Chapter 9

’Tis Pity She’s a Whore

The Revision of Mary Magdalene

Though the information the bible presents concerning Mary Magdalene is thin, artists and religious leaders have long been fascinated by her. In her review of research on Mary Magdalene since 1975, Pamela Thimmes writes, “Apart from the other Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus, no other woman character in the Christian Scriptures has received as much attention. What makes this interest so extraordinary is that Mary Magdalene is a character found in all of the canonical gospels, but nowhere else in the New Testament. However, she is a character in 11 gnostic/apocryphal works, where sometimes she is a major character” (193). Galen Knutson observes, “However, if a count is made more narrowly of the passion, death and resurrection narratives, only Peter who denied Jesus and Judas who betrayed Jesus are mentioned more frequently” (207). However, that attention has not always been positive; in fact, for most of the past two thousand years, Mary has been portrayed as a prostitute, a sinner who was in need of redemption, rather than as the first witness to Jesus’ resurrection. Although there have been gains made in the critical evaluation of Mary Magdalene, Mary Rose D’Angelo is too optimistic when she writes, “Feminist interpretation has debunked the image of the fallen and repentant Magdalene, substituting the figure of Mary Magdalene as the intrepid and faithful disciple of Jesus, an apostle with the twelve and a witness to the resurrection” (105). In fiction, rather than in the theological realm, Mary has largely moved from an apostle in the early church to a redeemed prostitute to the main cause of Jesus’ sexual temptation, depending on whose version of the story one reads. Contemporary authors retell Jesus’ story and use Mary Magdalene to reinforce themes of redemption or temptation in their works through how they present her: whether or not she was a prostitute, how she lived her life
with Jesus, and whether or not she had any role in the spreading of the story of the resurrection.

Most authors focus on the Mary Magdalene of legend, the prostitute. As Thimmes writes, “Based on the strategy that sex sells, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1969) and Nikos Kazantzakis’ books, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1960, and the subsequent film in 1988) and Report to Greco (1965) built their fictionalized portrayals of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute and the lover of Jesus from conflated and erroneous biblical interpretations, popular legends and Christian art” (194). Through her, they show the sexual temptation that Jesus faces (and gives into in Saramago’s book, though it does not show that action as negative), but they also use her to show the idea of redemption and Jesus’ acceptance of those whom society does not accept. Even Ricci’s book, which does not present Mary as a prostitute, still makes her an outcast.1

It is not surprising, given the number of legends and the teaching of the early church concerning Mary Magdalene, that almost all writers who deal with her draw on her mythical past as a prostitute. She had been seen as an equal to the apostles—the “apostle to the apostles,”2 in fact—but that changed on September 21, 591, when Pope Gregory presented a homily where he stated, “We believe that this woman whom Luke calls a female sinner, whom John calls Mary, is the same Mary from whom Mark says seven demons were cast out” (qtd. in Jansen 32–33).3 Gregory connects Mary Magdalene to Mary of Bethany, but he also connects her to the woman mentioned in Luke

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1Only a writer such as Reynolds Price whose slim gospel seems to simply tell the gospel story of the Bible, has Mary as the minor character she is in the gospel accounts. He shows her having the seven demons cast out of her, at the cross when Jesus is crucified, and at the empty tomb where Jesus appears to her, but nothing more.

2Thimmes writes, “it is significant to note that Hippolytus, bishop of Rome (c. 170–235) . . . was the first to grant to Mary Magdalene the title *Apostola Apostolorum* (apostle to the apostles). In his commentary on *Canticle of Canticles* he associates her with the bride and with the Bride of Christ, a symbol of the Church” (220–21). According to Lucy Winkett, “The ancient tradition of Mary of Magdala as apostola apostolorum (‘apostle of the apostles’) is used today by Pope John Paul II” (26).

3There was evidence of this change coming before Gregory preached his homily. Thimmes writes, “The origins of the ‘invented’ Mary Magdalene traditions are so elusive and obscure that a source cannot be posited, although some suggest that the writings of Ephraim the Syrian (306–373 CE) provide a clue to the origins of this ruse, for he identifies the Mary Magdalene of Lk. 8.1–3 with the unnamed woman of Lk. 7.36–50” (221).
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who anoints Jesus’ feet with perfume.\footnote{Lisa Bellan-Boyer argues that Gregory did this "to conflate all the women who supported and participated in the life and ministry of Jesus into as few women as possible, making the many Marys into one honorable Mary and one Mary who bore the mark of shame. Mary, the mother of Jesus, like her son, become less and less Jewish and more and more divinized. She became increasingly separated from other women, 'blessed among women' so as to become ostracized from them, or they from her. One can never be as good as the Blessed Virgin Mary, no matter how unassailable one's bodily purity may be or how selfless a mother. You could be 'as good' as Mary Magdalene, though" (55–57). What Bellan-Boyer does not point out in this assertion, though, is why Gregory would have conflated Mary of Bethany, certainly one of the "good" Marys with Mary Magdalene, who became the representative of the "bad" Marys.} It is not explicitly stated that this woman is a prostitute, but it is clearly implied:

Although the Greek word for a harlot, \textit{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 wears her hair loose is another sign of her fallen status, as only prostitutes wore their hair thus in public. (Haskins 18)

The influence Gregory has on the later interpretation of Mary is difficult to overstate: “Gregory’s influence in this matter can be seen in later centuries when his sermons were highly praised in the eight [sic] and ninth centuries (they were more popular than Augustine’s), and his composite Mary Magdalene rode into the Middle Ages, where the legends grew and the myth endured” (Thimmes 221). And so, “by the 10th century Mary Magdalene the holy harlot was fully formed. Abbot Odo at Cluny Abbey wrote that after an existence devoted to ‘sensual pleasures’ Mary Magdalene helps, by a reformed life and zealous ministrations to the daily needs of Jesus, to rescue females from the condemnation Eve brought upon women at the beginning” (Winkett 21–22).

