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Mary Magdalene's Iconographical Redemption in Isabel de Villena's Vita Christi and the Speculum Animae
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MARY MAGDALENE'S ICONOGRAPHICAL REDEMPTION IN ISABEL DE VILLENA'S *VITA CHRISTI* AND THE *SPECULUM ANIMAE*

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ABSTRACT

This study will examine the depiction of Mary Magdalene in two late 15th century Valencian Passion texts: *Vita Christi* and *Speculum Animae*. The first text is known to have been composed by Isabel de Villena. The second, *Speculum Animae*, is a profusely illustrated manuscript mistakenly thought to have been authored also by Isabel de Villena and which, until its recent rediscovery by Albert Hauf, had not been seen by anyone since 1761. This essay will consider two aspects of the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in these two texts: first, why and how the authors underscore the importance of Mary Magdalene in their account of Christ's passion and, secondly, the way in which the treatment of Mary Magdalene activates in the intended reader (mostly an audience of cloistered nuns) a desire either to imitate or to resist the set of beliefs or ideology transmitted by the readings.

"Human appetite for romance cannot wholly explain
the attraction of the figure called the Magdalene"

Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* 232

Mary Magdalene has become a fashionable subject of late. In the wake of the unprecedented success of the infamous *Da Vinci Code* many have become interested in Mary Magdalene's exploits. cursory research on the subject will yield not only a wide array of highly dubious and esoteric websites about Mary Magdalene and her descendants but also a number of more reputable articles on various publications. One thing that contemporary readers have in common with medieval Christians is their absolute fascination with the character of Mary Magdalene.

One particular and very remarkable example of this interest in Mary Magdalene can be seen in Isabel de Villena's¹ *Vita Christi* and the

¹ Elionor de Villena or Sor Isabel de Villena (1430-1490) was the illegitimate daughter of the famous aristocrat and writer Enric de Villena, who was related by blood to both the royal houses of Castile and Aragon. Isabel de Villena was also niece and cousin of Queen María de Luna, wife of Alfons el Magnànim, King of Aragon and Naples and it was this queen who founded the monastery of the Poor Clares of La Trinitat where Isabel de Villena lived from the time she left María de Luna's court until her death in 1490.

anonymous *Speculum Animae*, which has, until very recently, been attributed to the fifteenth-century Valencian nun. These two works, seemingly composed within the same artistic and cultural milieu, exhibit a similar approach to defining the figure of Mary Magdalene, although they differ in the fact that the first work contains a written account of some of the saint's deeds, while the latter, which is a copiously illuminated manuscript, displays a visual depiction of Mary Magdalene.

The differing discursive medium in which the narration of Mary Magdalene's life is inserted in these two works could prove fruitful in illuminating several aspects of late medieval devotional practices in fifteenth-century Valencian nunneries.² On one hand, it could aid us in constructing the dynamics of medieval society and, more specifically, constructing the medieval audience of nuns to whom these works were addressed. But it would also enable us to establish the efficacy or inefficacy of images to affect the viewers, to influence social behavior by contributing to the imposition of a given moral message, namely, in this case, a vision of Mary Magdalene which would either perpetuate the traditional view of the saint or challenge it.

As a means of investigating these issues, I will examine two aspects of Sor Isabel de Villena's portrayal of Mary Magdalene: first, why and how does Villena underscore the importance of Mary Magdalene in her account of Christ's passion and, second, how the treatment of Mary Magdalene activates in the intended reader (mostly an audience of cloistered nuns) a desire either to imitate or to resist the set of beliefs or ideology transmitted by the readings.

The two works studied here belong to the general genre of the Passion; they illustrate the life of Jesus and, especially, the events that take place during his passion and death. The first text is known to have been composed by Isabel de Villena. The second, *Speculum animae*, is a profusely illustrated manuscript mistakenly thought also to have been authored by Isabel de Villena and which, until its recent re-discovery,³ had not been seen by anyone since 1761.⁴

² For more extensive studies of these two works and the devotional practices that they exemplify see Piera (*Writing and Auctoritas* and *Devoción y contemplación en "Speculum animae"* in progress) and Twomey.

³ Albert Hauf discovered the manuscript which contained the *Speculum animae* (Espagnol 544) at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. After a careful scrutiny of the document Hauf concluded that this is, indeed, the work which has been attributed to Sor Isabel de Villena but that the evidence seems to indicate that it was, in fact, not composed by her.

