeting with the risen Christ.

Christ's disinterest in the conventions of his day, and his desire to radically alter certain social *mores*, are made manifest in his treatment of women, not least because they actually formed part of his retinue. Although women might assist rabbis financially, it was certainly uncommon for them to accompany preachers as travelling disciples.²⁹ Christ also welcomed into the group the kind of women whom Luke describes as having been healed of 'evil spirits and infirmities' (8:2-3), those who might otherwise have been regarded as social outcasts. Of the few women in the community who are named, one, Joanna, is or has

been married to Chuza, Herod's steward, and must therefore have left her family and the royal court to follow Christ. It perhaps should be noted that the reference to Joanna's social status, as a married woman, has the effect of further determining that of Mary Magdalen: of the women described, she alone stands out undefined by a designation attaching her to some male as wife, mother or daughter; and she is the only one to be identified by her place of birth. It is therefore as an *independent* woman that she is presented: this implies that she must also have been of some means, to have been able to choose to follow and support Christ.

From the gospel accounts it would appear that the women formed a heterogeneous group, some of whom in conventional Jewish terms might also have been seen as marginalised. That social status and other socio-religious considerations are unimportant to Christ is shown by his rejection of the traditional Jewish ideas about taboo and impurity found in the Old Testament, as in the case of the woman with an issue of blood (Matt. 9:20–2; Luke 8:43–8), whom he cures of her physical ailment, thereby denying any connotation of uncleanness. In the story, she comes from behind him in a crowd to touch the hem of his garment so that she may be healed of the complaint she has had for twelve years, and upon which she has spent all her money. When Christ asks who has touched him, she tremblingly admits to it, giving her reason, and the result, her immediate cure; he tells her to go in peace as her faith has made her whole (Matt. 9:22; Luke 8:48). She is cured by touching him and believing, whereas in Jewish society of the time she would normally have been considered as having polluted the person she touched.³⁰

Mary Magdalen's 'seven devils' to which both Luke and Mark refer were a focus for speculation amongst early Christian commentators; their link with the 'evil spirits and infirmities' ascribed to some of the women may well have led to their identification with the seven deadly sins. It has been suggested that Mary Magdalen was the best known of the women because her 'healing was the most dramatic', as the seven demons may have indicated a 'possession of extraordinary malignity'.³¹ However, nowhere in the New Testament is demoniacal possession regarded as synonymous with sin.³² That Mary Magdalen's condition might have been psychological, that is, seen as madness, rather than moral or sexual, seems never to have entered into the considerations of the early biblical commentators, although it preoccupied her interpreters from the nineteenth century onwards. There is, after all, no implication

in the story of the *man* possessed of devils that his 'unclean spirit' is sexual (Luke 8:26–39), nor in that of the demoniacs whose 'devils' went into the swine which 'ran violently down a steep place into the sea' (Matt. 8:28–34). Nor, indeed, in the story of the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman who was cured of her unclean spirit (Matt. 15:21–8). Mrs Balfour, the noted nineteenth-century Evangelical, was one of the first to deny that Mary Magdalen's malaise was anything other than psychological, and more recently one scholar has written that rather than being in a state of sinfulness, she probably suffered from a 'violent and chronic nervous disorder'.³³

To the ascription to her of the ambiguous 'seven devils' was added the putative disadvantage of her birthplace: Mary Magdalen's second name, *Magdalini* in Greek, signified her belonging to el Mejdal, a prosperous fishing village on the north-west bank of the lake of Galilee, four miles north of Tiberias. Its apparent notoriety in the early centuries of Christianity – it was destroyed in AD 75 because of its infamy and the licentious behaviour of its inhabitants – may have helped later to colour the name and reputation of Mary Magdalen herself.³⁴ (Today, a rusting sign by the lake tells the passing tourist that Magdala, or Migdal, had been a flourishing city at the end of the period of the Second Temple, and was also the birthplace of Mary of Magdala who 'followed and ministered to Jesus'.³⁵)