There are a few other contributions to the longevity of this idea. Magdala, Mary’s hometown and from whence she derives her name, was known for its immorality, especially relating to sexuality; rabbis, in fact, blamed the fall of the city on the inhabitants’ behavior (Blair 288). A purported autobiography
of Mary, of which there were many, now referred to as the *vita eremitca*, shows Mary going to Egypt to live be a hermit for thirty years. The true Mary of Egypt, whose story is combined with Mary Magdalene’s in this work, had been a prostitute before she is converted (Jansen 37–38).

Mary is also loosely connected to the woman caught in adultery in John 8. Haskins writes, “The links between Mary Magdalen [sic] 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” (26). The Catholic Church officially held Gregory’s position until 1969 (Jansen 35), and it is clear that this idea is still held, though no longer officially. The lingering effects still exist, as Lucy Winkett points out: “Mary Magdalene has given her name to homes for fallen women, to the Magdalen laundries; popular as workhouses for, among others, women pregnant with the children of priests (with all the attendant imagery of sin and stain). She has given her name to a charity which currently exists to assist women who have had or who are having relationships with priests who have committed themselves to celibacy” (20). Galen Knutson adds to this list, “This mythic image of a sainted ‘sinner’ even led to a pornographic movement in nineteenth-century England, where poor women were manipulated into posing for ‘Magdalene photos’” (206).

It is understandable, also, why people might cling to the idea of Mary as a prostitute, even outside of the stories and legends that have accumulated. It is an appealing picture because a Mary who is a sinner is much more human than a Mary who does nothing more than support Jesus’ ministry, witness his resurrection, and spread the gospel like the rest of the apostles. In the same way that Peter’s denial humanizes him, Mary’s role as a prostitute humanizes her. Karen King points out the metaphorical importance of these legends: “Yet the role of repentant

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*The Da Vinci Code* has Leigh Teabing argue that the church purposefully labeled Mary as a prostitute to discredit her: “Magdalene was no such thing [a prostitute]. That unfortunate misconception is the legacy of a smear campaign launched by the early Church. The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (244).
prostitute is symbolically appealing in its own right, and not just because the other options were closed off. It has proven itself to be a much more evocative figure than that of Mary as Jesus’ wife or lover. The image of Mary as the redeemed sinner has nourished a deep empathy that resonates with our human imperfection, frailty, and mortality. A fallen redeemer has enormous power to redeem” (153). While it is easy to understand why the myth of Mary Magdalene has had such staying power, modern scholarship has recently tried to rescue or re-vision Mary, focusing on her role as a witness to the resurrection and attempting to correct the legends that have accrued around her. However, reviewing film versions of the gospel stories, Jane Schaberg states quite clearly how this attempt has failed: “So much for modern scholarship which tries to undo the conflation between the Christian Testament figure and the nameless women of other stories—the conflation which became the essential aspect of her image” (35). Other than Ricci, all of the authors under consideration continue this conflation and turn Mary into a prostitute.

Burgess’ presentation of Mary seems quite simple, as he, like most of the other authors, presents her as a prostitute; he does not, however, equate her with the woman in John 8 who is accused of adultery. His novel also ignores the main scriptural reference to Mary’s past that shows that Jesus had cast out seven demons from her. Burgess’ book does provide an interesting twist to Mary’s character. Despite the fact that she is clearly breaking Jewish law by engaging in prostitution, she refuses to work on the Sabbath, no matter what her madam thinks. Thus, she is presented as someone who seems to do what she must to survive but who does not willingly disobey the Jewish laws. It is this observance of the law, despite her profession, that lays the

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6Many authors seem to ignore this fact, which is odd, considering it is one of the few clear references to Mary in the Bible. Perhaps it is our scientific world’s discomfort with the idea of demon possession that makes authors skip past this information. Margaret George, though, in *Mary Called Magdalene*, actually devotes almost the first third of her book to describing how Mary becomes possessed with the seven demons and how she unsuccessfully tries to rid herself of them. It seems that there has been a wide variety of opinions as to what the demons were, as well, often reflecting the interpretation of Mary at that particular time. Winkett says, “Each age has tried to explain them: Medieval theologians interpreted them as the seven deadly sins, with emphasis on lust. Martin Luther interpreted them as the seven devils. Modern theologians interpret them as convulsions, similar to the man who lived among the tombs, a form of disability. Others write of a goddess cult contemporary with Jesus, which had seven steps of initiation” (23).
groundwork for Mary’s interest in Jesus even before she encounters him. This presentation also further humanizes Mary, as her attempt at observing orthodoxy in a matter that many modern readers (though not Orthodox Jews) would consider minor is in direct contradiction of what could be a major transgression.

When one of her customers tells her of Jesus, calling him “friend” because of the way Jesus speaks of the forgiveness of sins, Mary decides to seek him. Jesus is speaking of the day of judgment, and a Pharisee points to Mary and asks if she will be included in the wheat (the holy people) who will enter paradise. Jesus protects Mary as he responds to his interrogator, though Jesus seems to address his comment to Mary, “Have no fear, daughter. For the sins of the body are quickly purged. But the fire is a strong one that will burn out the sin in the soul” (177). It is understandable, then, why Mary would want to follow someone who clearly accepts her as she is. She has been trying to follow the law but needs to make a living; Jesus shows Mary that she is closer to the truth than she could have ever imagined and that the law may be less relevant than the intentions of her heart.

