

## **“Christ Had a Wife? Mary Magdalene as Hypersexual Icon”**

### *Introduction: Mary Magdalene as Iconized Figure*

Throughout history, the identity of Mary Magdalene has remained a mystery. The very mention of her name today evokes mystical legends and boundless images of a woman whose true identity we will never know. Her body has functioned in the public sphere anywhere from a whore to Jesus Christ’s potential wife. Although not much is widely known about Mary Magdalene, her identity (especially the dichotomy of whore-wife) has been a topic of heated debate. For centuries, she has been and continues to be depicted in the public sphere as many contested entities: a sexual object of temptation or sin, a prostitute, the lover and possible wife of Jesus Christ, a revered apostle and forgotten saint, and a symbol of feminine power, among many others. With the recent release of The Da Vinci Code in addition to countless other popular novels and films, more research and interest has been generated regarding Mary Magdalene’s role in the Catholic Church and in overall contemporary society. This revival of the scrutinization of Mary Magdalene as a public figure has made her more of a hyperembodied figure in the public sphere than ever before. Her sexuality, identity, and status within the Church have made her one of the most talked about figures in all of history.

In the Bible, there are approximately thirteen references to her in the New Testament and even within the Old Testament, Mary Magdalene's identity is oftentimes interchanged with that of other prominent women named Mary (Ehrman 2004). There are so many differing accounts of her that in fact

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... yet when we look for this creature in the New Testament, we look for her in vain (Haskins, 1993: 3).

In many old religious texts written by members of the Catholic Church, Mary Magdalene has indeed been traditionally represented as a prostitute, this sexual form of temptation and original sin. If seemingly so little is known about her true identity, why is Mary Magdalene still such a contested and controversial figure? Why has she been called a whore and a prostitute?

In this essay, I will explore how the body of Mary Magdalene has been represented as a publicly visible sexual object within the public sphere. Specifically, I will produce an analysis of how Mary Magdalene's body has become a hyperembodied figure in the public sphere by multiple parties. The knowledge I hope to produce will show how her body has been and continues to be used as a publicly visible site for sex and gender issues, focusing on how power comes into play as well. In order to understand how her body has been represented in different ways, I will compare ancient religious textual references with more recent, contemporary ones. The essay will be structured and developed around the following important concepts: hyperembodiment, the idea of the

actual vs. prosthetic body and ‘marked’ bodies, and the concept of women’s role in the public sphere. These concepts should prove useful in the interpretation of Mary Magdalene’s bodily illustrations and will allow us to gain a better understanding of how her body has been constructed into a public icon.

***Hyperembodiment: How Mary Magdalene Became ‘Outside Herself’ through Religious and Contemporary Discourses***

According to Lauren Berlant in her article, *National Brands/National Body*, hyperembodiment is a term that refers to the act of turning a body into something greater than a simple, physical object. It represents the act of turning the body into a symbol that transgresses the boundary between public and private, where “the body itself becomes the object of public consumption, protected by the distance between the image, performance, and actual form” (Berlant, 201). The body is therefore treated as an object, powerless in public but afforded shelter by its very objectivity.

In the case of Mary Magdalene, her body became hyperembodied multiple times; first by the Church and again later through more contemporary representations. In old traditional canonical texts, Mary Magdalene’s body was represented largely as a prostitute and a whore. In Susan Haskins’s book, Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor, she argues that Mary Magdalene

...became the redeemed whore and Christianity’s model of repentance, a manageable, controllable figure and effective weapon and instrument of propaganda...Mary Magdalen’s sin... [represented] the rejection of what the Church most feared and abhorred, incarnated in the flesh of the woman, [in essence] her sexuality (Haskins, 1993: 97).

