“You Weakened Him”

Jesus’s Masculinity in Mary Magdalene

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Abstract

This article will explore the manner in which the masculinity of Jesus, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is constructed in *Mary Magdalene* (2018), considering what sort of impression the viewer is left with of Jesus as a man. Framed around the accusation that Peter makes of Mary towards the end of the film when he says to her, ‘You weakened him [Jesus]’, this paper uses theory from Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell to analyse the way in which Jesus’s masculinity is performed. Focusing on the presentation of his body and voice and how these reflect a conflicted sense of identity—particularly with reference to the raising of Lazarus scene—it is argued that Jesus is presented in conventionally ‘unmanly’ ways, but that this contributes to a broadly positive construction of masculinity, as Jesus’s character is performatively aligned with Mary’s.

Keywords

Mary Magdalene – Jesus – masculinity – film – Judith Butler – Raewyn Connell

Mary Magdalene, directed by Garth Davis, was released to UK cinemas in March 2018.¹ Despite receiving mixed reviews from the mainstream media,² the film

- ¹ *Mary Magdalene* was only released in the US in April 2019; its initial release was delayed as a result of the Weinstein scandal breaking at the end of 2017 (The Weinstein Company was the original North American distributor). As Garth Davis commented in 2018, ‘Look at the movie’s poster, “her story will be told”, how’s the irony?’ (Sydney Morning Herald 2018).
- ² Although some reviews praised the film’s fresh take on Mary’s story, many perceived it as lacking passion (e.g. Hans 2018; Collin 2018). *Variety* commented on its ‘burlap-textured dullness’ (Lodge 2018). The film fared better within Christian media, gaining fairly favourable reviews

is significant in offering a unique contribution to filmography concerning the character of Mary Magdalene by overturning the tired narrative that she was a prostitute-turned-disciple.³ It also makes a valuable contribution to filmography related to the Jesus character by constructing a filmic Jesus through the eyes of a woman. It is this latter dimension of the film that is the subject of this article, and in particular the manner in which Jesus's masculinity is constructed in *Mary Magdalene*. While the Jesus of the silver screen is no stranger to academic enquiry (for examples, see Baugh 1997; Walsh 2003; Reinhartz 2007, 2013), and in particular the masculinity of the filmic Jesus has received some consideration (Graybill 2018), *Mary Magdalene* offers new comparative potential with previous films because of its unique storytelling perspective.

This investigation is prompted by a discussion that takes place between Mary, played by Rooney Mara, and Peter, played by Chiwetel Ejiofor, towards the end of the film after Mary has seen the risen Christ. Peter cannot accept Mary's claim about what the resurrected Christ signifies and he finishes their conversation by saying, 'You have weakened us Mary. You weakened him'.⁴ Peter's comment offers a useful entry-point into analysis of the film: in what way has Jesus been 'weakened' and how does that affect the type of masculinity he models? By focusing on the body and voice as arenas for masculinity analysis in this film, and how these relate to his divine and human identities, I will then use the raising of Lazarus scene as a case study to explore the characterisation of Jesus in more detail. As will become clear, Jesus is not presented in a characteristically 'masculine' manner given the emphasis on his bodily weakness.⁵ In addition, the Lazarus scene performatively aligns Jesus with Mary, serving to construct his character through hers. Just as Pilate invites the crowd in John

from *Church Times* (Brown 2018) and *Premier Christianity* magazine, which referred to it as 'the Hollywood film Christians have been waiting for' (Hailes 2018).

- 3 Although this paper is focused on the character of Jesus, the film is of course a significant contribution to the reception of Mary Magdalene. It visually depicts recent contributions to scholarship that have sought to counter the myth that Mary was a repentant prostitute, which simultaneously downplayed her significance among Jesus's followers (e.g. Haskins 2005; Brock 2003). Films have contributed to the persistence of this inaccurate Mary narrative (Haskins 2005, 366–400), and thus *Mary Magdalene* offers a refreshing alternative.
- 4 All quotations from film are my own transcriptions. The power dynamics in this scene are complex as race and gender intersect, as Fletcher (forthcoming) highlights. Notwithstanding these complexities, the accusation made of Mary is still a helpful invitation to consider Jesus's character construction within the film.
- 5 As a generalisation, weakness is often culturally coded as feminine and strength as masculine, even though what might constitute as weakness/strength will vary from context to context. For a range of examples from modern case studies, see Heilman, Barker, and Harrison (2017), Messerschmidt (2018), and The Men's Project and Flood (2018).

19:5 to ‘Behold the man’ (κῑν), so too this article invites the reader to ‘behold the man’ in *Mary Magdalene*, contemplating exactly what *sort* of man comes into view.