Thus, Mary joins Jesus and follows him, though Jesus makes her and the other women travel separately. He reminds her that his disciples are merely men who are trying to resist temptation. Jesus, however, seems not to be tempted by Mary in the least, treating her more as a kindly father would. Through this separation, the book reminds the reader of the role of women in Jewish society at the time but does not seem to critique it. Instead, the situation is merely presented as a fact, an inconvenience that must be dealt with and nothing more.

Kazantzakis’ novel also depicts Mary Magdalene as a prostitute; however, unlike Burgess’, it presents Jesus as the reason behind Mary’s employment.7 When Jesus is twenty years old, he travels to Cana to choose a wife. He sees Mary holding a rose, and he knows immediately that he wants her, but “ten claws nailed themselves into his head and two frenzied wings beat above

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7 It might be argued that God is the reason behind Mary’s choice of careers, as he is behind Jesus’ reaction. However, Mary is unaware of God’s role at this time, as is Jesus. Thus, Mary sees Jesus as the cause, and Jesus feels guilty for causing it, though he certainly had no control over his actions then.
him, tightly covering his temples. He shrieked and fell down on his face, frothing at the mouth” (26). God will not allow Jesus to marry, it seems. It is unclear why this event drives Mary to prostitution, but it seems perhaps to be a way for Mary to retaliate against Jesus. In the same way in this novel that Jesus seems to rebel against God’s calling him to be the Messiah by building crosses, Mary rebels against the typical role for women in Jewish society by going to an extreme.

Simeon, Mary’s father, does not know that Jesus is the cause of Mary’s decision; he merely knows that “one day, after she returned from a festival in Cana, she wept and declared she wished to kill herself, and afterward she burst into fits of laughter, painted her cheeks, donned all her jewelry and began to walk to the streets” (38). Not only is she rebelling against Jesus by her action she is rebelling against her family and its expectations, as well. It has done nothing to deserve this, though, and the members of her family suffer needlessly because of her decision.

Jesus goes to Mary to ask her forgiveness and to try to save her from her behavior, but she does not want him to save her. She believes that she will find salvation in “the mud: shame, filth, this bed, this body of mine, covered as it is with bites and smeared with the whole world’s drivel, sweat and slime!” (90). However, when Jesus leaves, she weeps, and it is clear she still loves him. She does not follow him as she believes that he will come back for her. He does come back, and this time he saves not just her soul, but her body as well.

She had practiced her trade on the Sabbath, which angered many of the Zealots. Barabbas and others went to her house to stone her. Here, Kazantzakis takes the story of the woman caught in adultery from John 8 and adapts it to fit Mary Magdalene. Barabbas and men and women from Magdala and Capernaum are preparing to stone Mary when Jesus comes through the crowd and physically restrains Barabbas’ arm, asking him, “Barabbas . . . have you never disobeyed one of God’s commandments? In your whole life have you never stolen, murdered, committed adultery or told a lie?” (176). From this point on, Mary ceases to be a prostitute, and she follows Jesus until the end. As in Burgess’ novel, it is easy to see how such acceptance would appeal to
someone in Mary’s position. Both novels by Burgess and Kazantzakis show Jesus accepting Mary publicly, not behind closed doors. This acceptance gives her a public standing that a prostitute (or even a woman) could not have imagined in the society of the time.

Mary plays a very minor role in Mailer’s novel. It does draw on the gospel account of Jesus’ casting seven demons out of Mary, as the reason for her support of his ministry (Luke 8:1–2). In the gospels, the reader does not know when she encounters Jesus and when he cast the demons out, and there are no explanations for how she had the money to support his ministry. Mailer’s novel does provide an explanation for the demons, and it also presents her as a prostitute: “The bones of her face were delicate, and her hair flowed down her back. With art, she had painted her eyes. She was gentle even as her mouth was proud and foolish” (183). Jesus refers to her as a harlot, and he remembers scriptures that condemn prostitution. Mary’s role in Mailer’s novel seems to be nothing more than a means to highlight attributes of Jesus. Since Jesus thinks of scriptures that condemn prostitution when he sees Mary, but moves beyond those scriptures to accept her, the novel poses an implicit criticism of those who cannot move beyond such attitudes. However, this remains implied, and it does not help with the characterization of Mary much at all.

Like The Last Temptation of Christ, The Gospel According to the Son takes Mary beyond being a common prostitute and turns her into the woman caught in adultery who is brought before Jesus for judgment. Jesus first thinks of many scriptures which condemn such behavior, but he ultimately lets her go with one of his most famous sayings: “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone” (184). However, he does not send her away until he has cast the demons out of her. Again, this scene seems to be included more to demonstrate the development of Jesus’ character than Mary’s. Jesus struggles with Mary’s role in society, yet he forgives her and casts the demons out of her, and that is all.

Mary Magdalene in The Gospel According to Jesus Christ, also a prostitute, is allowed more range than is evident in the other novels. Here her house is on the outskirts of town because of the lack of official acceptance for what
she does, though enough men come to visit her to show that there was plenty of unofficial acceptance. Jesus stops to visit her because he has a sore foot, and he needs some medical attention. Jesus seems a bit naive initially, as he is not even certain that she’s a prostitute:

The woman reeks of perfume, but Jesus, who may be innocent, has learned certain facts of life by watching the mating of goats and rams, he also has enough common sense to know that just because a woman uses perfume, it does not necessarily mean she is a whore. A whore should smell of the men she lies with, just as the goatherd smells of goat and the fishermen of fish, but who knows, perhaps these women perfume themselves heavily because they want to conceal, disguise, or even forget the odor of a man’s body. (233)

After taking care of Jesus’ foot, Mary invites Jesus to bed. Jesus initially resists by quoting verses concerning lust, but he ends up quoting the Song of Solomon: “Your thighs are like jewels, your navel is like a round goblet filled with scented wine, your belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies, your breasts are like two fawns that are the twins of a gazelle” (236). They live together for the next week with Mary instructing Jesus in the bedroom.