According to Haskins, Catholic texts construed Mary Magdalene as primarily a sexual deviant, a vessel that served to be used at the Church's expense as an example of what was evil and sinful on Earth, which would be punished if not repented. Mary Magdalene became more than just a character in the history of Catholicism. Instead, we see Mary Magdalene's body becoming hyperembodied outside of a normal human body where it is iconized and publicly recognizable, even consumed, by the general public. By turning into a hyperembodied icon, Mary no longer possessed ownership of her body. Instead, her own individual identity was 'cast off' and instead replaced with the Catholic Church's alternative of a whore and prostitute. Her body developed into an object that the Church used to further preserve Catholic traditions. Mary Magdalene could no longer take pleasure in a sense of privacy; her previously private life suddenly became fodder for public discourse. Her body was thus 'shielded and protected' by Catholicism and thus functioned as a site for public consumption and public example. Her body was essentially purchased by the Catholic Church and delivered as a consumer product to the public. She became "a woman who...enjoys no prophylactic private sphere, no space safe from performance or imitation" (Berlant, 1993: 197). In essence, her body became a public icon for how one can be saved from sin by the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Although there seems to be a lot of negative images circulating in regards to Mary Magdalene's identity, more contemporary interpretations today show her as a more progressive and powerful figure. Especially in recent years, the quest to find the true identity of Mary Magdalene has developed into wide-scale media frenzy where her body has been a spectacle for the public to view, consider, and judge. According to many scholars and media sources, Mary Magdalene is now being represented not simply as a

whore or repentant sinner, but rather as a woman of beauty, embracing her feminine power, even the possible wife of Jesus Christ. Her body has been given novel representations ascribed with meanings with far better intentions than ones prescribed by the Catholic Church in earlier texts. In an online article published shortly after the release of The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown, the author explains that

...the combination of catholic rethinking and Gnostic revelations have reanimated wilder Magdalene speculations, like that of a Jesus-Magdalene marriage. ("No other biblical figure," Schaberg notes, "has had such a vivid and bizarre postbiblical life.")

The idea that Magdalene herself was the Holy Grail--the human receptacle for Jesus' blood line--popped up in a 1986 best seller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which inspired Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. When Brown said recently, "Mary Magdalene is a historical figure whose time has come," he meant a figure with a lot of mythic filagree (Van Biema pars. 15-16).

The fact that so little is truly known about Mary Magdalene's identity has caused many to wonder and question what more *could* be known. The mystery that Mary Magdalene creates inspired Dan Brown to take a very modern, some say far-fetched, idea of Mary Magdalene as the Holy Grail and use it as a source for yet more inspiration and controversy. Brown's use of Mary Magdalene's body hyperembodies her once again, except this time, we see her as an autonomous free-thinking individual with power and influence over Jesus Christ. In the novel, Brown's character Sir Leigh Teabing brings to life the idea of Mary Magdalene as a powerful figure and mother of Christ's child:

The threat Mary Magdalene posed to the men of the early Church was potentially ruinous. Not only was she the woman to whom Jesus had assigned the task of founding the Church, but she also had physical proof that the Church's newly proclaimed *deity* had spawned a mortal bloodline. ..Mary Magdalene was the womb that carried His royal lineage. The Priory of Sion, to this day, still worships Mary Magdalene as the Goddess, the Holy Grail, the Rose, and the Divine Mother (254-255).

Brown's image of Mary Magdalene as Christ's potential wife and divine human being simultaneously frees her body from Catholic representation while allowing her body to fall back into that traditional role of wife. Nonetheless, The Da Vinci Code spawns even more theories regarding Mary Magdalene's identity and role within the Church. Was she really mistakenly assigned the label "prostitute?" Should she be looked upon with respect and adoration? Did she really carry Christ's child? Is there another side to the story of Christianity? Although we may never know the answers to these questions, one thing is clear. With the dawn of more contemporary textual references, Mary Magdalene's image no longer remains just a prostitute. Her body has now been "re-embodied"; it has been reassigned and re-ascribed with new identities, more powerful, influential, and groundbreaking ones at that:

The number of books, movies, and TV documentaries on Mary Magdalene has exploded in the past fifteen years...it seems Mary's story is once again a popular place for thinking about religion, the church, women and men, and the body. Mary is a cultural icon, whose story continues to change as it meets different needs, comes under different control, is enacted and marketed and appropriated in different ways.