⁴ This is how Agustín Sales described the manuscript in 1761:

"(Sor Isabel de Villena) otro libro en folio dejó escrito, según la continuada tradición del Convento, i guarda este con veneración, aunque algo maltratado por el uso de

The *Vita Christi* can be inserted within the tradition of the Franciscan *Vita Christi* which proliferated in Europe inspired by Bonaventure's *Lignum Vitae* (1260). The Franciscan theologian insisted that the soul can recover its spiritual purity through the imitation of Jesus' example and the contemplation of his suffering at the cross and that of his mother. Thus, in the tradition of the *Vita Christi* the sole knowledge of Jesus' life and passion is the best antidote against sin and vice. The purpose of all the examples of this genre was to guide the reader towards his or her spiritual betterment. Another text that belongs to this popular genre was later and erroneously attributed to Bonaventure, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. Also of this tradition were *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu* by Ubertino di Casale and *Vita Christi* by Landulf of Saxonia.

As for the *Speculum animae*, it belongs to a tradition of illuminated *specula*, encyclopedic texts with a didactic emphasis represented by works such as *Hortus deliciarum* by Herrad von Landsberg (12th century), *Biblia pauperum* (end of thirteenth century) and the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (beginning of fourteenth century).

As a consequence of the emergence of feminism and feminist studies many critics have turned their attention to the works of Isabel de Villena. Her writings have been rescued from oblivion because they purportedly exemplify female writing. Albert Hauf, the foremost expert on Isabel de Villena, has defined her as "l'única gran escriptora de les nostres lletres medievals" (*Vita* 5) while Alan Deyermond has classified the *Vita Christi* as "la obra maestra de la literatura femenina catalana" ("Las autoras" 40).⁵ Literary scholar Joan Fuster was the first to suggest not only that the *Vita Christi* evidences Isabel de Villena's feminism but also that the book was, in fact, a response to Jaume Roig's brutally misogynistic *Spill o Llibre de les dones* (1459).⁶ Following Fuster's lead, Rosanna Cantavella refers to the Valencian

las devotas religiosas, que intituló *Speculum animae*. Es obra de mucha habilidad, juicio y piedad, correspondiente a lo que la misma venerable sor Villena escribió en la *Vida de Christo*, tratando puntos muy elevados. Usan de esta obra las religiosas para sus meditaciones i ejercicios de piedad" (*Speculum animae* 90-91)

⁵ Sor Isabel was also very renowned among her contemporaries. She exercised considerable influence in court and her work and intellectual caliber were praised by her peers and by later historians. Four of the most important poets of Valencia -Pere Martines, Bernat Fenollar, Joan Ram Escrivà and Joan Roís de Corella- dedicated their work to Sor Isabel de Villena. In addition, the eighteenth-century historian Agustín Sales refers to her as: "el oráculo de los hombres grandes de Valencia, pendientes de su voz, consejos i (sic) aciertos" (Sales 51, quoted in Hauf, *Speculum* 309).

⁶ The hypothesis is not implausible given the fact that Jaume Roig was physician to both Queen María de Luna and the convent of La Trinitat and, therefore Sor Isabel and Roig likely knew each other.

nun as "la nostra Christine de Pisan" (80), referring to the defense of women common to the literary works of both authors.

Although other critics (Alemany, Orts Molins) have disagreed with Fuster's appraisal and consider that Isabel de Villena cannot be considered a feminist writer, it is clearly discernible throughout the book that she holds women in high esteem. The narrator repeatedly and emphatically asserts that women are better predisposed to love and virtue than men and, within the narration, Jesus himself expresses this point of view, attacking those who belittle women. Among these women who deserve high praise we find Mary Magdalene, fiercely condemned by medieval preachers but supposedly redeemed in Villena's *Vita Christi*.

Mary Magdalene was undoubtedly the most popular saint (after the Virgin Mary) in all of medieval Europe (Haskins). Western liturgical texts upheld the tradition that Mary Magdalene, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, was originally a prostitute who anointed Christ, obtained forgiveness for her sins, and became his follower. The traditional identification, however, of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute did not become established until the sixth century (Haskins, Saxer).