After a week, when his foot has had time to heal, Jesus leaves Mary to return home. When his family does not believe that he has seen God, he returns to Mary to see if she will believe him. She has given up prostitution and promised herself to him alone, and she begins to travel with him, even though it seems she already knows who he is. When they are talking one night, Mary tells him that she will be at his side whenever she is needed. Jesus responds, “Who am I to deserve this?” Mary answers, “Don’t you know who you are?” (240). She seems able to intuit how important he is and his impending death, but she chooses to accompany him anyway.

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8Though this book goes farther than any of the others in granting Jesus and Mary an open, sexual relationship, even he does not suggest marriage. Oddly enough, one author notes that “Martin Luther believed that Jesus and Magdalene were married, as did Mormon patriarch Brigham Young” (Van Biema).
Even though Saramago is the most unorthodox of all the authors, his book does hint at Mary’s ultimate role as the “apostle to the apostles.” Since she recognizes who Jesus is even before he does, it makes sense that she might also understand the possibility for resurrection as well as, if not better than, any of the other disciples. While this book does not take the story to the resurrection, this portrayal of Mary is certainly more consistent with the gospels than many of the others, even though its author is an atheist.

It is interesting to note that other authors who write about Mary Magdalene, even when they are ultimately trying to rescue her reputation, still present her as a prostitute. For example, Marianne Fredriksson’s *According to Mary Magdalene* is clearly trying to show Mary as a positive character and as a foil to the rest of the disciples. Twice in the opening twenty pages, the novel shows Mary remembering parts of her life in language almost verbatim from the gnostic *Gospel of Mary*. In this section, the apostles ask Mary Magdalene to “Give [them] the words [Jesus] spoke to [her] and which [they] do not know” (3). Throughout the work, the novel refers to Mary’s (and women’s) role in Jesus’ ministry. When Paul visits her after Jesus’ death to find out what she knows, she tells him, “We were equal numbers of men and women disciples, and women constantly surrounded him. Right up until Golgotha, when most of his apostles deserted him. Around the cross we stood, his mother, Susanna, Salome, Mary, Clopas’ wife, and me” (98).

However, Mary also sees that men have controlled women’s lives and attempt to control religion. Thinking back to her mother’s life, she remembers her mother’s smile, only because it was so rare. What she saw more often was the pain of her mother’s life: “But the clearest pictures were of her mother’s sorrow. And her exhaustion, her body sucked dry from childbirth, bowed, its beauty gone, and the clenched hand pressed to her back to ease the pain. It was slavery, she thought” (26). Mary sees this same control of women taking root in the new religion of Christianity. Speaking

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9In *The Wild Girl*, Michèle Roberts also quotes from both the gnostic *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Philip*, though more to talk about Peter than about Mary Magdalene. However, the novel does reference the *Gospel of Philip* by having disciples call Mary “the companion of the Saviour” (49).
to the priestess at the temple of Isis, she says, “Nothing will change. . . . The apostles are Jews, rooted in ancient prejudices that woman has no soul and man is the only human being.” The priestess replies, “It’s not just the Jews. The ancient goddess lost power all over our world. People free themselves from agriculture, from childbirth, and from the flow of life” (86–87).

Margaret George’s *Mary Called Magdalene* also uses Mary to illustrate the limitations women have in a patriarchal society. When she is younger, she realizes that “girls could not attend the school, since they could have no official place in religion.” In fact, her father quotes a rabbinical statement, “It would be better to see the Torah burnt than to hear its words upon the lips of women” (8). And, when it comes to selecting a husband, her friend Keziah says, “We are women. . . . In the end, we have so few choices” (80). However, what truly angers Mary about Jewish law is the description of women as unclean. After the birth of her daughter, she is not allowed to touch her for sixty-six days because of her unclean state. Though Joel lightly jokes about it in public and allows her to break the law in private, for Mary, “it was a painful reminder that in every way women were considered so much lower than men” (122). This book’s choice of the Hebrew law to represent the repression of women leads into Jesus’ questioning of the law later. In light of Mary’s feelings about the hindrances placed on women, not just by her society, but also by her religion, it makes sense that Jesus’ questioning of that law would appeal to her and encourage her to leave her family to follow him.

Since Fredriksson, like George, creates a Mary Magdalene who is obviously hemmed in by a culture that does not give women much freedom, why, then, would a woman who points out the importance of Mary Magdalene and women, in general, depict a Mary who is a prostitute?10 One reason might be to show society’s role in women’s limited choices of profession. When Mary was little, she often hears her father pray, “Praise

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10It is especially interesting that Fredriksson draws on the legend of Mary as a prostitute, just as she uses the idea that Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary, which is biblical, to show how myths arise about Jesus. Peter tells Mary that the disciples believes that about her, but she tells Paul, “You see how the myths already flourished even when he was alive. I was not possessed by any demons. I was happy because of the spring, the flowering fields” (109).
be to Thee, oh Lord, King of the Universe, for not creating me a woman” (17). She notices that her father, her mother’s brother, and the neighbors all act as if she does not exist. She understands “that it was a curse to be born a girl, and in addition the firstborn” (18). When she arrives at Euphrosyne’s brothel, she finds out about Miriam, who obviously does not want to be a prostitute; however, “she was raped by a soldier and gave birth to a child in secret. Her parents put the child out and drove Miriam away” (37). It is no surprise when Miriam later commits suicide.