It might be argued that none of the elements detailed above offers sufficient grounds in itself for proving that Mary Magdalen was a sinner or prostitute. Indeed, these assertions might never have achieved currency – at least not to the extent they did – had she not also been confused with other female characters from the gospels, some of whom are explicitly described as sinners; and one who, from her story, appears to have been a prostitute. To later commentators, and in an ecclesiastical environment which was becoming more entrenched in its attachment to the ideal of celibacy, her femaleness would only have served to lend credence to this misidentification. By such means could the seven devils with which she was possessed assume the social and moral stigma, and the monstrous proportions, of lust and temptation – those vices which early Christian interpreters of Genesis traditionally associated with the Female – that they did. Mary Magdalen, chief female disciple, first apostle and beloved friend of Christ, would become transformed into a penitent whore.

Mary Magdalen was, from the earliest centuries of Christianity, closely linked to and ultimately conflated with two other New Testament figures – a woman described by Luke as a ‘sinner’, and Mary of Bethany, who appears in Luke’s gospel and in John’s account of the Passion. To a lesser extent, she was also associated with the woman from Samaria (John 4:6–42), and the woman taken in adultery (John 8:3–11). Her identification with Luke’s ‘sinner’ and Mary of Bethany was so pervasive that for the greater part of the Christian era the persona created for her by exegetes has overshadowed her biblical role as disciple of Christ and herald of the ‘New Life’. Confusion about the identity of these women dates from at least the third century, but it was not until the end of the sixth century that Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) was to settle the question by declaring that Mary Magdalen, Mary of Bethany and the sinner in Luke were one and the same. A close examination of these figures will show clearly their very different individual character traits, their actions and their significance, and that, in the case of Luke’s sinner and of Mary of Bethany, their only point of convergence with Mary Magdalen is in their association with anointing Christ. How and why the process of conflation took place will be examined in more detail in Chapter Three, but it is necessary to establish the different identities as they appear in the gospels so that they can be recognised when they are subsumed into that of Mary Magdalen.

At the end of Chapter 7, just before Luke introduces Mary Magdalen by name for the first time as a follower of Christ in Chapter 8, he describes the episode where a woman ‘which was a sinner’ (v. 37) comes to seek forgiveness from Christ. The evangelist’s marvellous story-telling powers vividly dramatise the events which take place in the town of Nain early in Christ’s ministry, a scene which has provided us with one of the most enduring images of the mythical Magdalen (see Plate 1):

And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw

it, he spake within himself, saying, this man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner (7:36–9).

To the modern reader, the geography of the events may seem a little strange: the unnamed woman has entered the house, and appears to be behind Christ’s feet and therefore not in his vision, but within the Pharisee’s. The Greek, however, reads that on ‘entering into the house of the Pharisee, [Christ] reclined’, a description which suggests that the household adopted the Graeco-Roman fashion of banqueting, where sandals were left at the door, and where the host and his guests lay on couches to eat.³⁶ The woman would have been able to enter freely as Jewish houses were open; that the Pharisee, named Simon, does not seem surprised by her presence may have been due to the fact that it was not unusual for poor people to enter the houses of rich men in order to beg.³⁷ When the woman comes in, Christ’s back is turned towards her, preventing him from witnessing her arrival. Until the sixteenth century, depictions of the scene almost always showed Christ, the Pharisee and other guests seated in the traditional European fashion,



1 Luke’s sinner at Christ’s feet in the House of Simon the Pharisee. From the Gospel Book of Henry the Lion of c. 1180. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek.

deriving from the Latin text which described them as '[sitting] down to meat'. In such images, Christ appears to ignore the woman's action, whilst she grovels at his feet. In 1648, Nicolas Poussin painted the scene to illustrate the theme of the Sacrament of Penance, in his series of paintings of the *Seven Sacraments* made for the sieur de Chantelou, perfectly portraying the *triclinium* as it appeared in the original Greek of Luke's gospel, where the sinner rushes in behind Christ to pour ointment on his feet, in her act of homage and supplication.³⁸ It is, as we shall see, the act of anointing which opened the way to the confusion about the figures which were conflated to create the image of Mary Magdalen.

