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## “Let me hear Thy voice”: Michèle Roberts’s Refiguring of Mary Magdalene in the Light of The Song of Songs

# ABSTRACT

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The article engages with the protagonist of *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* by Michèle Roberts, first published in 1984 as *The Wild Girl*. Filipczak discusses scholarly publications that analyze the role of Mary Magdalene, and redeem her from the sexist bias which reduced her to a repentant whore despite the lack of evidence for this in the Gospels. The very same analyses demonstrate that the role of Mary Magdalene as Christ’s first apostle silenced by patriarchal tradition was unique. While Roberts draws on the composite character of Mary Magdalene embedded in the traditional association between women, sexuality and sin, she also moves far beyond this, by reclaiming the female imaginary as an important part of human connection to the divine. At the same time, Roberts recovers the conjunction between sexuality and spirituality by framing the relationship of Christ and Mary Magdalene with *The Song of Songs*, which provides the abject saint from Catholic tradition with an entirely different legacy of autonomy and expression of female desire, be it sexual, maternal or spiritual. The intertext connected with *The Song of Songs* runs consistently through *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. This, in turn, sensitizes the readers to the traces of the Song in the Gospels, which never quote from it, but they rely heavily on the association between Christ and the Bridegroom, while John 20 shows the encounter between the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene in the garden whose imagery is strongly suggestive of the nuptial meeting in *The Song of Songs*.

**Keywords:** Michèle Roberts, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, *The Song of Songs*.

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In her “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (first published in 1984 as *The Wild Girl*) Michèle Roberts writes that she has chosen “to follow the tradition of centuries” and create “a composite character” despite the fact that “many modern scholars distinguish separate figures in the Gospel accounts” (ix). As a result, her “scriptural metafiction” (Mańczyńska 4) is based on the conflation of three different women from the Gospel tradition. Ingrid Maisch identifies actual Mary Magdalene as Mary of Magdala, her name Magdalene being an identification clue. Magdala (Migdal) was a prosperous city in the Land of Israel in the times of the Roman Empire (Lofenfeld Winkler and Frenkel 103). Mary of Magdala was its inhabitant who may have abandoned her home/family in order to follow Christ (8:2–3). Her portrait as an independent and self-reliant woman has emerged only recently. Mary Magdalene’s arbitrary connection with prostitution rests on the testimony of Luke who mentions a woman from whom Christ cast out seven demons (8:2–3). Maisch conjectures that the seven demons signified a serious psychosomatic condition, which gave rise to different interpretations throughout centuries, among them the association with the seven deadly sins or the reduction of seven demons to seven devils. The biased readings were countered by what Maisch calls the New Age interpretation in light of which Mary Magdalene was possessed by “the feminine Holy Spirit” (177). In her insightful *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, whose first edition preceded the book by Maisch, Susan Haskins discusses the role of Gnostic texts in which Mary Magdalene is “an aspect of Sophia or wisdom of God” and “Christ’s chief interlocutrix,” which makes her role completely different from that in “mainstream Christianity” (38).

Roberts’s Mary Magdalene is literally Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and the devoted listener to Christ’s words who gains praise for her attention in the Gospels, while her sister Martha is rebuked for her preoccupation with mundane, domestic tasks. In the analyzed novel it is Mary of Bethany (rather than an anonymous sinner from Luke 7:36–50) who anoints Christ’s feet and wipes them with her hair. Also, Roberts’s fictional portrayal revolves around the apocryphal texts about Christ’s favorite female disciple. In the note preceding the novel the author admits that the recreation of this protagonist dovetailed with her search for “the alternative version of Christianity” (ix). The Nag Hammadi Code and other writings, especially *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Mary*, which have remained the narrative periphery to the canonical center offered an important inspiration in this respect.<sup>1</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> Jane Schaberg does not see *The Gospel of Mary* as a part of the Nag Hammadi Code (357).

century has seen a resurgence of interest in Mary Magdalene, which is often regarded as a result of Dan Brown's thriller *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) rather than that of Roberts's novel *The Wild Girl*, which has not claimed comparable attention, just like its protagonist. Whatever the reasons for the return of the repressed, the process of unearthing knowledge about Christ's "first apostle" (Haskins 10) has resulted in new texts, among them *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (2002) by Jane Schaberg, which remains a milestone on the excavation site of Mary Magdalene research, to use an archeological metaphor from Schaberg's final pages.<sup>2</sup>

Schaberg discusses a brilliant analysis of John 20 by Alison Jasper (330), according to which Mary Magdalene is a woman sinned against rather than sinning, because John's text exposes her loneliness, ignorance and rejection (Schaberg 330). If the Johannine narrative had been meant to foreground Mary's discipleship, it would not have shown her in this light; this seems to be the implication of the analysis. On the other hand, "the amount of energy which a culture expends in order to suppress or marginalize a voice 'forms a reliable index to the effectiveness of that voice as posing threat to the hegemonic practices of that culture'" (Schaberg and Boyarin qtd. in Schaberg 349).