However, Mary willingly chooses to become a prostitute, unlike Miriam, and it is this contrast that the novel draws between Mary and many women of her time. Mary does not become a prostitute because she has to. Even though she leaves home because she thinks she is a bastard and even though she believes that Leonidas is dead, she never feels any compulsion to turn to prostitution as a way to make a living. In fact, Euphrosyne has no plans for her to become a prostitute. What changes is that Mary has sex with Quintus, even though it’s clear that she does not love him (but she thinks she does). She tells Euphrosyne what she plans to do, and Euphrosyne tries to prevent her, but Mary “liked men, their purposeful striving to achieve pleasure, and their bodies nearly always so tense and hard. She learned a lot and always had the courage to show how she wanted it—she was both inventive and demanding” (78).

Although Mary turns to a life of prostitution in Fredriksson’s novel, it is for very different reasons than what the male authors present. Kazantzakis’ novel shows Jesus (or God) as the reason behind Mary’s choice of professions, while the other books show Mary as a prostitute almost solely to provide Jesus with a temptation. Mary in According to Mary Magdalene tempts Jesus, but not with sex (they do have sex, many times, it seems); instead, it is along the lines of Kazantzakis’ Mary, who tempts Jesus with a normal life: “After she had cleared and washed the dishes, she realized why he had spoken about his mother as a great temptation. It was not only the devouring mother threatening him—it was her, too, the woman who loved him” (150). However, this novel’s presentation shares characteristics with Saramago’s Mary who provides Jesus with physical pleasure and becomes
one of his closest disciples, and from Kazantzakis’ portrayal of Mary as a temptation for Jesus to live a normal life.

Michèle Roberts’ *The Wild Girl* also uses Mary to raise the issues of the role of women at that time, but Mary is forced into prostitution to illustrate the low standing of women. Roberts is clearly aware that the portrayal of Mary as a prostitute is not accurate, as she writes in an author’s note:

> Medieval and later tradition in art, hagiography, legends, poems and plays collapses the figure of Mary Magdalene, briefly mentioned in the Gospels, into that of Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and also into that of the sinful woman who anoints Christ. Although many modern scholars distinguish separate figures in the Gospel accounts, I have chosen to follow the tradition of centuries, the spinning of stories around a composite character. (9)

As with Fredriksson, the choice to continue this mingling of stories of Marys is conscious, though for a different reason. Where Fredriksson wants to show a Mary who chooses to be a prostitute because she enjoys men, thus giving her a choice in her future, Roberts wants to show the low status of women in Jewish society at that time and thus present the limited options women had, especially physical relationships. Early in the novel, Roberts shows Mary’s struggle with her position in society: “My brother Lazarus was encouraged to study the ancient books of our religion, but not I. I learned about our faith through the words of men. God was mediated to me, as to my older sister Martha, through the words of my father and brother in the confines of our home, and, outside, through the authority of our village priests and rulers. I sulked under this triple yoke, but for a long time expressed no rebellion” (12–13). This subordination ultimately forces her to leave her home in search of a free life, but, along the way, she is raped. When she returns home after her father’s death, knowing no man will marry her as she now is, she turns to prostitution to help earn money for the family: “Then it became obvious that I could employ my newly acquired identity as a means of augmenting the meagre income of our family, so long as I remained discreet and careful in my
manner of doing so and avoided any possibility of open scandal” (28). Because she lives in a society where men can frequent prostitutes and still be able to marry, but women cannot marry after they have been raped or had sex, Mary has to embrace her fallen status in order to earn money for the family.

Ricci’s book, however, differs greatly from the others under consideration, for it does not present Mary as either a prostitute or some sort of sexual temptation to Jesus. Writes a reviewer, “The Mary Magdalene painted here has neither the immorality nor the madness sometimes attributed to her. The thin, plain daughter of a Jewish fish merchant and his Syrian wife, she accounts herself fortunate not to be bound to someone in marriage” (Wald-Hopkins EE-01). Mary does still have an interest in Jesus beyond his teachings. She loves Jesus, but in a motherly, protective sort of way, certainly mixed with romantic love, as Simon of Gergesa notes:

But I would sooner have put myself in the way of any of Jesus’s men than in hers, for all that a good wind would have knocked her down. All sorts of stories about her went through the camp, that she was the one who’d poisoned the pregnant girl we’d heard about, out of jealousy, or that she tried to put enmity between Jesus and those she didn’t like. But it was just that she wanted to possess the man—you saw that in how she never let him from her sight, and protected him, and was the one who stood guard to see he had his moment of peace. (365)

Mary is definitely not a sexual temptress as she describes herself as plain, and she has no interest in marriage, even after her father works to find some men willing to marry her. Not only is she not attractive, she is young and innocent, about as far from a sexual temptress as she can be. She is the most naïve of Ricci’s four narrators and the only one who believes that Jesus can actually heal merely by touching people: “... I could see that his healing was no mere magic or enchantment but a sort of power that flowed through him in his very touch, and that surely must have sprung from the Lord. Sometimes he need only lay his palm on a sick child’s brow for the fever to lift, or move his hands over a crippled leg for the bones to find their place,
and the lame to walk again” (146). It is not surprising that this Mary is one of the two women who go to the tomb and claim to find it empty, for this book seeks to show how believers manipulate genuine events into the events presented in the gospels.