For many people, Mary Magdalene has come to stand for women's agency and vision. Research on Mary Magdalene has created new understandings of Christian history that inform the ongoing struggle for equality in church and society. However, her legends also represent women throughout history who have been distorted, ignored, appropriated, and denied authority. Mary's story casts light on the way society stigmatizes wo/men's sexuality and fears wo/men's intelligence (Schaberg, 2006: 152-3).

It seems as though modern popular culture is just bursting with fresh interpretations of Mary Magdalene, using "the publicity system that had used her, reclaiming her stolen 'womanhood' from it, and attacking her attackers" (Gamson, 2001: 171). Films such as

Jesus Christ, Superstar, The Last Temptation of Christ, The Book of Life, and The Passion of the Christ have depicted her as Christ's possible wife, a beautiful woman comfortable with her sexuality, an enigmatic and independent female. (Bellevie 2005). As Susan Haskins points out, "Mary Magdalen continues to travel with the times, once again a prototype for women, but this time in her own guise, and as the symbol of women's right to resume their place and role in the Church" (Haskins, 1993: 397). Despite this liberation with her new labels of Christ's wife, a powerful political figure, and beautiful woman, her body is in fact no longer protected. In essence, she has "lost" her iconicity due to her "re-embodiment." In today's texts, she gains back a body and is subject to public consumption in both negative and encouraging ways. As Christ's wife, she simultaneously becomes a scandalous, tempting woman *and* a domesticated figure confined to the traditional notion of marriage. As a political figure, she serves as an example of how women can have a voice in the public sphere and disseminate their own ideas and beliefs in a serious way. Finally, as a beautiful woman, Mary Magdalene embodies now a sexuality that can be seen as more empowering than the sexuality she was ascribed with by the Church. This explosion of new cultural texts allows Mary Magdalene to regain possession of her body with these new alternative identities. The re-hyperembodiment here causes us to see that perhaps Mary Magdalene wasn't just a prostitute and a whore, but quite possibly a strong, intelligent, free-thinking female with power and presence.

***The 'Actual' vs. 'Prosthetic' Body: The Taking Away and Reassigning of Mary Magdalene's Identity***

In Michael Warner's article, *The Mass Public and the Mass Subject*, he addresses the topic of the 'actual' vs. 'prosthetic' body. He argues that the actual body is more of a physical body whereas a prosthetic body "does not reduce to or express the given body... [it is] a disembodied public subject that [we] can imagine as parallel to [a] private person...the public, prosthetic body takes abuse for the private person" (Warner, 1992: 381).

Using Warner's theory, we can see that Mary Magdalene's actual body became invisible and replaced by the prosthetic body through the work of the Catholic Church. Her prosthetic body became more publicly visible while simultaneously nullifying her individual ownership over her actual body, thus converting her into an iconic spectacle.

Reduced to her sexuality, she is experienced as dangerous to those men who want to and do resist her temptation, and who don't. Blamed for provoking their sexual desire, enflaming their lust, [her body] is often the target of male sexual aggression and hostility, moral outrage and condemnation (Schaberg, 2002: 106).

Mary Magdalene's prosthetic body served as an extension and conveyer of the Church's beliefs and traditions. By being reduced to a mere iconic figure and especially a dangerous prostitute, the Catholic Church was able to use her body at its own disposal: "An object of legitimized voyeurism, Mary Magdalene's eroticism could express pious emotionalism, or pious pornography, or secular pornography" (Schaberg, 2002: 107).

Mary Magdalene's prosthetic body became a recognizable symbol for prostitutes everywhere; corrupt women (or perhaps just women in general) could identify with her and in theory recognize their immoral, sinful nature. The Catholic Church discourse effectively used Mary's prosthetic body to represent how women (and society in general) could redeem their sins through the forgiveness of Christ. Mary became essentially the



'poster child' for Christianity, the perfect example of how one could recover from sin and be converted into a pious and committed Catholic. Her prosthetic body took abuse for her private body, both allowing the Church to represent her to their advantage while oddly providing her actual body shelter from public humiliation. Since her body no longer belonged to her, Mary Magdalene became a symbol of Catholicism's teachings and shielded her from being publicly ridiculed as a private person. Her iconic role as remorseful sinner assigned by the Church allowed for Mary Magdalene to retain an identity that was protected but yet forcefully and demeaningly assigned to her. The iconicity of Mary Magdalene's body served the purposes of the Church but also took away from the possibilities of power that she could have had within important religious texts.