During the discussion concerning two alternative titles of the novel at the conference dedicated to her fiction,<sup>3</sup> Michèle Roberts admitted that she had changed the title from *The Wild Girl* into *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* after the publication of *The Da Vinci Code*. Dan Brown referred to a text by Margaret Starbird entitled *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (1993). In this text, which was published later than Roberts's *The Wild Girl*, and in her next work entitled *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile* (2005), Starbird deconstructed the image of a penitent whore, transforming her into Christ's bride in the New Testament hierogamy. Hers was also the contention that Da Vinci placed Magdalene in the painting of the Last Supper as Christ's bride.

Brown's fiction obliterated Roberts's earlier contribution even if her "breakthrough commercial success" had come with that novel (Fisk, *Sex, Sin, and Our Selves* 161). Yet it is Roberts's novel that needs to be recognized for its pioneering use of the Gnostic sources, but above all, for conflating

<sup>2</sup> Schaberg's contribution, which went unacknowledged, in her lifetime is emphasized in a chapter concerning Roberts's Mary Magdalene by Anna Fisk ("Stood Weeping Outside the Tomb" 166–67).

<sup>3</sup> The conference was organized by Tomasz Dobrogoszcz and Marta Goszczyńska from the Department of British Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, 7–8 September 2017.

the bridegroom and the bride from The Song of Songs with Christ and Mary Magdalene respectively. This identification heals the old-time rift between the body and spirit, which resulted in the denigration of physicality in the writings by church fathers. Refiguring Christ and Mary Magdalene's union in light of The Song of Songs makes it possible to overcome the mutilated representations of women, which have dominated the official discourse of Christianity ever since the Gospel canon was formed.

The fictitious construction of a penitent whore, or else "the mad woman . . . in Christianity's attic" as Jane Schaberg puts it (8), Mary Magdalene has inspired generations of painters who dwelled on the mystery of her sexuality which remained attractive despite being contained under the patriarchal lock and key. Due to such paintings her allurements could be condemned and ogled at the same time. Ingrid Maisch contends that Mary Magdalene "became a symbol of all women whose fate she shared throughout history: honored, buried in silence, pushed to the margins, elevated to unreality, degraded to an object of lust" (ix). Mary R. Thompson states that the identification of Mary Magdalene as a harlot resulted from a sexist bias (1). It rests on a popular misconception which has remained pervasive despite the lack of evidence in the Gospels. Jane Schaberg calls this process "the harlotization" of Mary Magdalene, which resulted from reading traces of her presence in the Gospels through the black legend (9). Roberts chose to navigate the gap between the black legend and discipleship. In order to deal with the binary opposition implied by it, she turned to The Song of Songs, which was the favorite book of early Church Fathers (like Origen), but they refused to interpret it as a text about erotic love.

Whereas the Gnostic and Jungian undertones of *The Secret Gospel* by Roberts were explored in criticism (Rowland 35–42, Falcus 56–57), The Song of Songs has not been duly acknowledged as a potential framing for the novel. Falcus argues that one can "see in Mary's descriptions of her experiences with and feelings for Jesus the explicitly sexual and sensual tone of The Song of Solomon" (58). This begs for further interpretation. Through this intertext Roberts foregrounds the old association between Mary Magdalene and the Bride that has always existed in Christian tradition, which is reflected in European art (Howell Jolly 38). Significantly, on the feast day devoted to Mary Magdalene on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, the Catholic liturgy makes use of the crucial passage from The Song of Songs:

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave; the coals thereof are coals of fire, *which hath a* most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if *a* man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned. (8:6–7)