Christopher Moore’s Lamb also does not make Maggie (Mary Magdalene) into a prostitute; however, it draws on almost all the other legends about Mary that lead to her reputation as a prostitute. Moore, in effect follows the example of Pope Gregory who combined the various Marys from the Bible into one woman. Maggie has a sister Martha and a brother Simon (who is called Lazarus) whom Joshua (Jesus) raises from the dead. When it becomes clear to Maggie that Joshua is going to Jerusalem where he and his followers know he will be killed, she goes out and buys an alabaster box containing ointment that she uses to anoint his feet, just as the woman in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 does. Thus is combined the sister of Martha and Lazarus with the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet with Mary Magdalene, yet she is not a prostitute here. In the Afterword to Lamb, Moore writes,

Although I’ve glossed over many events that are chronicled in the Gospels, there are numerous elements which many people think are there, which simply are not. One is that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. She’s always portrayed that way in movies, but it doesn’t ever say that she is in the Bible. She is mentioned by name eleven times in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Luke, Mark). Most references to her talk about her preparation for the burial of Jesus, and then being the first witness of his resurrection. It also says that Jesus cured her of evil spirits. No whore references, period. There are ‘Marys’ without surnames all over the Gospels, and some of them, I suspect, may refer to the Magdalene, specifically the Mary who, soon before his death, anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment and wipes them with her hair, certainly one of the most tender moments in the Gospels and the primary basis for my rendering of Maggie’s character. (442)
Moore seems to have no knowledge of Pope Gregory’s combination of Marys; instead, he seems to have come to this conclusion on his own. He believes that the confusion of Mary as a prostitute comes from the early church: “We know from letters that many of the leaders of the early church were women, but in first-century Israel, a woman who struck out on her own without a husband was not only considered uppity, but was likely referred to as a harlot (as was a woman who was divorced). That could be where the myth originated” (442). Though there is no scholarly evidence to support Moore’s hypothesis, it makes a good deal of sense, given the low status of women in that society.

In Mary Called Magdalene, Margaret George also draws on this idea in her presentation of Mary. George does not portray Mary as a prostitute, nor does she even have any of her characters clearly state that she is, but she does have a couple of characters point out that Mary might be perceived as one.11 While Jesus is being tempted in the wilderness, some of his followers begin to discuss whether or not they will stay with him. Nathanael, a student of the Law, tells Mary that she can’t stay: “You can’t join him anyway. . . . You’re a woman. You can’t be a disciple. There is no such thing as a woman disciple. Did you see any with John? And even if there were, you’re married. You can’t leave your family. Then you’d surely be stoned, as a prostitute. Jesus couldn’t have meant it when he invited you. He just meant it in some symbolic sense” (213). Of course, Nathanael is wrong; Jesus did mean it in a literal sense. However, he is right in that the popular interpretation of Mary’s actions will be that she is a prostitute.12

Unlike George, after all of his research Moore changes one of the few facts we know about Mary from the gospels. When Joshua casts seven demons out of Maggie, it is nothing more than a ruse to get her away from her husband Jakan, who is a leader of the Pharisees and, thus, will now divorce her. It is

11While it is clear that members of Mary’s family feel that she has behaved as a whore with the male disciples, and possibly Jesus, as well, they never call her a prostitute. Her father Nathan even says, “She’s a whore! . . . People will account her one” (258). The implication is that whether or not she had sex with the disciples, people will assume she does. However, if she does have sex with the disciples, she does so for free, which would make her a whore, not a prostitute.

12And, like Moore, George argues in her afterword that “there is no scriptural or historical basis for the ideas that she was ever a prostitute, the sinful woman who washed Jesus’s feet with her hair, or the same person as Mary of Bethany” (628).
not that Moore’s Joshua could not do such a thing, but Moore seems to want to present his Mary Magdalene as someone who is strong and who would never be possessed with demons in the first place. Instead, from the first time Maggie is introduced, she is different from the other Jewish girls. She wants to be a fisherman. Thus, it is not surprising that he also does not make her a prostitute.

Though the Mary in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* is a prostitute, she is, like Mary in *Lamb*, a strong woman; she is seen as a positive influence on Jesus’ life, at least by his family, but she also affects one of Jesus’ miracles. In fact, Harold Bloom writes that Jesus’ “principal relationship in his life, as Saramago sees it and tells it, is to neither of his fathers, nor to the devil, nor to Mary his mother, but to the whore Mary Magdalene” (164). In meeting Jesus’ mother at the wedding at Cana, she attempts to work out a peace among the family members. She even earns the respect of Jesus’ mother, who tells her, “You will always have my blessing and gratitude for all the good you have done my son Jesus,” and when Mary Magdalene kisses her shoulder out of respect, “Mary threw her arms around her and held her tight, and there they remained for some moments, embracing each other in silence before returning to the kitchen” (290). Mary Magdalene seems to have some type of healing effect on Jesus that his mother notices because on his first night home after having spent a week with Mary Magdalene his nightmares cease, and he never experiences them again.

Saramago’s Mary Magdalene, in contrast, prevents Jesus from performing one of his greatest miracles. Saramago’s novel shows Mary in keeping with the biblical Mary whose sister is Martha and whose brother is Lazarus. Lazarus has some sort of breathing problem, choking as if his heart were about to stop beating, and he turns pale. When Jesus and Mary are visiting her family, Jesus heals Lazarus while they are sitting outside one night: “You are cured, Jesus murmured softly, taking him by the hand. And Lazarus felt the sickness drain from his body like murky water absorbed by the sun. His breathing became easier, his pulse stronger, and he asked nervously, puzzled by what was happening, What’s going on, his voice hoarse with alarm, Who are you?” (348).
However, when Jesus and his disciples are gone to Jerusalem, Lazarus dies, but the novel does not say from what Lazarus died, leaving unclear, then, whether or not Jesus’ healing powers were powerful enough or whether Lazarus died of something unrelated to his previous illness. Regardless, just as Jesus is preparing to raise Lazarus from the dead, Mary stops him: “. . . but at the very last minute Mary Magdalene placed a hand on Jesus’ shoulder and said, No one has committed so much sin in his life that he deserves to die twice” (362). This Mary clearly passes beyond a sexual tempter to one who might influence which miracles Jesus performs and which ones he does not.