The Pharisee's words imply that the woman is notorious as a 'sinner' in the city, and he consequently assumes that Christ too will be aware of her 'evil ways and reputation'.³⁹ The Greek word for 'sinner', *hamartolos*, used here in Luke 7, has various connotations in the New Testament: in a Jewish context, it could be applied to someone who had forfeited his or her proper relationship with God by disobeying the Law; it could also refer to anyone who lived an immoral life, such as a murderer or thief, or who followed a dishonourable profession.⁴⁰ Although the Greek word for a harlot, *porin*, which appears elsewhere in Luke (15:30), is not used in this account, the emphasis given to Luke's phrase 'a sinner in the city', and the word 'sinner' used by the Pharisee, both seem to indicate the latter's conviction that the woman's 'sin' is sexual, that she is a prostitute. That the woman apparently wears her hair loose is another sign of her fallen status, as only prostitutes wore their hair thus in public. Loosening the hair was also one way of disgracing a suspected adulteress;⁴¹ a good Jewess allowed none but her spouse to see her hair unbound, and by loosing it in public she gave grounds for mandatory divorce.⁴² No reference is made to the woman's marital position, but it seems unlikely that she was an adulteress as, had she been so, she would doubtless have been punished by stoning in accordance with Mosaic law.⁴³ At all events, it has always been assumed that the sins of the 'sinner in the city' were those of her sexuality, and as such she was to provide the Church with a useful paradigm.

The woman has come to ask for forgiveness for the sins of her past life; in verse 37 Luke makes it quite clear that he wishes his audience to know that her purpose is to anoint Christ with an expensive ointment which she carries in an alabaster box, an *alabastron*. She weeps on his feet, drying them with her hair as a sign of repentance, and in doing so clearly violates rabbinic codes of seemly behaviour. In kissing Christ's

feet, she also breaks the laws of clean and unclean: defiled by her trade and therefore ritually impure, her touch would pollute others. Christ's acquiescence in the woman's dramatic behaviour proves to the Pharisee what he wishes to know – his guest is not a prophet, otherwise he would have known of her unclean state and would never have allowed such a creature to touch him. Christ then tells him a parable about a creditor and his two debtors, one of whom owes him a large sum and the other a lesser sum, and whom he releases from their obligations. Which debtor, he asks Simon, 'will love him the most?' The Pharisee has to confess reluctantly that the one who is forgiven most will be the one who loves most. Christ then curtly criticises his host for failing to carry out the normal rituals of hospitality towards his guest, those of washing his feet, kissing him in greeting, and anointing him with precious oil, all of which the woman has done, although as acts of intense humility and gratitude rather than as matters of convention.

The parable is intended to illustrate to the Pharisee the way in which Christ himself regards the woman: she is the debtor who owes more, and naturally loves more. Christ accepts the touch of the sinner, and implies that her action is more welcome to him than his host's. Although Simon's attitude is, according to Pharisaic law, correct, the sinner, 'whose sins are indeed many', is forgiven because she loves much, and out of gratitude. The Pharisee, by adhering to the Law strictly, and showing less gratitude and love towards Christ, is compared to his detriment with someone whom he had himself considered a social pariah. Christ tells her that her many sins are forgiven, for she has loved much: a phrase which has often been taken to refer to her sexual past, and not, as Christ's words indicate, to her love for him and to her faith, which are what save her.⁴⁴ He then tells her to go in peace (v. 50).

Because of the beautiful, edifying story of the unnamed sinner, the most pervasive image we have of Mary Magdalen is one of a weeping woman with long loose hair, holding an ointment jar. It may have been because the sinner rushed into the Pharisee's house with her *alabastron* to ask forgiveness for her sins and to anoint Christ in gratitude that she was associated with the female disciple who had seven devils cast from her, and who went to anoint Christ in his death. That the second woman, Mary Magdalen, is first described by Luke immediately after the scene in the Pharisee's house may have given rise to the idea that they were one and the same woman, and the fact that she was also numbered amongst the women 'healed of evil spirits and infirmities'

could have reinforced her identification with a sinner, despite the fact that possession by evil spirits is nowhere else equated with sin. It is because Mary Magdalen went to anoint Christ that she is also associated, as we shall see, with Mary of Bethany.