The quoted passage is followed by an excerpt from The Gospel of John (20:1,11–18) which tells the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus after his resurrection culminating with the words: "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and *that* he had spoken these things unto her" (*King James Version*).<sup>4</sup> The choice of texts proves the long-lasting connection between Mary Magdalene and the bride from The Song of Songs: "as the bride goes about seeking the beloved in the nighttime (Song 3:1–2), so Mary remained by the tomb at night not as an individual but the embodiment of the holy Church" (qtd. in Maisch 31). Schaberg stresses the influence of The Song of Songs in her discussion of John 20, stating that the implications of the woman's presence in the garden should not be overlooked (335). At the same time Schaberg agrees with Rhinehartz that the inclusion of a quotation from The Song of Songs in the liturgy of Mary Magdalene's feast day Mass is entirely "nonthreatening," because in light of the Johannine text she cannot possibly represent the leader of a Christian community (335).

The Song of Songs is connected with more than one paradox in the history of its interpretation. It is an explicitly erotic text about secular and sexual love which has been elevated to an exceptional status. Arguing for its inclusion in the Hebrew Bible Rabbi Aquiba states: "all the ages are not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (qtd. in Stievermann 364). The rabbi perceived the Song as an expression of God's love for Israel (Stievermann 364). For Christians the Song became the text praising Christ's love for his church, but interestingly enough, the New Testament does not contain a single quotation from this book even though many other biblical books are referred to there. Despite this singular omission the imaginary that associates Christ with the bridegroom and his follower with the bride persists throughout the New Testament, and it is this element that is singled out and translated back into an erotic and mystical union in Roberts's novel prior to its being used by Starbird, who also conflates Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the Bride from The Song of Songs.

The affinities need to be unpacked in a detailed way in order to show that the message of Roberts's novel is continually informed by echoes of The Song of Songs and thus provides a commentary which makes it possible for the reader to see traces of the Holy of Holies in the editorial palimpsest of the canonized Gospels. The Song of Songs is characterized by the powerful voice of the Beloved who speaks her female desire in an unabashed way, and it is her voice that is particularly appreciated by her

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from the Bible come from *King James Version*.

lover: “let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet *is* thy voice, and thy countenance *is* comely” (2:14). Mary Magdalene is first heard and then seen by Jesus in Roberts’s novel: “I liked your singing, he said: it was beautiful. It was you, wasn’t it, out in the garden earlier. . . That was an old song . . . but you gave it a new meaning, so full of power” (29). In his comment Jesus recognizes the archaic message of the song and its explosive potential which cannot be contained by censorship or discontent. Also, his comment intimates to the reader that the song in question might just as well be one of the many versions of *The Song of Songs* which bears affinity to the Mesopotamian “hymn to Ishtar” (Exum 227), because the complex text was generously informed by the pagan elements that Judaism and Christianity aimed to suppress. The pagan quality of Mary’s song surfaces as early as in her childhood: “I found I was singing a song whose words and music I did not know. . . What are you singing?—her mother asks angrily—they are forbidden, those words and that music. They belong to the rites of pagans, may the Most Powerful forgive you” (Roberts 4).

When Mary is preparing for the arrival of the guests who include Jesus himself she finds that “a song” suddenly starts “to grow inside” her (27). There is an explicitly somatic meaning to the song which can be juxtaposed to the moment when Mary Magdalene’s daughter by Jesus is born: “I named her Deborah, since she had issued forth like a strong song” (162). The choice of name is far from accidental. Esther J. Hamori argues that the status of Deborah, who is remembered in the Bible as the prophet and the judge, is similar to that of Moses rather than that of Miriam, while her characterization shows freedom from stereotyping (90). In Roberts’s novel the baby becomes a celebratory song made flesh. The mother hopes that Deborah will become one of the disciples, and the song will go on in body and in spirit. Deborah’s name promises that she will not be pushed to the margins the way her mother was as a result of her confrontation with Jesus’s male disciples.

When Mary Magdalene is visited by her song prior to Jesus’s arrival she describes it as a miracle because the gift of songs returned to her after years of absence in the darkness of the fragrant garden. As she returns to the house she notices that “the little oil lamps were lit” (Roberts 28). Her sister, like the wise maidens from Christ’s parable, keeps the lamps aflame for the one who will turn out to be Mary Magdalene’s mystical and physical bridegroom. Ironically, Mary had become the provider of oil and other necessities to the family; she exchanged her sexual favors for the things Martha needed in the household.