1 Reading for Masculinity

Judith Butler’s important contributions to gender theory highlight the manner in which gender is a socially constructed entity. Gender manifests itself through a ‘stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler 1990, 191; emphasis removed); it is performative (Butler 1990; 2004). Masculinity analysis, then, is concerned with those behaviours typically associated with being male, and the way in which various masculinities interact. Raewyn Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity helps to map out the ways in which these interactions happen. ‘Hegemonic’ masculinity represents the dominant ideals of male behaviour in a particular group that affirm patriarchal relations, even if in reality few men actually embody those ideals. Hegemony stands in contrast to subordinated, complicit, and marginalised masculinities, which offer alternative scripts for maleness that intersect with and subvert hegemonic ideals (Connell 1987, 183–187; 2005, 77–81; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 829–859).⁶ Combining Butler’s theory of performativity with Connell’s theory of hegemony enables us to explore the way in which Jesus’s masculinity is constructed and how it is shaped by other masculinities and femininities. In particular, a key part of the following discussion will consider how Jesus’s character symbolically interacts with Mary’s, such that his character can be read *through* her.

Given that gender performance extends beyond the site of the body, as argued by Butler (2004), there are various ways in which the construal of masculinity could be examined in respect to this film. These might include examining the different institutions represented, such as marriage and religion, the various relationships modelled, or the different roles, such as husband, father, or leader, that men play or are expected to play (Creangă 2014, 4–5). One could also choose to compare Jesus to other characters in the film to analyse the multiplicity of masculinities.⁷ That being said, this paper will focus on the pre-

⁶ Despite criticism of Connell’s original theory (e.g. Martin 1998; Demetriou 2001; Schippers 2007), the framework has successfully been defended and reformulated (e.g. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2016, 9–36; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018).

⁷ The characters of Peter and Judas would offer interesting comparisons, particularly from an intersectional perspective: in the film, Peter is the primary strategist in the early Jesus movement, keen to bring about political revolution, and only just tolerates Mary’s presence in the

sensation of Jesus's body and voice given that they are rich conveyors of gender, and limiting the scope of this article in this way will allow for a more detailed discussion. Rather than trying to assess the presentation of the Jesus character in relation to Greco-Roman ideals of masculinity, which might then relate to questions about the historical Jesus, this paper is interested in Jesus's masculinity from a reception perspective, noting the ways in which the scriptwriters,⁸ Helen Edmundson and Philippa Goslett, have chosen to depict the Christ character. By presenting Jesus through the eyes of Mary and as imitating Mary's behaviour, as I will argue below, Jesus's masculinity is subordinated by aligning him with femininity (Connell 2005, 78–79)—as far as Peter is concerned at least. By disrupting dominant ideals of power and strength, the Jesus of *Mary Magdalene* presents an alternative masculinity to previous filmic Jesuses that encompasses the breadth of his human and divine identities: he is a man that gets tired and weeps, but also the Christ who returns from the grave.

2 Summary of the Film

The film begins with an ethereal shot of Mary drifting underwater, accompanied by a voiceover that paraphrases the parable of the mustard seed. In this retelling, it is a woman who does the planting of the seed, which immediately signals to the viewer that the narrative is going to unfold through female eyes. Early on in the film, there is a birthing scene that shows Mary in the role of midwife, comforting Leah, the woman giving birth, by lying next to her on the floor. The film goes on to show Mary in the context of her family life, grappling with her father and brothers' desire for her to get married and have children, versus her own lack of desire for this traditional female role. She encounters Jesus and as her fascination with him grows, she leaves her family in order to follow him as a disciple when he moves on from Magdala. This feminist retelling of Mary's story signals the way in which this film confronts expectations about gender: Mary's 'unfeminine' behaviour foregrounds the 'unmanly' behaviour of Jesus that will later be apparent in the film.⁹

group. Judas, on the other hand, is a loveable, warm character who is far from the greedy, evil individual usually depicted. He is Mary's main ally in the group and consistently affirms her validity to be with them.

- 8 Although the convention is usually to refer to a character in relation to the film's director (e.g. Davis's Jesus), this film is somewhat unique in that the director joined the project fairly late in the film's timeline. For this reason, I will refer to 'Mary Magdalene's Jesus' to reflect the wider input of the creative team, including Davis, in the creation of Jesus's character.
- 9 Mary's actions are met with hostility by her family; in particular, her brother Daniel tells Mary

The film continues by showcasing parts of Jesus's ministry and Mary's increased prominence as a disciple, culminating with their arrival in Jerusalem. The cleansing of the temple scene becomes the trigger for Jesus's persecution by the Roman authorities, and although Judas fulfils his traditional role as the betrayer, his motives are reimagined: he is not driven by money or satanic forces, but a desire to see Jesus inaugurate the new kingdom. The next scene features Jesus stumbling under the weight of his cross, which quickly transitions to the crucifixion. After his body has been wrapped and buried, Mary alone sits outside the tomb, crying. The next morning, she encounters the risen Jesus and tells the other disciples she has seen him alive. The film ends by cutting between two scenes: one is of Mary walking through Jerusalem, followed by other women; the other is of her once again floating underwater, alongside many other figures.