The medieval Magdalene combined three New Testament figures: Mary of Magdala, out of whom Christ cast seven devils and who was the first to see Christ after his resurrection (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9; John 20:17); Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, who listened to the teachings of Christ while her sister was busy looking after the guests (Luke 10:38-42); and the figure identified only as "a woman in the city, which was a sinner," who washed Christ's feet with her tears at the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:37-38) (Warner 226-229; Karras, "Harlots" 17; Szövérfy 82-84). Ever since Gregory the Great in the late sixth century the three figures were identified as one in Western Christianity (Saxer 4-5; Szövérfy 84) and this applies not only to the writings of the Church fathers and other biblical commentators but also to the hymns, where "we never find any hesitation on the part of the hymnodist to assume for Magdalene this unity of personality" (Szövérfy 84). Isabel de Villena's *Vita Christi* exemplifies this conflation of the three different "Marys" in her account of Mary Magdalene.

In her retelling of the story, however, Villena will also avail herself of elements taken from apocryphal gospels. It is, in fact, quite common to "find apocryphal Christian material in the midst of scriptural sources" as Alberto Ferreiro states in his study of Vincent Ferrer's sermons: "(T)he frequent citation and trajectory of these second- and third-century 'apocryphal' documents by the medieval church is only now beginning to be understood and studied seriously by the scholarly community." He adds, "As long, then, as the contents of the apocryphal acts were not perceived as heretical and subversive, the

door remained wide open for this material to find a place in the beliefs and traditions of the church" (44).

In the case of the story of Mary Magdalene, however, even materials which were deemed subversive, such as the Gospel of Mary, seemed to have made their way into the ecclesiastic tradition and perhaps informed Villena's glosses in the *Vita Christi*.

The Gospel of Mary is preserved in two Greek fragments of the third century and a fuller, but still incomplete, Coptic manuscript of the fifth. The book itself was composed sometime during the late second century. It is an intriguing Gospel for here Mary Magdalene is accorded a high status among the apostles of Jesus (Filoramo, Robinson, Ehrman).

Mary's special relationship with Jesus is seen above all in the circumstance that he reveals to her alone, in a vision, an explanation of the nature of things hidden from the apostles.

When Mary relays this vision to the apostles, Peter protests vehemently and asks: "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?" To which Levi replied: "Peter, you have always been hot tempered...But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. This is why he loved her more than us" (Ehrman 37; Robinson 527) It is quite obvious why the popes, heirs of Peter, might not like this particular gospel.

Sor Isabel de Villena, however, seems to refer to it implicitly in one of her frequent amplifications of a biblical reference. The Latin quotation that she is glossing appears in chapter 292; this is the episode where Jesus appears only to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection. The rubric reads "Com la seràfica Magdalena, restant al sepulcre ab infinides llàgrimes e dolor, mereixqué ésser consolada per la presència del seu amat mestre, fent a ella la primera aparició." (321)

The Latin passage, which Villena will translate into the vernacular, reads as follows: "O Maria! Magna est constancia tua, magna est fides tua..." (325) Villena translates it as: "O, Maria, *deixeble e amada mia* [emphasis mine]. Gran e singular es la constancia tua, e gran e complida es la tua fe!" (325)

Other scholars have already noted that Isabel de Villena very often amplifies her sources and that she selects certain passages of Jesus' life while eliminating others that might have been considered more relevant by the previous ecclesiastical *auctoritates* (Hauf, Recio, Courcelles, Piera).

This procedure is not, in itself, an anomaly since it was widely accepted among other Franciscan writers, such as Francesc Eiximenis, Bonaventure and Ubertino de Casale. What is relevant to this study is

not to demonstrate that Villena effects changes to the inherited religious discourse but what these changes are and their purpose.⁷

In addition to the use of apocryphal gospels, it is evident that Villena is also familiar with other aspects of Mary Magdalene's life that derive from hagiographical legends, liturgical hymns and church commentaries. In the seventh century or before there emerges the legend that relates that Mary Magdalene could no longer look on any other man after Christ's ascension and, therefore, she decided to retreat to the desert, where she stayed for thirty years alone, naked and without any food or drink. The basis for the story of the penitential part of Mary Magdalene's life was the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt, who, according to Jacobus de Voragine and his *Legenda Aurea*, was a prostitute in Alexandria who bought her passage on a ship to Jerusalem by selling her body to the entire crew but later, through the intercession of the Virgin, repented and went to live in the desert.⁸ The conflation of the stories of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt has also served to establish more clearly Mary Magdalene's identity as a former prostitute.