The gospels tell us that Christ had two friends called Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1). In Luke's brief story, Christ, wearied by his journeys, enters an unnamed village where 'a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word' (vv. 38–9). The setting is domestic, clearly a place Christ has visited before on his travels; and it would appear, since she receives Christ 'into her house', that Martha is the elder sister. She fusses around fulfilling her role as hostess, and is quite understandably incensed when Mary does not help her. According to Jewish custom, a woman's role was to serve: it is therefore the younger sister's duty to assist.⁴⁵ Martha appeals to their guest, asking him to reprimand Mary, but he calms her, at the same time as defending her sister, 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things.' He reminds her that although her own hospitable actions are important, Mary's apparent inaction, her choice of 'that good part', as he describes it, is equally necessary. By this he means that in performing the role of a disciple who listens and learns, Mary has come to understand, and as such is a model for his audience. (The story of Mary and Martha of Bethany was often quoted in medieval sermons as an edifying example to noisy, and particularly female, congregations.) Martha too has her good side, for she and Mary may well have come from the kind of background where servants were employed, and in assuming that role, in preparing a meal for their visitor, she has done it out of love and a desire to serve. In using the metaphor of a disciple sitting at a master's feet, Luke does not necessarily imply that Mary was physically sitting by Christ's feet, but may simply be stating that she is already a disciple. He establishes the fact that Mary has understood Christ's words, and is therefore a follower, something – 'the one thing needful' – which Martha should try to understand and emulate.⁴⁶

The episode of Mary and Martha leads us to John 11:1–45, where we have the climactic story of the raising of Lazarus, the event which precipitates the Passion and death of Christ. For with the miracle of Lazarus' return from the dead, the Pharisees and chief priests know that they can no longer allow Christ to continue his work without his threatening their own authority and their relations with the Roman officials. In this chapter, we hear that a 'certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha', and that 'Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus' (v. 5). Mary and Martha are the central characters, Lazarus' grieving sisters, who send for Christ when their brother is sick. On hearing of his friend's illness, Christ, seemingly inexplicably, tarries for a further two days, so that by the time he arrives, he finds that Lazarus has already been dead for four days. Martha, who again seems to be the elder sister, goes out to meet him on his arrival, and to reproach him for not having come sooner. In the ensuing conversation, she confesses to her belief in the resurrection of the dead, and also in him as Jesus Christ, the son of God, the Messiah. Mary, meanwhile, has remained quietly in the house, presumably because of her great sorrow. Christ sends Martha in to request her presence. When Mary comes out, she too falls at his feet, weeping, reproaching him for allowing their brother to die. On seeing Mary, and the Jews about her who have come to comfort the bereaved sisters, weep, Christ joins in their grief. He then performs the miracle, bidding Lazarus to come forth from the grave, saying to Martha, 'Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?' (see Plate 2). This miracle ensures Christ's death: some of the Jews present go to the Pharisees who, fearing the loss of their nation and their importance, decide that Christ's death is the only way to maintain their authority.

Ambiguities abound in these two stories, not least in the relationship between the two sets of sisters with their identical names. In neither account do they appear to be members of Christ's immediate entourage, but a close relationship seems to exist already, as is evident from both accounts, the major difference being that in John the sisters have a brother called Lazarus. (The Lazarus in Luke [16:20–31] is quite another character.) John's strange emphasis in his description, that 'Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus', has been seen to imply that the relationship between the sisters and Christ was closer than that between Christ and Lazarus, or that they were somehow more important in the



2 The Raising of Lazarus. From the Codex Egberti (c.990), named after Egbert, archbishop of Trier between 977 and 993. Trier, Stadtbibliothek.