In his essay, Michael Warner also introduces the idea of 'marked' vs. 'unmarked' bodies. An unmarked body is one that is afforded automatic privilege in public discourse whereas a marked body is one that is allowed little to no access. According to his theory, unmarked bodies go largely unnoticed in public discourse. They are given more privilege and power than other minoritized, marked subjects, such as women.

Neither in gender nor in race nor in class nor in sexualities is it possible to treat different particulars as having merely...difference. Differences in such realms already come coded as the difference between the unmarked and the marked, the universalized and the particular...The bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal (Warner, 1992: 383).

Since the bourgeois public sphere affords more opportunity to the unmarked bodies (e.g. white, male, and middle class.) for chances to speak in public discourse, other voices are

left out and abstracted. Mary Magdalene's body is considered in this case to be a 'marked' body, where she did not have the privilege in engaging in public discourse. Her body did not coincide with the characteristics required in order to participate in community discussions. Her private body was marked by its non-conformity (e.g. being a woman), stolen, and subsequently converted into a protected icon and symbol of the Church. Her marked body became an emblem for minorities and sinners, prostitutes and whores. Within many canonical texts, Mary Magdalene's body is a clear site for political contestation and deliberate gender manipulation.

However, in recent years, the re-marking of Mary Magdalene's body as a new form of woman, that of a powerful and influential female, has in effect disassociated her from those previously negative images. The marking of her body nowadays is an emancipatory one, giving her more of a voice in the public sphere.

It is perhaps time to recognize the true feminine model, one which, according to the gospels, embodies strength, courage and independence, all feminine qualities which the Church has attempted to suppress by subordinating women to the model it has created, the passive virgin and mother (Haskins, 1993: 393).

Haskins contends that with more contemporary textual references to Mary Magdalene, her body can now manage new identities, ones that are beneficial and inspirational to women and minorities everywhere. Her actual body and prosthetic body become united once again, collapsed into one. "[The Church's] style of femininity tends toward the invisible or the "abstract," which involves a wish to cast off the visible body, [whereas now] the other, [more contemporary style of discourse tends] toward the erotic, the sensational, which hyperemphasizes the visual frame" (Berlant, 1993: 174). Her once

invisible and prosthetic body is now given back its particular features of a woman, but in an optimistic, perhaps even more public light. “She surely stands for us as an idealized example of wo/men’s ability to break free of their social and religious roles and expectations” (Schaberg, 2006: 78). Even with so much negative discourse surrounding her body, Mary Magdalene, through the help of contemporary texts, becomes a marked body *with privilege*. In art, novels, films, and other forms of representation, Mary Magdalene embodies her sexuality and owns her body. It is rare to see such happenings in today’s society, where although women are more included in public discussions, Mary Magdalene is given a stronger, more unique opportunity to take back what she originally lost: her body, her sexuality, her femininity. “The true Mary Magdalen has much to offer when freed from the restrictions which gender bias has imposed upon her. Symbolism has done her an injustice; modern scholarship has made restitution possible” (Haskins, 1993: 399-400). Today, she no longer is depressingly marked by her particulars of being a woman; instead, she is now marked in a constructive way by her ability to serve as a strong role model and free-thinking independent figure.

### ***Women’s Role in the Public Sphere: Mary Magdalene’s Progression from Exclusion to Inclusion***

Throughout history, women have not been graced with having the opportunity to express their opinions in the public sphere. In many ancient historical texts and even today, women have not been given much voice and importance; they were (and sometimes still are) limited and confined to the household and expected to stay there. In Iris Marion Young’s article, “Impartiality and the Civic Public,” she argues that

...women must be excluded from the public realm of citizenship because they are the caretakers of affectivity, desire, and the body...Even within the domestic realm, moreover, women must be dominated. Their dangerous, heterogeneous sexuality must be ... confined to marriage...These chaste, enclosed women can then be the proper caretakers of men's desire, by tempering its potentially disruptive impulses through moral education (Young, 1987: 432).