_testament_ differs from the other books that present Mary as a prostitute, drawing on recent scholarship that has attempted to reclaim Mary. This approach comes from the biblical scholarship that actually begins at about the same time that Kazantzakis’ writes. Pamela Thimmes notes,

> Coinciding with the publication of Kazantzakis’s novels and Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s opera were the early years of feminism, the Second Vatican Council in Catholicism and the development and use of new biblical methods in the Academy. The convergence of these religious, cultural, political and academic factors as well as an injection of new scholars and pastors—and for the first time, significant numbers of women—suggested that both the Academy and the Church would revisit the biblical texts, looking for texts about women, investigating women characters and so on. (194)

Since _Testament_’s Mary is not a prostitute, Ricci must find another way to create a character who is an outcast. Not only is she a woman who travels with Jesus, but she also has a mother who is not Jewish. Her mother seems to be descended from one of the many tribes that occupied what was, in Jesus’ time, Israel before the arrival of the Jews: “Her own people, she said, had lived on these lands since the world was created, and had got on very well long before the Jews arrived with their one true God” (125). Mary becomes so desperate to rid herself and Jesus of Judas that she turns to her mother’s
religion and attempts to invoke a pagan curse against him. It seems to be working, but when she returns to the man who performed the curse for her, she finds him near death; in the end, she brings Jesus to him to heal him, and the man, Simon the Canaanite, becomes one of Jesus’ disciples. She is forgiven by Jesus for what she has done in trying to hurt Judas, and she realizes that “it was as if after much struggle and despair [she] had suddenly reached the pinnacle of some high mountain, from where everything was visible” (176), and she believes that this sequence of events was all part of God’s plan to lead Simon to Jesus. Of course, this scene does not merely show her as an outsider, not completely Jewish; it also reveals her naïveté and her complete faith in Jesus as part of God’s plan.

Perhaps because Mary is forgiven, or maybe because she has taken Jesus’ teachings to heart, she later treats Judas with immense kindness while they are traveling. They make a long, hard trek to Jericho, and Judas’ feet have become blistered. Judas sits down to massage his feet “when Mary came, though with a face like a mourner’s, and offered to rub oil on them . . . and it was the strangest thing then, watching how gently she rubbed his sores and knowing it cost her to do it” (375–76). Despite her aversion to Judas, she treats him as she would like to be treated, following the core of Jesus’ teaching. This scene echoes the biblical scene of the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet, and it illustrates that Mary treats Judas even as she would treat Jesus. Thus, Testament can use Mary to illustrate the theme of redemption, though he does so without turning her into a prostitute.

Mary’s role as the first witness of Jesus’ resurrection is almost completely ignored by these books, partly because they ignore the resurrection altogether. This omission is particularly interesting, as it is one of only three things we know about her from the gospels. In the gospel accounts, she goes to the tomb to either look at the tomb (according to Matthew) or to properly prepare his body for burial, as she and the other women have not had time to do so because of the Sabbath (Luke 23:55–24:1). According to John, after the disciples have gone back home after they have been to see the tomb, Jesus appears uniquely to Mary (John 20:10–18). Mark, too, mentions that Jesus appeared to Mary first (Mark 16:9). Even though she is not given prominence
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in the books of Matthew and Luke, she is the only woman all four gospels indicate has gone to the tomb. Saramago, however, does not take his story that far, and Kazantzakis’ story ends with the crucifixion completed after Jesus’ last temptation. In this temptation, Jesus marries Mary Magdalene, but she dies when they are both still young. Oddly enough, the idea of being married to Mary is not enough for his temptation; instead, he must move on to a more domestic scene with Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus.

*Man of Nazareth* shows Mary in attendance at Jesus’ crucifixion with Mary, Jesus’ mother, and Salome, who has also joined the women who are following Jesus, and this Mary is present when the tomb is discovered to be empty. However, here the resurrected Jesus appears to Salome, not to Mary. In fact, Mary is barely mentioned at the tomb, and she is never mentioned afterward. This book, then, has completely robbed Mary of her role as “apostle to the apostles,” much in the same way that Gregory did in his homily. She is turned into nothing more than the Mary of legend, the prostitute who represents the repentant sinner.

In *The Gospel According to the Son*, Mary appears at Jesus’ tomb, but Jesus, as narrator, is not sure if that story is correct or not. He believes that the story that she and his mother come to the tomb may be true, but he is unable to confirm it. Thus, Mary exists mainly in Mailer’s novel as she does in Burgess’: a prostitute in need of cleansing and forgiveness.

*Testament*, which does not present Mary as a prostitute, does show her following Jesus to the end. Mary is, in fact, one of the few who stay with Jesus all the way to the cross. Almost all of his followers have abandoned him, except Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother, Jesus’ brothers, a few disciples, and Salome. The other disciples come back after the stories of his resurrection, and Peter becomes a great preacher, but Mary is the only one who remains with him from her first exposure to him when he stayed at her father’s house to the cross and, in her mind, after his resurrection.