The image of Mary Magdalene as a penitent prostitute will not fully emerge until after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the founding of the two great mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans (Jansen). Two decrees that were promulgated at this Council had an immediate impact on Mary Magdalene's role. Canon 21 was a reformulation of the sacrament of penance and Canon 10 officially sanctioned popular preaching by the mendicant orders. As a consequence, both the Franciscans and the Dominicans made the preaching of penance central to their sermons, and from the outset Mary Magdalene was adopted as the model penitent saint, the paradigm of penance: "The sermons gave Mary Magdalene a new significance and heightened interest in her both as a penitent and as a prostitute" (Witcombe 279). In fact, David Viera's enlightening studies on the sermons composed by the Dominican Valencian preacher Vicent Ferrer corroborate this trend and highlight the Dominicans' preference for this saint's cult (Viera 64-65).

Iconographically, Mary Magdalene was depicted as a beautiful and wealthy lady; her attributes were a pyxis (ointment jar) or a book (as a symbol of the contemplative life). She was often shown as a penitent

⁷ In this regard Courcelles has analyzed the changes that Villena introduces in her account of the Eucharist in the *Vita Christi*. Courcelles concludes that Isabel de Villena's biblical translation techniques validate her abilities as theological exegete and literary creator.

⁸ The legend of Santa María Egipcíaca was very popular in Spain during the Middle Ages and circulated widely in different versions. See *La vida de Santa María Egipcíaca*. Eds. B.R. Thompson and J. K. Walsh, Exeter Hispanic Texts, 1977.

with long, disheveled hair. In cycles of her life the first scene was usually the anointing of Jesus. Luke (7:36-38) describes how the unnamed sinner (Mary Magdalene) wet Christ's feet with her tears, wiped them dry with her hair, kissed them and then anointed them with ointment. Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark (14:3-9) tell a different story, of Jesus at the house of Simon the leper at Bethany, where another unidentified woman enters and pours very expensive ointment on Christ's head as he sits at the table. John narrates the same story but names the mysterious woman Mary, just as Gregory the Great later identifies her as Mary Magdalene, the sister of Martha and Lazarus.

This same iconographical confusion is evident in the two fifteenth-century works which are the subject of this study. In the *Vita Christi*, Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus's feet, while in the *Speculum animae* the illustration clearly depicts the woman who signifies Mary Magdalene pouring her ointment on Jesus's head, not on his feet.

Other scenes of Mary Magdalene that were often depicted were: Martha leading Mary Magdalene to hear Jesus's preaching, the conversion of Mary Magdalene and the *Noli me tangere*, after the resurrection. The *Vita Christi* has extensive retellings of all the scriptural scenes where Mary Magdalene plays a part while the *Speculum animae* only has four illuminations where she is present: the dinner at Simon's house where Mary Magdalene anoints Jesus's head and she undergoes her conversion; a scene during the Via Crucis where Mary Magdalene accompanies the Virgin Mary as Jesus goes by carrying his cross; one of the vignettes of Jesus' crucifixion; and the moment after his death when his body is lowered from the Cross.

The two latter scenes, which are the most important scenes of Christ's passion, are also those where Mary Magdalene is more easily identified. She is wearing a red cape, her head is uncovered and her blonde hair loose and we see the ointment jar in front of her. She is, thus, depicted with her regular attributes and the viewer would clearly understand her status as a loose or promiscuous woman, very different from the rest of the women in the illustration, who look very much like nuns. In the latter scene we find what Hauf calls a "rarsa iconogràfica": "el fet que Magdalena es trobi asseguda i tingui damunt els seus genolls les cames de Crist, detall que assimila i l'ajunta en certa manera amb la Mare de Deu, tot fent-li compartit un privilegi reservat a la mare de Jesus" (*Speculum* 93).