Unlike her mother, Jesus praises Mary for the meaning and power of her song. This makes her a woman of authority who speaks in an

autonomous way through the song, which places her on a par with the Beloved, whom Exum calls “the most autonomous of biblical women” (15). Interestingly, Mary bristles at the suggestion of Lazarus and refuses to entertain the male guests with her song at her brother’s bidding. Her song is too private and too profound to be contained by the convention that aims at making a woman either a plaything or a tool in male hands. Referring to a scene of intimacies between Jesus and herself in the novel *Mary Magdalene* says: “He asked me to sing for him, and I complied, and this set the seal on my love for him, that he said he was in awe of the power of my songs, and saw in them the same mystery that he followed and tried to understand himself (Roberts 41). The excerpt goes with the attempt of the Beloved to be recognized as “the subject and not an object of love’s work,” to use the words of Pamela Sue Anderson about the interpretation of the Beloved in the writings of Luce Irigaray (64).

The scenes that show Mary singing or thinking about the song are invariably connected with the garden setting and pastoral imagery. Francis Landy argues in his interpretation of *The Song of Songs* that the text conjures up a scene of the return to Eden in which “the Beloved replaces the garden” (218). The critic dwells on the series of sensuous images that pervade the song, and that are connected not only with visual and auditory sensations, but also with the sense of smell and touch. In Cheryl Exum’s commentary on *The Song of Songs* the lover enters “the garden of eroticism” at the invitation of the Beloved whose desire for lovemaking matches his own (40–41).

All of this throws light on the scene of Mary’s encounter with Jesus after the crucifixion. The well-known passage from *The Gospel of John* states that in her despair she mistook Jesus for a gardener, which is precisely one of the roles that the lover from *The Song of Songs* adopts. Like Jesus in Bethany, Mary first hears his voice and only then does she pay attention to his face. In his hands there is a basket full of figs, another allusion to *The Song of Solomon*: “The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away” (2:13). *The Song of Songs* that later became an element of Jewish Passover rituals overlaps with the time of Christ’s crucifixion and the time of spring in the pagan rejuvenation of nature. According to Haskins, the famous words uttered by Jesus in the scene of his last encounter with Mary, i.e. “Touch me not” (*John* 20:17) are far less brusque in the Greek original: “do not seek to hold onto, cling to or embrace me” (10). They also gain new significance in the novel since Mary needs to sublimate her desire for the sexual reunion with Jesus into mystical communion. When he imparts his message to her and disappears to leave her only with “a trace of fragrance of spices and aromatic oil . . . in



the air under the trees” (Roberts 109–10), a sensuous signature of *The Song of Songs* in the novel is sealed. Mary begins her frantic search for Jesus, and thus acts out the words: “I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me” (5:6–7). In Roberts’s novel Mary Magdalene states: “I was that bride—and accosts men in the street asking each—Are you my husband?” (120), which leads first to propositions and then to insults. Also, the condition of the distraught Beloved throws light on Mary’s earlier pursuit of freedom and autonomy which took her on to the road and rendered her defenseless against itinerant merchants who raped her because an unescorted woman was denied personhood and became an object of sexual invasions. *The Song* does not state what really happened to the Beloved when the watchmen wounded her. However, the very gesture of taking away her veil meant reducing her to a prostitute because mostly prostitutes went around unveiled in order to attract attention (Wight 84). The euphemism may have covered up sexual violence experienced by the Beloved. When young Mary Magdalene hits the road in Roberts’s novel, her rapists-cum-protectors immediately notice her vulnerability and unspecified status, and use her brutally until she manages to escape their clutches in Alexandria and survives on the strength of her male disguise before she is rescued from homelessness and imminent hunger by an empathetic woman.

Mary’s distress after Christ leaves her upon Resurrection can be compared to what the biblical authors of Psalms call “the waters of death” (e.g., Psalm 90:5–6). In the Psalms the phrase was commonly used to signify liminal situations fraught with the danger of death (McGovern 350–58). Mary identifies the waters as maternal and thus resexes what was unsexed in the Hebrew Bible. Also, Mary’s experience connects with Christ’s confession before death: “I am going back to my Mother” (Roberts 100). Roberts’s Mary Magdalene goes back to the mother, just like Jesus before her. She enters the waters of death, which are the image of Sheol underneath the earth: “Her waters took me. I was carried in a black torrent, icy and fast, that foamed between high rocky banks and that turned me numb and cramped me until I thought I should sink like a stone and drown and die” (121). Like Ishtar, Mary Magdalene goes to the underworld and tries to pit her love against death.