This positive portrayal of Mary, especially in comparison to Peter, who becomes the head of the church, has its background in the writings of the early church and again shows Ricci’s reliance on contemporary scholarship. In the earliest church writings, Mary is presented as, if not equal to the other apostles,
then just a step below them. According to Jansen, the Gospel of Mary presents her as “both a prophet and the moral conscience of the disciples. She exhorts the other apostles to act on the Lord’s precepts and reveals a vision in which Christ extols her constancy of faith” (25). She was, it should be remembered, the first person to take the news of the risen Christ to the disciples, making her the first to proclaim the gospel. The Song of Songs, a book once thought to have been written by Hippolytus, refers to Mary as the first witness, and it calls her an apostle. However, it also confuses Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, which becomes a recurring problem (Jansen 28–29).

Other early writings also portray Mary positively. Elaine Pagels points out that “the Gospel of Mary depicts Mary Magdalene . . . as the one favored with visions and insight that far surpass Peter’s. The Dialogue of the Savior praises her not only as a visionary, but as the apostle who excels all the rest. She is the “woman who knew the All” (22). Karen King reminds us that “the second-century work, First Apocalypse of James, suggests that James should turn to Mary and the other women for instruction” (143) and that in “the Sophia of Jesus Christ, also from the second century, . . . Mary is included among those special disciples to whom Jesus entrusted his most elevated teaching, and she is commissioned along with the other disciples to preach the gospel” (144). In the Pistis Sophia, Jesus speaks directly to Mary: “Excellent, Maria. Thou are blessed beyond all women upon the earth. . . . Speak openly and do not fear. I will reveal all things that thou sekest” (Jansen 25). In the same work, he also says that “Mary Magdalene and John the Virgin will be superior to all my disciples” (Maisch 21). And rather than confusing Mary Magdalene with a prostitute, as later writings do, the hymns of Ephram the Syrian hymns combine Mary Magdalene with Mary, the mother of Jesus, thus focusing on her virginal aspect (Jansen 30–31). Thimmes sums up these apocryphal views of Mary: “For most scholars, the arguments, while diverse, are quite simple—Mary Magdalene represents in gnostic texts a leader, one who receives revelations, who correctly interprets revelations, one with Jesus’ authority to teach the disciples, and one who is spiritually mature (has gnosis). In these texts she is the leadership/authority figure that Peter represents in the canonical texts” (216).
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Eastern Christianity also shows Mary positively, not succumbing to the portrayal of her that arises in the West. Knutson writes, “In the Didascalia Apostolorum, from the first half of the third century in northern Syria, Mary Magdalene is associated with women deacons who serve as baptismal ministers” (210–11). He also relates what Modestus, the Patriarch of Jerusalem who died in 634, wrote about Mary: “After the death of Our Lord, the mother of God and Mary Magdalen [sic] joined John, the well-beloved disciples, at Ephesus. It is there that the myrrhophore ended her apostolic career through her martyrdom, not wishing to the very end to be separated from John the apostle and the virgin” (qtd. in Knutson 212). What is especially interesting about this comment is that Modestus associates Mary with the women who anointed Jesus’ feet with myrrh (whether the unnamed woman from Matthew 26 or Mary of Bethany), yet he does not connect her with prostitution at all. In fact, he later claimed that she “remained a virgin always” (qtd. in Knutson 212). Thus, as Knutson comments, “The divergence [between the two portrayals of Mary] cannot be more stark. In the west, Mary Magdalene was being portrayed as a penitent prostitute, while in the east she was believed to have lived with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with John, was a teacher of holiness and was herself a virgin. In the east, the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene is focused on her as myrrh bearer and equal to the apostles” (212–13).13

Dan Brown takes this positive portrayal of Mary to its utmost extreme in The Da Vinci Code. Drawing on the Merovingian legends,14 The DaVinci Code historians, Teabing and Langdon, tell Sophie that Mary was married to Jesus, and she gave birth to a daughter, Sarah, after she had fled to France. Because Mary was of royal descent, as was Jesus, since he was descended from the line of David, this bloodline could claim the throne of Israel. Teabing goes even

13Lisa Bellan-Boyer points out that Mary and John, in the Eastern Church’s tradition, are said “to have traveled together as partner-evangelists” (53).

14As David Van Biema points out in Time, “The notion that Magdalene was pregnant by Jesus at his Crucifixion became especially entrenched in France, which already had a tradition of her immigration in a rudderless boat, bearing the Holy Grail, his chalice at the Last Supper into which his blood later fell. Several French kings promoted the legend that descendants of Magdalene’s child founded the Merovingian line of European royalty, a story revived by Richard Wagner in his opera Parsifal and again in connection with Diana, Princess of Wales, who reportedly had some Merovingian blood.”

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farther, though, when he tells Sophie, “The quest for the Holy Grail is literally the quest to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene. A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one, the lost sacred feminine” (257).\footnote{This idea is not new, as David Van Biema points out: “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.”}

Brown’s book, like Michèle Roberts’ *The Wild Girl*, is an argument that the church has lost the balance between masculine and feminine that Christ sought by focusing exclusively on the male aspects, largely represented by the Roman Catholic church via Peter; Mary Magdalene, then, becomes the representative of the feminine, what the church has lost, for both authors.\footnote{Margaret George, in *Mary Called Magdalene*, is much more generous to Peter than either Brown or Roberts. The book shows Peter’s followers claiming that Peter has been given primacy, but Mary, who has spent a great deal of time with Peter, argues that she has never heard him claim anything along those lines.}

Though all of these books make significant changes to what the biblical record preserves of Mary, drawing on the legends where it fits, mostly, they seem to give her a good deal of power while Jesus is alive, yet try to take it away from her in the end. Perhaps this results from how her story has been told over the years, or perhaps it is so that the reader can focus on Mary as a symbol of redemption. Either way, the changes reflect a trend to use Mary’s ever-evolving story as each generation has need of it.