While the *Speculum animae* does not seem to take full advantage of the many artistic possibilities which the character of Mary Magdalene can provide, the *Vita Christi* certainly does. Thus, curiously, the written text becomes more visually meaningful than the illustrated manuscript. As Goddard King and Breckenridge have demonstrated in their studies on the Passion iconography, Villena's descriptions in *Vita*

Christi are so vivid and emotionally powerful that they have inspired various paintings or altarpieces, such as the Sijena altarpiece and the *retaulle* of the Pereas in Valencia (Goddard King 298; Breckenridge 29). As a consequence, the many pages of the *Vita Christi* which are devoted to the narration of Mary Magdalene's life become an "imaged text."⁹

The dramatic and highly sensorial depiction of Mary Magdalene begins in chapter 117, entitled "Com lo senyor, preicant en Jerusalem, converti la noble e gran senyora Magdalene tirant aquella a la amor e coneixença sua"; the episode as narrated by Villena highlights Magdalene's life of sin before her conversion, which is a theme that did not become popular among artists until the later Middle Ages (Karras 1990, 25). In Villena, on the other hand, the initial and lengthy description of the lady Mary Magdalene owes much to courtly literature:

Preicant lo senyor en Jerusalem, s'esdevengue que una gran senyora molt here-tada, singular en bellea e gracia sobre totes les dones de l'estat seu, franca de senyoria de pare e de mare, car ja eren morts deixant a aquella grans riqueses e abundancia de bens, ab tot tingues un germa e una germana ella era la principal senyora e major de tots, e veent-se així lliberta en la joventut sua, sens negun reprehedor, havent la propia voluntat per llei, seguia tots los apetits sensu-als, no entenent sino en delits e plaers de sa persona, en arreus e novitats, e res no li era difícil, puix tenia que despendre, car l'abundancia de riqueses en persona jove es gran ocasió de pecar.... E aquesta senyora era gran festejadora e inventora de trajos. Tenia cort e estrado en casa sua on s'ajustaven totes les dones joves entenents en delits i plaers, e aquí es feien festes e convits tots dies. E com en tals coses la fama de les dones no pot perseverar sencera, enca-ra que les obres no sien males, les tals demostracions donen sospita de mal e llicencia als mals parlers de jutjar e condemnar la vida de tals persones... E així aquesta senyora, tant com de mes estat era e pus singular en bellea e riquesa, tant pus prest la fama sua fou tacada, e la gent menuda, que comunment s'ade-lita en dir mal de les grans dones per poca causa que veja, parlaven tan llargam-ent d'aquesta senyora, qui havia nom Maria Magdalena, que ja entre lo poble no la nomenaven sino 'la dona pecadora' (211-212).

This passage deserves some attention. On one hand, Mary Magdalene is a beautiful, noble and rich woman. On the other hand, she is portrayed as vain, superficial and engaged in all kinds of sensual pleasures. But Villena's amplification also underscores two important

⁹ I have no doubt that the reverse of this correlation is also true and that Isabel de Villena might have been modeling her vivid and plastic descriptions on examples of contemporary paintings and other visual artifacts which stimulated her imagination. I study this aspect of her work more in depth in my article on the illuminations of the *Speculum animae*.

aspects about Mary Magdalene: first, the fact that she is harming not only herself with her behavior but also others by inviting them to her house and to her constant parties. And second, Villena also comments on the dangers of gossiping, which can contribute to tarnishing someone's reputation even when no sin has been committed. This particular comment might seem to indicate a desire on the part of the narrator to lessen the magnitude of Mary Magdalene's sin. But as we continue reading we will observe that this is not entirely accurate.

The truth is that in both the *Vita Christi* and the *Speculum animae* (which has been thought to have been inspired by Isabel de Villena) it is easily discernible that there is no intention to "redeem" Magdalene's sinful behavior or embellish her reputation, as it could be surmised given the preeminence accorded to Mary Magdalene in the texts.