eyes of the evangelist. A further dissimilarity, and one which is quite telling, exists between the two Marys – in Luke's story she is already a disciple, but according to John she clearly has doubts in her faith. In Luke's story, it is Mary who has the more important role as believer, but in John, it is Martha, as the recipient of dogma. In spite of these differences, the coincidence of the names has allowed the accounts to be regarded as different episodes in the same women's lives, so that the Mary who sits at Christ's feet has always been known as Mary of Bethany. Early in the third century, Origen (c.185–254), the great biblical scholar and theologian, was to identify Martha and her sister Mary as the active and contemplative forms of the religious life on the basis

of Luke's account. Through the accretion of Luke's Mary to Mary Magdalen by way, as we shall see, of Mary of Bethany, the Magdalen would become the symbol of the contemplative life and be regarded as such throughout the Middle Ages and again, with further emphasis, in the seventeenth century. To the early Christians, the story of the raising of Lazarus – like the Old Testament story of Jonah⁴⁷ – prefigured and represented Christ's own death and resurrection, with the result that it was depicted frequently from the earliest years of Christianity. Forty paintings of the scene survive in the catacombs alone,⁴⁸ and in later images the shrouded figure of Lazarus appears, being bidden from the grave, watched in astonishment by onlookers holding their noses against the terrible stench of death, and with Mary of Bethany and her sister often kneeling at Christ's feet. With the conflation of Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalen, the episode of Lazarus' resurrection was to be included in the medieval and later legends of Mary Magdalen's life, and became part of the extensive imagery which built up around her.

John may have known Luke's story of the unknown sinner, and have applied it to Mary of Bethany for, at the beginning of the Lazarus episode, he tells us very clearly, apparently anticipating his account of the event in his next chapter, that 'It was *that* Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick' (11:2). It has also been suggested that the relevant chapters in John have been transposed, and that John is referring to the Mary of his own story.⁴⁹

Either way, his account compounds the confusion about the various women, and has helped the composite Magdalen on her way. The anointing takes place in John 12:1–8, in the house of Mary and Martha at Bethany, six days before the Passover, where 'they made him a supper', and the resuscitated Lazarus 'was one of them that sat at the table with him' (v.2). Again Martha serves, but in this case does not complain, assuming the role of servant as an act of thanksgiving and love. Then Mary takes a 'pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly', and anoints Christ's feet, and wipes them with her hair: 'and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment' (v.3) (see Plate 3). This scented imagery, when applied to Mary Magdalen in later allegorical commentaries, contributed to the aura of femininity and eroticism which was to envelop her.

Among the disciples is Judas Iscariot, later to betray Christ to the

chief priests, who criticises Mary for wasting the ointment rather than selling it for 'three hundred pence' which could have been given to the poor. John, far from seeing this as evidence of Judas' charitable ideals, regards this episode – the loss to Judas of three hundred pence – as the reason why he sells Christ to the Jews. Here, Mary as anointer may also take on the role of servant: her act, performed in homage (as in Christ's washing of the feet at the Last Supper, anointing the feet was symbolic for anointing the whole body⁵⁰), is perhaps also performed in thanksgiving for the restoration of her brother's life, and even as an apology for her lack of faith at the moment of his death.⁵¹ Mary not only anoints Christ's feet but also, in common only with the sinner in Luke 7, wipes them with her hair. This action may also be related to the custom of masters wiping or drying their hands on the heads or hair of their servants, which again implies that Mary has adopted the role of servant.⁵² Christ then replies, 'Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this' (v. 7), thus establishing Mary of Bethany's prophetic and prescient role: in anointing him in his lifetime, she witnesses her knowledge of his death and resurrection. She is, moreover, the only disciple to know of Christ's soteriological, or redemptive, death before it takes place.⁵³