In her book *The Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels attempts to reconstruct the process which resulted in the total rejection of female imaginary in the Christian descriptions of God. She points out that the Hebrew word *ruah*, which came to be identified with the Holy Spirit is feminine (102), while God is both male and female not only in the imaginary from the Gnostic



Gospels (e.g., The Gospel of Philip), but also in the writings of greatest Christian mystics like St Clement of Alexandria (Pagels 102–03, 121). The description of creation in Genesis was influenced by the Phoenician, Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths which revolved around goddesses (Synowiec 136, 176). The anthropomorphic tendency is continued in the Yahwist source in Genesis, but God is shown as a male potter, and the female element in creation is entirely suppressed.

The emphasis on God who is the mother and the father means bringing back the elements that Judaism and Christianity suppressed, that is, the connection between Godhead and femaleness which was ousted from religious discourse as a result of reprisals against paganism. The Song of Songs offers an adequate framing for the recovery of this conjunction. Strikingly enough, it is the sole text in the Bible in which only the mother and not the father is mentioned (Exum 25). The bridegroom describes the Beloved as “the *only* one of her mother.” She, in turn, says: “I would lead thee, *and* bring thee into my mother’s house, *who* would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate” (8:2). The mother’s house is the womb, and “sexual awakening is a reminiscence of birth” in the Song, as Francis Landy argues (119). Both Lazarus and Jesus respectively are brought back into “the mother’s house” in the literal sense of death. When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the man emerges from the grave as if from the womb. After all, Mary’s previous pagan incantations above his body equated his death with a sojourn in the mother’s womb. The same takes place in the scene of resurrection. Jesus, who looks like a gardener, points to the meaning of the seed that died in order to release new life. He was buried but he rose like the seed that needs to die in order to bring forth the fruit, which is alluded to through the image of Christ’s basketful of figs. Following Landy’s interpretation, Mary Magdalene is the metaphorical embodiment of the garden that is now rife with Christ’s message, and literally pregnant with it.

After Christ’s resurrection Mary experiences a mystical vision in which Salome prepares her for the encounter with the bridegroom. Her psychosomatic condition is thus summed up by Martha when Mary wakes up: “you suddenly ran out into the garden. We found you stretched full-length, senseless, on the Lord’s empty bed in the tomb” (Roberts 134). Discussing the encounter of Mary Magdalene and Jesus dressed as the gardener in the Johannine Gospel, Cynthia Bourgeault calls it “the nuptial meeting”; thus the tomb becomes “the bridal chamber” (230–31). Interestingly, the imagery of John 20 and of the relevant passages in Roberts’s novel bring to mind the connection between funerary rites and eroticism demonstrated by Pope in his analysis of The Song of Songs,

which is “expressive of the deepest and most constant human concern for Life and Love in the ever present face of Death” (Pope 229).

This is exactly the case in Roberts’s book. Yet before Mary can experience mystical and sexual closeness with her bridegroom, she has to go through the ordeal of fire, which connects with the apogee of *The Song of Songs*, where love is “the flame of God,” and it cannot be quenched by “many waters” (Landy 129–30). The opposition between anarchic “waters of death” and the divine flame is illustrated in Roberts’s novel by Mary nearly drowning in waters, which is followed by her experience of purifying fire. After these ordeals she is washed and arrayed in fine clothes by Salome. Then she is led to “the bridal pavilion,” where she awaits the bridegroom who soon joins her and they both discard their wedding clothes. The fragrance that surrounded Mary in the garden “sweet and heavy as incense in the air” (Roberts 128) is now replaced by the taste of “almonds and figs, persimmon and pomegranate, all washed down with a strange wine” (130). The sensuous tone of *The Song of Songs* that is conflated with the garden scene from John is additionally enriched by the allusion to the messianic banquet in the Bible, that is, an image of the feast for those who enjoy divine closeness (Psalm 23:5). Mary is fed by her bridegroom and she drinks from the “sacred vessel” (130). Thus the messianic banquet is conflated with the Eucharist. At the same time the rift between the body and the spirit is healed. “Love fused us” (131), Mary confesses, and became the source of knowledge. In contrast to the story of the fall this was not the knowledge that would result in “sin and sorrow,” to use a famous expression from Mieke Bal’s analysis of Genesis 1–3.