On the contrary, both works stress those textual and iconographical aspects which would enable the audience to immediately identify Mary Magdalene with a lustful woman. Even though Mary Magdalene was not really a prostitute, the focus in these passages on her makeup, clothing, perfume, and frivolity, that is, the outward signs of lust, implied the same sort of sexual sin as the more explicit texts of women, including saintly women, who engaged in prostitution (like Mary of Egypt, Thais, etc.) for monetary profit.¹⁰

The same is true of the hymns devoted to Mary Magdalene, where the saint is defined by a number of colorful epithets which underscore her promiscuity: *meretrix impudica*, *peccatrix*, *sordida Babylonis filia* and *vas foetoris* (although after her conversion she will be called *vas odoris* instead) (Szöverffy 92).¹¹

Furthermore, in the *Vita Christi* Mary Magdalene is made to proclaim her love for Jesus in very physical terms: she talks about her burning desire, she marvels at the beauty of Jesus' face, she throws herself at Jesus' feet and bathes them with her abundant tears (216-221). Although medieval audiences were accustomed to sensual metaphors for spiritual relationships, in reading the highly eroticized language of desire used by the repentant woman in Villena's *Vita Christi* one cannot help but recall precisely Mary Magdalene's stigma before the conversion.

¹⁰ According to canon law, promiscuity was the factor in determining who was a prostitute, not the aspect of exchanging sex for money (Brundage 827; Karras, "Prostitution" 162).

¹¹ As a matter of fact, Villena's depiction of Mary Magdalene very faithfully mirrors those features that have been classified as distinctive in the hymns devoted to the saint: emphasis on Mary Magdalene's sinful past, frequent allusion to her copious tears, description of the saint's exceptional love for Christ, her penance, her function as example to other sinners and the reference to the fact that she was the first to see Christ after the Resurrection (Szöverffy 114). All these elements appear in the *Vita Christi* and in the *Speculum animae*.

To further underscore Mary Magdalene's sensuality, not only the narrator but also Jesus himself will make reference to Mary Magdalene's hair, which she uses to wash Jesus' tired feet, and they will describe it as her most outstanding attribute: "en los cabells, los quals havia singularment bells e grans" and "ab los seus cabells, que eren de singular bellea." Jesus, in fact, says, when he is defending her from Simon the Pharisee's accusations: "ab los cabells, qui sobre totes coses estimava" (223).

Preachers insisted on this particular sinful attribute of the saint. St. Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444) explained that her "third sin was through the hair" (cited in Witcombe 291) and Vicent Ferrer stresses its importance in his sermon *Beate Marie Magdalene*:

Hun dia ella vingué al sermó de Jesuchrist (podeu pensar que ella vingué tota ornada en cabells, per tal que'ls seus enamorats la vessen e la mirassen) e fo en lo sermó (pensat que estave axí, ab lo cap alt), e Jesuchrist véu-la axí ornada, e sabie la sua intenció; hagué pietat d'ella, de la ovella errada, e començà a preycar contra peccat de luxúria (192).¹²

Moreover, Magdalene herself in the *Vita Christi* (or rather the omniscient narrator relaying her thoughts) identifies her hair with sinning: "E besant aquells peus divinals moltes vegades, llavant-los ab molta abundancia de llagrimas e ab los cabells, qui eren de singular bellesa, torcava e eixugava aquells amb molta reverencia, volent-lo servir ab aquells cabells ab los quals tant havia ofès sa Majestat" (220). Thus, her hair, her uncovered head, her use of ointments and her dress all implied frivolity but also a touch of debauchery. Decent women did not generally have their hair exposed for everyone to see and manuscript illuminations repeatedly attest to this fact. In the *Speculum animae*, for example, all women except Mary Magdalene are depicted wearing headdresses.

But enmeshed within this very sensual presentation of Mary Magdalene we also encounter one of the most relevant passages of the text. It is in this initial presentation of Mary Magdalene to the audience in chapter 117 and at this point of Villena's *Vita Christi* that the narrator makes Jesus "address his entire sermon to her" ("dreçà tot lo sermó a ella") and say: "Misericordia vull donar e comunicar a les gents, e no vull altre sacrifici sino d'amor cordial, car no so vengut per cridar los que estudien esser justs, sino aquells qui es confessen e es coneixen esser pecadors" (212).

The reader now understands why it is so crucial that Mary Magdalene be seen as an indecent woman. In order for the tale of Mary

¹² See Thomas Izbicki for other sermons condemning Mary Magdalene's vanity and ornamentation.