Women were (and in some cases, still are) assigned the role of caretaker for men. They serve as the embodiment of men's desire and emotions, which traditionally have been considered as improper and inappropriate for discussion within the public realm. In many Catholic Church texts, Mary Magdalene was confined to the role of whore and prostitute because the possibility of her having a voice in a male-dominated society would not be appropriate; it might even cause controversy. She embodied the fear of unbounded female sexuality which quickly needed to be concealed. Her persona was created to subvert this eroticism and the possibility that she may have been a significant force in the context of Catholicism. Michael Warner notes that "public discussion has always been an unequally available resource" (382), where the public sphere almost always excluded the voices of women and minorities. Mary Magdalene's strong position in the Church would challenge the traditional notions of womanhood and femininity, therefore putting the male-dominated public sphere in danger of being overtaken. A woman in power would mean the beginning of the end for the Catholic Church. As Jane Schaberg argues in her book, Mary Magdalene Understood, Mary Magdalene existed

...in a textual world of male-centered language, theology, and ideology...men [were considered] as perfect and strong and women as imperfect and weak...women characters are a minority, and men do most

of the talking...In these texts, as in all societies, women sometimes speak in favor of their own oppression” (Schaberg, 2006: 72).

The possibility that women could have roles outside of the home or private places was considered a threat. In many Catholic texts, “femaleness is something to be overcome or changed” (Schaberg, 2006: 73). Even the possibility of her role as Christ’s wife subjugates her once again into the traditional notion of marriage. For Mary Magdalene, her voice was suppressed and replaced by one created for her by the Catholic Church. Her figure was spoken for by the male members of the Church, depicting her as a sexual figure in danger of corruption and in desperate need of salvation:

In some versions [of Mary Magdalene’s legends], she preaches and teaches; but what she says – if anything is given for her to say—simply repeats what men say. She becomes represented by and represents prostitutes; but both she and they are degraded and blamed... the presentation is of male views only, with the sensual and the spiritual and the intellectual split apart...she remains punishable by the memory of that from which she was “reformed” (Schaberg, 2006: 63).

According to Schaberg, Mary Magdalene was in theory “punished” and given the identity of prostitute because she was a woman. The fact that she did not possess a male body in effect gave the Church reason to disregard her importance and possible power status within the Church. Her important testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ also played into her exclusion within the public sphere and subsequent negative image. “In all four Christian Testament Gospels, Mary Magdalene is a –perhaps the – primary witness to the resurrection, the fundamental data of the early Christian faith” (Schaberg, 2006: 32).

Because Mary Magdalene was documented as a primary witness of Jesus’ resurrection (and the possibility that she may have been the only one), she became an instant menace

for the Church. More importantly, the fact that she was a woman pushed the Church to suppress or manipulate her identity in order to better serve its functions and goals, as Catholicism was on the rise. In a male-dominated society, a woman simply could not be given the same status and power as men. The positive marking of her body as a woman caused Mary Magdalene to not be awarded the title of primary witness to Christ's resurrection. Stefan Lovgren argues too that "Beginning in the fifth century, Catholic leaders began referring to Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, perhaps because they wanted to undermine the capacity of women to appeal to Mary Magdalene for legitimacy and leadership" (Lovgren, pars. 19-22). Women's ideas within the ancient world were sharply opposed, even considered heretical at times. Therefore, many early canonical texts have taken to representing Mary Magdalene in rather harsh and extremely demeaning ways, including the infamous prostitute and whore identity.

Despite the fact that women have often been exempt from public discourse and allocated little to no space, recently women have been gaining more territory. In terms of Mary Magdalene, ever since Dr. Carl Reinhardt's 1896 discovery of an ancient Coptic book, there is now evidence that Mary had her own Gospel (Bellevie, 2005: 190). This is encouraging because it suggests that if Mary Magdalene held an influential role in society and within the Church, perhaps others did too. She encourages us to consider that there were other women and minorities who, like herself, existed and held important positions, even if they were not given a proper voice in the public sphere.