Pouring balm has an important role in the gospels and since it is performed by women on each occasion, it has led to the theory that the same woman carries out the ritual. Echoes of the proleptic anointing for Christ's burial are to be found in two further episodes, in Mark 14:3–9 and Matthew 26:6–13. Both take place two days before the feast of the Passover, at the height of the machinations of the chief priests and scribes in their attempt to trap Christ. In both accounts Christ is in Bethany, in the house of Simon the Leper, and the woman who anoints him is unnamed. Matthew 26 records: 'There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat.' The costliness of the balm is echoed in the 'spikenard very precious' of Mark 14:3, and in Mary of Bethany's 'very costly' 'pound of ointment of spikenard' in John 12. The disciples criticise the woman, and again, as in the case of Mary of Bethany, Christ defends her action, pointing to the fact that she has done it in anticipation of his death. In anointing Christ's head, the woman, in both Mark and Matthew, acknowledges and celebrates Christ's royal and priestly nature. (According to both evangelists, this incident acts as a catalyst for Judas to seek out the chief priests, offering to deliver Christ up to



3 Mary, sister of Lazarus, wipes Christ's feet with her hair while Judas criticises her. From the Codex Egberti (c. 990). Trier, Stadtbibliothek.

them in return for money.) These anointings, helped by the fact that three took place in the houses of men called Simon (Luke 7:36–50; Mark 14:3–9; Matt. 26:6–13), were to be the principle by which later exegetes, commenting on the various characters who appeared in the New Testament, were to conflate the women into a single figure (see Chapter Three). Whether there was one anointing or two, and whether it was carried out by one woman or different women, is a problem which has teased, and still teases, the imaginations of scholars and commentators; the theory of two anointings by one woman, later identified as Mary of Magdala, sister of Martha and Lazarus, was called by exegetes the theory of unity; its antithesis, the theory of plurality, claimed that two, if not three, different women anointed Christ, and distinguished Mary Magdalen from Mary of Bethany, Luke's sinner and the anointings in Bethany. From the time of Gregory the Great until 1969, when changes were made to the Roman calendar, the western Church tended to treat

the three as one, celebrating them as Mary Magdalen on 22 July. This despite the fact that in the sixteenth century Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples ruffled the until-then untroubled waters of consensus by daring to suggest that Mary Magdalen was a separate character from Mary of Bethany and Luke's sinner, and was duly excommunicated for his pains.⁵⁴ The eastern Church, however, followed St John Chrysostom in distinguishing the two different Marys of Bethany and Magdala, and Luke's sinner, and celebrates their feasts on separate days.⁵⁵

The purposes of the women's anointing of Christ are as various as their characters: Luke's sinner anoints Christ out of gratitude and love; Mary of Bethany out of homage and foreknowledge of his death (and possible thanks for Lazarus' return to life), as do the unnamed women of Matthew 26 and Mark 14; and Mary Magdalen goes to seek Christ in order to embalm him after his death. Mary Magdalen's role as an active, courageous follower of Christ differentiates her from Luke's sinner, whose dramatic act is inconsistent with the gospel character of Mary Magdalen. Although Mary of Bethany is also a disciple, she symbolises the essentially contemplative aspect of the spiritual life and, as the sister of Lazarus, has a mystical premonition of Christ's death, whereas the Magdalen mourns the dead Christ, and seeks 'the living among the dead' in order to anoint him. To the extent that Mary Magdalen was subsequently identified with these figures, she also inherited their characteristics in her composite form, so that through the centuries she was to become the symbol of the contemplative life and model of repentance, while the significance of her actual role in the New Testament as disciple and primary witness to the resurrection receded into the background.

The links between Mary Magdalen and both the woman of Samaria and the woman taken in adultery are even more tenuous than those between the Magdalen and Luke's sinner and Mary of Bethany. They owe their origins, however, to the conflated creature which Mary of Magdala became from the sixth century on – the repentant whore. For both the Samaritan woman and the adulteress epitomise aspects of the female sexuality which the rabbis and, as we shall see, the early Church Fathers so feared and despised.⁵⁶