To say that the imagery in Roberts’s book is simply Jungian is to fall short of its potential. Jung played a worn out patriarchal card when he identified man with logos and woman with eros. The book not only records the exchange of stereotypical attributes as a result of which Jesus opens himself to eros, and Mary to logos. The novel makes Mary the one who gives a new meaning to an old song. She becomes an active and restless interpreter whose word resides in both corporeal and mystical experience. She gives birth to it the way she gives birth to her daughter. “The first other which I encounter is the body of the mother,” states Luce Irigaray pointing out that all other encounters are modelled on this one (qtd. in Deutscher 161). This is intuitively grasped in *The Song of Songs* where conception and birth of the bride take place in the space that provides the setting for her later lovemaking. Mary Magdalene also becomes the beloved in her mother’s place; and this is where she makes love to Jesus for the last time before he is seized by his oppressors. The experience of the other also means communion with God, which is translated into corporeal reality and voiced in terms marked by sexual difference: “All

of us, men and women alike, are the ovens and wine-skins of God, I tell my daughter, and we are God's wells in which God kicks and swims like a fish" (Roberts 171). Mary translates the mystical experience into the image of being pregnant with God, whose word is like a foetus swimming and kicking, as the *logos* grows inside transforming the inner world of an individual. Roberts's imagery continually reminds the reader of the need to reclaim the possibility of voicing religious experience in female terms that reintegrate corporeality with spirituality. Her image translates the ancient concept of *logos spermaticos* into inclusive terms combining the male and female aspects. The concept of *logos spermaticos* used by Justin Martyr (Karkkainen 56–57) to refer to seeds of divine reason planted in every human being, reflected the ancient and medieval misconception about men's sole role in transmitting life which was planted in female wombs, regarded as passive vessels until modern times when the discovery of ovaries completely changed the understanding of the reproductive process. Roberts's Mary combines the image of foetus with her translation of human bodies into ovens and wineskins of God, i.e. both men and women become vessels carrying the Eucharist bread and wine, and the potential for subsequent transformation.

But Mary Magdalene remains a liminal figure on the outskirts of the Christian community. Her representations (e.g., by Georges de la Tour) show a woman meditating and shorn of female desire, which renders her a safe model for imitation. By way of example, the woman in de la Tour's painting entitled *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* is still young and beautiful but frozen into contemplation. Her belly is girdled with a rope that is meant to cut her off from her female desire. The snake symbolizing the sin of Eve, or else, the snake symbolizing wisdom, and therefore worshipped among the followers of Gnosticism (Haskins 35), is now a lifeless tool of control. Christ's sexual banter to Mary about allowing him to be a snake in her tree makes it possible to read de la Tour's representation in a different way: not as a *memento mori* but as a meditation on loss that is not only spiritual. Only the candle flame is a distant echo of God's flame in The Song of Songs, a symbol of love that can defy death illustrated in the Golgotha skull that Mary is cradling in her lap as if she cradled a baby.

Her passivity in such constructions defies her earlier restlessness and insight that was potentially dangerous, and which she shared with the Beloved from The Song of Songs and Sophia, i.e. the divine wisdom described in The Book of Proverbs (8:1–36). Schaberg compares Mary Magdalene to Shakespeare's sister Judith, imagined by Virginia Woolf as the one who lies buried at the crossroads. The choice of this particular image from *A Room of One's Own* completes Schaberg's archeological imaginary in the book, which refuses an unambiguous conclusion. Re-visioned by Roberts, Mary

lives on in her own enclave and enjoys both motherhood and discipleship. Yet her message goes underground just like she did after Christ's death in her tormented vision. But whatever is buried can be retrieved because the seed germinates as a result of the gardener's efforts. "The daughter of the daughter" will eventually dig up the text of "an old song" and give it "a new meaning." The final sentences of the novel are a paradoxical flashback from the future that has already started. While theologians are at a loss in the excavation site, Roberts lets the reader hear "a voice." Is this a utopian hope for a Christianity in which the sexes are equal? If so, it fits with Schaberg's inconclusive ending to her book. In the last lines Schaberg recounts a meeting with Harvey Klein, who praises the manuscript and states the following:

Well, Magdalene Christianity: we—you—have to invent it. Maybe it wouldn't have been called Christianity; something new, outside. I might even. . .

"Yeah, I might even too." (356)

That is precisely how the reader may feel after navigating the gap between John 20 and *The Song of Songs* on the strength of Roberts's refiguring, which ends with the hope of "Magdalene" Christianity.

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