Apparently written in the second century by a Christian sect, [the gospel of Mary] is the only existing early Christian gospel written in the name of a woman. [It] is generally accepted as authentic, even by the Church... "This gospel changes the understanding of the tradition of Mary Magdalene and the Church," said Karen King, whose recent book The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle is the

first English-language study of the gospel of Mary. “It argues that Mary understood Jesus’ teachings better than the other disciples and was able to preach them,” King said. (Lovgren, 2004: pars. 6, 8).

The curiosity surrounding Mary Magdalene’s true identity has caused such a stir that now, other textual references to her are being unearthed, including this new Gospel. Even though it is generally accepted that the gospel was genuine, there still exists much controversy around it, therefore allowing space for additional contestation within the public sphere. As Karen King, a history professor at Harvard University's Divinity School and one of the world's leading authorities on the subject of Mary Magdalene, noted above, the mere existence of the Gospel of Mary gives us another voice to consider that empowers women and regards them as vital figures in the development and structure of Catholic scripture. The Gospel of Mary, albeit highly controversial, introduces a whole new aspect into the debate surrounding Mary Magdalene. It allows us to create alternative possibilities in regards to women’s roles and importance within ancient society and the Church.

The Gospel of Mary is not alone; there are countless other references to Mary Magdalene today that depict her in a new, encouraging manner.

Over the last decade or so, Mary Magdalene has also become the heroine of a steady stream of semi-mystical novels and short stories...Mary Magdalen, with her famous, or infamous, sexuality has come to represent the liberated woman of the late twentieth century, and her myth has been recreated in that light: she is a rebel, a traveler, an independent woman; she might even have had a child by Christ (Haskins, 1993: 383).

Thanks to recent discoveries and further inquiry, Mary Magdalene is now awarded more authoritative identities. Novels and stories alike have honored her by assigning new roles

for her, mostly in her favor. In particular, The Da Vinci Code and other textual references have represented her in less traditional and more empowering ways, such as Christ's wife, beautiful woman, sovereign political figure, and independent thinker. Through these depictions, she gains new visibility and is able to allow those who are still underrepresented in the public sphere to capitalize on her newfound power and presence in the public sphere.

***Conclusion: Mary Magdalene's Transformation from Prostitute to Sexual Diva***

While Mary Magdalene has retained the identity of a prostitute for many centuries, it is only recently now that her status as a public figure has changed significantly. After extensive research and analysis, it becomes obvious that the Catholic Church has been a powerful and domineering force in structuring and determining how we come to regard Mary Magdalene in the public sphere. As Jane Schaberg puts it, "Through centuries of Christian literature she has been ignored, labeled, replaced, conflated, diminished, and openly opposed. But she has always, also, been utilized, unsilenced, rediscovered, and resurrected, living again in new legends, ideals, and fantasies" (Schaberg, 2006: 9). Instead of being considered solely as an icon of the Catholic Church and used to represent a redeemed sinner, her body has been 're-embodied' and given back to her; causing her to both lose her protected iconicity but more importantly allowing the chance for other, powerful possibilities of women's roles in the public sphere to open up. Oftentimes, when an important iconized figure loses their protected status, it can result in humiliation. By converting the body from protected icon to re-exposed figure, the person is afforded no extra protection or shield; instead, they are



left to our most severe judgments and criticism. Their prosthetic, iconic bodies no longer serve as safety barriers from our comments and harassment; their actual bodies are now left to pick up the pieces and fend for themselves. However, in the case of Mary Magdalene, the reassertion of her body seems to be a more affirmative, progressive experience. The recreation and re-embodiment of Mary Magdalene's body from prostitute to powerful and beautiful woman opens up possibilities for women's participation in the public sphere today. Mary Magdalene is no longer a whore. She's a sexy, sassy, beautiful, *and* intelligent woman. Her body serves now as an encouraging beacon of hope that underrepresented figures will no longer be excluded from public discourse as they once were, but given the chance to voice their opinions with confidence and conviction.

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