In John 4, Christ, wearied with his travels, rests by a well in Samaria (see Plate 4). There he asks a woman drawing water for something to drink. His request surprises her since 'the Jews have no dealings with

the Samaritans' (v.9).⁵⁷ Then Christ speaks to her about the healing waters of everlasting life, and the woman questions him, showing her receptivity to his teaching. The beautiful imagery of water often appears in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, where wells and springs symbolise the life given by God, and in the New Testament symbolise the life given by divine Wisdom and by the Law, and also signify the spirit. Christ tells the woman to call her husband; she replies that she has none. He then says he knows of her five husbands, and that the man she is presently with is not her legal husband. She is astonished, and confesses her belief in the Messiah, and departs to tell her people in the city, wondering if the man she is speaking with is indeed the Christ (vv.16–29). The disciples who have been away buying food return, amazed to see their master talking with a woman, and one who is a foreigner. When she comes back, the woman is accompanied by many



4 Christ and the Samaritan Woman. From the Codex Egberti (c.990). Trier, Stadtbibliothek.

of the townspeople who through her agency have come to believe that Christ is the Messiah they have been awaiting (v.42). In early Christian commentaries on the story, the woman of Samaria was to be regarded as the first apostle to the Gentiles for her role in bringing truth to the unconverted.⁵⁸ The story also illustrates Christ's radical views concerning women: not only was the woman not a Jew, but her social status, living with a man out of wedlock, meant that in Jewish eyes she was unclean. As with Luke's sinner, Christ makes no judgement on her moral position, and this, together with the fact that Jewish men and, in particular, rabbis were not allowed to speak with women in public places, demonstrates not only his acceptance of women, of all kinds, but also that he considered women equal with men, regardless of their race or creed.⁵⁹ And once again, as in the case of the Lazarus episode, he has used a woman as a vehicle in discussing a tenet of faith; indeed it is to her that he reveals himself as the Messiah for the first time (in John's gospel), 'I that speak unto thee am [the Messiah]' (v.26). Despite her very different role, the woman of Samaria has been confused with Mary Magdalen, solely on the basis of her own admitted sexual sins, and those imputed to Mary Magdalen, an association which appears in some medieval texts, and is still to be found today.

In John 8:3, the scribes and Pharisees bring a woman before Christ whilst he is teaching in the temple.⁶⁰ Apparently caught in the act of committing adultery, she is to be stoned to death, the punishment meted out under Mosaic law to adulterous married women. Eager to trap Christ into denying the teachings of the Torah, or Law, the scribes and Pharisees challenge him, asking whether he regards stoning as the correct penalty for such a crime. Christ's response is to bend down and write something in the sand, implying that he wishes to dissociate himself from the situation (see Plate 5). The Jews persist, and he finally replies: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her' – by which he neither contradicts Mosaic law nor encroaches upon Roman law. Here again, he passes no judgement on the woman, but rather questions the motives of her accusers. The Jews, understanding his meaning, and 'being convicted by their own conscience', go away, leaving Christ alone with the woman. On his questioning her, she tells him that no-one has condemned her (v.11), and his reply is that neither does he, and that she should 'go and sin no more'. What the episode most sharply brings into focus are the motives of the Jews and the



5 Christ and the Adulteress. From the Codex Egberti (c.990). Trier, Stadtbibliothek.

witnesses, rather than the woman's adultery *per se*. Christ himself does not stand in judgement on the woman; instead, he rejects her accusers' methods as being hypocritical and discriminatory in a social context where a woman's seduction, or sexual sin, was regarded as far more heinous than a man's lust. The woman's association with Mary Magdalen, remote though it is, centres on the fallenness of the mythical Magdalen and their sistership in sexual crime.