Magdalene to be truly exemplary to the readers of the *Vita Christi* her sin cannot be explained away by mitigating circumstances or softened by presenting the saint in a more sympathetic light. On the contrary, the guilt of Mary Magdalene, her role as subject of her own undoing has to be self-evident. In fact, what the narrator must underscore is Mary Magdalene's agency in sinning and, thus, reverse the procedure followed in other hagiographical accounts, where the saint commits a sin unwittingly or passively.¹³

For a female saint's tale "to act as a stimulus to faith and an encouragement to virtue, the horrors which Christian women underwent must be imaginatively recreated, and for this to be effective the perpetrator of the crimes inflicted against them must inevitably take a role centre-stage" (Meale 68). In this particular case the saint and the perpetrator are one and the same and, therefore, Mary Magdalene must take center stage. The result of this strategy is the establishment of the centrality of Mary Magdalene's penance, thus assimilating it to the key point of the gospels: the redemption of the contemptible.

In sum, Mary Magdalene is given a much more important role in this particular "*Vita Christi*" than in others by other authors, mainly male. Isabel de Villena privileges in her choice of sources accounts that highlight the relevance of Mary Magdalene; for example, she refers to gospels that state that Mary Magdalene was the first to witness the resurrection. Villena also stresses Mary Magdalene's importance by extensively glossing and amplifying episodes related to her, as we have seen.

As the apocryphal gospel of Mary indicates, Jesus preferred her over the other apostles: "he loved her more than us." Jesus also says so in Villena's *Vita Christi*: "O, Maria, deixeble e amada mia. Gran e singular es la constancia tua, e gran e complida es la tua fe! E per ço dignament has meritat que aquell, que mort cercaves, viu l'hages vist e oït" (325). By drawing attention to, rather than overlooking, Mary Magdalene's symbolism as a prostitute or sinner, the author transforms Mary Magdalene into the central, most salient character of her *Vita Christi*.

To conclude, as the reader engages in the contemplation of the life and suffering of Jesus he or she will also witness Mary Magdalene's conversion from the most abject sinner to the most loving penitent. The reader of the Passion texts will contemplate and admire Jesus' sacrifice but the example to follow will be that of Mary Magdalene. The text, thus, is transformed from an *imitatio Christi* into a *speculum Magdaleneae*.

The reader wonders what the ultimate reason is for this and the Vir-

¹³ For an exposition of the characteristics of saints' lives and their social function see Heffernan and Winstead.

gin herself provides us with an answer when she says to Mary Magdalene, "per tots sereu dita espill dels pecadors" (333).¹⁴ Mary Magdalene will become a "speculum," a mirror for sinners, but a mirror comparable to the Scriptures: "Holi writ is oure myrour/ In whom we sen al vre succour" (Bradley 102). St. Augustine in the *Enarratio* in Psalmum 103 links the idea of beatitude with knowledge of the Scriptures: "Blessed are the pure of heart" and in his subsequent commentary he affirms: "The mirror of Scriptures in its resplendence shows what you should be, that is, pure of heart; and it also shows you what you are, that you may confess your deformity and begin to adorn yourself" (Bradley 103; *Patrologia Latina* xxxii, 1338). Mary Magdalene (and the Christian reader) must see a true reflection of who she is before she can convert to that which she wants to be. One cannot fail to notice the irony here: the abbess of La Trinitat enshrines as the perfect Christian a prostitute, a promiscuous fallen woman, who becomes a "model" for the virginal nuns of her convent.

By reading the written episodes and the illuminations of Mary Magdalene in this light it would appear that the central character of the *Vita Christi* and the *Speculum animae* is a female and that the female author of the former and likely instigator of the latter, writing from the perspective of a woman, manages to redeem women in the *Vita Christi*. Ultimately, however, Sor Isabel de Villena's portrayal of Mary Magdalene is endorsing the very patriarchal notion which establishes that woman is a vessel of corruption. By asking its female readers to experience the drama of Mary Magdalene's sin as if it were a mirror, the text is affirming that all women are Mary Magdalene. But it also offers female readers what Anne Clark Bartlett calls a "counter-discourse" (3), which validates female authority, beauty and agency.

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¹⁴ This is also the chapter where Mary Magdalene's preeminence will be further emphasized when the Virgin Mary gives Jesus's crown to her: "en aquest meu partiment vull deixar a vós la millor e pus cara joia que posseïxe, car sou digna de posseir-la...la preciosa corona que vos e io li llevam del seu turmentat cap...lleix a vós aquest llegat" (334). Goddard King declares that by the fourteenth century the crown of thorns "was associated with the Magdalene and had become her attribute, along with the pot of ointment" (298).

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