Mary Magdalen stands out from among the group of women in the gospel texts for her role at Easter. This has been noted in recent studies about the origins of the early Church, and in particular those concerning the position of women within it, which have led to a re-evaluation of their roles and functions. Until quite recently, these women followers have often been relegated to the status of mere hangers-on and helpers at a subsidiary level, even though, as we have seen, Christ is shown throughout his ministry as positive and egalitarian in his attitude

towards women, in having them as friends and followers, talking with them freely, making them recipients of what was later to become Christian dogma, and assigning them roles in parables and stories. His attitude towards women constitutes, as one commentator has observed, 'a highly original and significant feature of his life and teaching'.⁶¹ Just how radical his approach was can be evinced from the gospels themselves, in the reactions of the Pharisees, and of the male disciples who 'wondered among themselves' when they saw Christ talking to the foreigner and social outcast, the woman of Samaria. That he was open to all comers is manifest in the ragged assortment of followers which gathered around him, and included sinners and publicans, prostitutes, and the sick and poor, all marginalised in one way or another by society. Christ accepted all of these, while simultaneously rejecting those stereotypes in which women were treated as scapegoats for the ills of society. His approach is epitomised in his debate with the chief priests and elders in the temple where reference is made once more to that most degraded and despised of creatures, the prostitute, who, together with the tax collector, another ignoble, will, through repentance, enter into heaven before the righteous (Matt. 21:23, 31-2). (The phrase 'Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you' (v.31) was constantly quoted by medieval preachers to precede sermons and homilies about Mary Magdalen.) He also criticises the conventional idea of women as temptresses, shifting the blame onto the beholder, rather than onto the object beheld, as in his sermon on the mount (Matt. 5:28) where, contrary to rabbinical sources which warned men against women's blandishments, he states clearly that anyone looking lustfully on a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Christ's overturning of conventional Jewish and Hellenistic values, at least within his own group of followers, was to be reversed within only a few generations of his death, while the rabbinical prejudices concerning the nature and role of women were absorbed into Christian thinking, and have lasted into the twentieth century.

The gospels show clearly that Christ regarded his women followers as disciples in their own right, capable of receiving unique revelation, and worthy of being valid witnesses of his death, burial and resurrection. Yet, at the same time, there are intimations in the narratives that a more conventional view will prevail. Although Mary Magdalen is mentioned in the four canonical gospels as the primary witness to the resurrection,

and, in John's gospel, is sent by Christ to tell the disciples what she has seen, thereby becoming the first apostle, this crucial role is already diminished in Luke by the emphasis he places on his account of the women's witness: the women 'told these things unto the eleven, and all the rest . . . And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not' (24:9-11). In fact, Peter is prompted to look for himself, possibly through curiosity, and possibly because of conventional Jewish male prejudice against the women's witness (v.12). Luke's gospel ends in a climax which totally eclipses the women's testimony: here Christ appears to Peter (v.34), and the evangelist entirely excludes any reference to his appearance to the female disciples; instead he lays emphasis on the final appearance of Christ to the 'eleven' (vv.36-53). And in the first account of Christ's appearances after the resurrection to be written, in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 15:5-8, Mary Magdalen's meeting with him in the garden is entirely omitted.⁶²



When the gospel Mary Magdalen is distinguished from the other New Testament figures who have over the centuries coloured her persona, it is possible to recognise the extraordinary role which was assigned to her and to the other women disciples during the Paschal events. Yet her disappearance and transformation remain to be explained. There is still the question of why it was to her that Christ appeared after his resurrection, and why, if a fundamental part of Christian *kerygma* (Greek, preaching) is based on the witness of Mary Magdalen and the other women, its importance and meaning has been played down in the Christian tradition. Perhaps more interesting still is that, for almost fourteen hundred years, she has primarily been represented as a repentant whore. Finally, there is the question of why the New Testament tradition of the women as disciples is maintained and emphasised in apocryphal texts from the late first century onwards, all but a few of which have vanished, and which have been regarded by the Church as heretical.

The few New Testament references to Mary Magdalen yield a character both enigmatic and powerful; the limited biographical evidence with which we are presented creates a tangible personality and yet, at the

same time, allows of interpretation. Her role at Easter and her closeness to Christ in John's gospel are tantalising but obscure elements which beg further exploration. Her very mysteriousness has inspired elaborate legends, which have taken her to places such as Rome and Ephesus, and to a hermit-like existence in the south of France. Her metamorphosis into a composite character who represents womankind in the Christian tradition takes us beyond the gospel figure, and is the subject of this book.