Mary Magdalene offers a snapshot rather than a comprehensive exposition of Jesus's life, drawing on the canonical Gospels as well as *The Gospel of Mary*.¹⁰ The narrative style is a reminder that the viewer is encouraged to experience the film as a female disciple of Christ, not as an all-seeing spectator. In this way, Jesus is a 'talismanic touchstone' who becomes meaningful through the attribution of meaning to him by other characters (Walsh 2003, 33). In *Mary Magdalene*, the meaning of the Jesus character is revealed through Mary. From the outset, then, Jesus's masculinity is constructed through femininity by virtue of being a character in Mary's narrative.

3 Casting Christ

The Jesus of cinema is a notoriously difficult character to depict; as a filmmaker, how does one attempt to encapsulate the historical Jesus and the Christ of

that she has brought shame on their family, and sarcastically asks her if she wants him to bind her breasts and shave her hair, so that she can 'become a man'. Jesus's gender performance is not so explicitly critiqued within the film, but he too fails to meet the expectations others have for him—particularly Judas and Peter.

- 10 This is apparent through Mary's prominence as a disciple in the film: in *The Gospel of Mary*, Mary is the one to whom Jesus reveals special teaching, which she then communicates to the disciples. Peter's suspicion towards Mary in the film is also grounded in the *Gospel*: after Mary has explained Jesus's teachings to the disciples, he says "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?" (translation by MacRae and Wilson in Ehrman 2003, 37).

faith?¹¹ Adele Reinhartz refers to him as an 'atypical hero': he lacks the imperfections that make human beings interesting, and so converting the Jesus of the Gospels into a cinematic Jesus can easily result in a flat, boring character (2013, 58). Where *Mary Magdalene* manages to avoid this is by destabilising Jesus from the centre of the narrative. In this way, the film fulfils Richard Walsh's observation that by focusing on characters that relate to the Jesus story, these characters can become more creative hero-types, which in turn reflect on the character of Jesus himself (2003, 23–25). The film also resists the trend identified by Rhannon Graybill (2018, 188) whereby biblical films typically centre themselves around a male hero: *Mary Magdalene* is still definable as a Jesus film, but Mary herself is also a key protagonist. Nor is Jesus primarily defined through other male characters (as with, for example, Judas and Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* [1988]; Graybill 2018, 189); rather, it is Mary who has the most significant impact on Jesus's self-understanding.

Mary Magdalene's Jesus is played by Joaquin Phoenix, perhaps best known for his roles in *Gladiator* (2000), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005), and *Her* (2013) among many other films. He bears some characteristics familiar to cinematic Jesuses with his long hair and beard, but he is dishevelled and weathered rather than immaculately groomed.¹² Reinhartz draws attention to Warner Sallman's 1940 painting of Christ and the similarities that subsequent cinematic Jesuses share with Sallman's artistic creation, not least in terms of their whiteness (2013, 62).¹³ In this respect, *Mary Magdalene*'s Jesus fits into a long line of white cinematic Jesuses, such that although the wider cast is racially diverse, the film has faced accusations of whitewashing for its casting of Phoenix and Mara (Edwards and Warren 2018).¹⁴

The most striking feature of Phoenix's face in this film is his eyes, which are often used to signal key points in the film's narrative (fig. 1), as is also the case with Mara. The way in which the eyes are shot in close-up transforms them from 'just' eyes, to 'eye-characters', to borrow Jean Epstein's language (2007, 52). The eye-motif is highly reminiscent of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to*

11 This is not to say that all filmmakers will feel constricted by this dilemma, but to recognise that depictions of Jesus present numerous interpretive possibilities: this is cleverly highlighted within the plot of *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) when the passion play that Daniel creates proves controversial to Father Leclerc.

12 *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Son of God* (2014) all offer a well-groomed Jesus.

13 In a footnote, Reinhartz notes *The Miracle Maker* (2000) and *The Colour of the Cross* (2006) as exceptions to this pattern.

14 It is worth noting that Phoenix's mother is Jewish.

FIGURE 1 Jesus looking into Lazarus's eyes in *Mary Magdalene*, 2018
FOCUS FEATURES/FILM4/FILMNATION/PORCHLIGHT FILMS/SEE-SAW FILMS

Saint Matthew (1964), in which the eyes play a central role in communicating parts of the narrative.¹⁵

The viewer is only shown Jesus's actual body at the point of his struggle with the cross, which is profound because the initial shot is from behind showing him covered in blood with whip markings on his back. At this point, the male body is presented as spectacle, and as a result the sequence challenges Laura Mulvey's notion of the default male gaze in cinema (1975, 6–18). There is an extent to which Mary's viewpoint is disruptive: she is the one who witnesses Jesus's humiliated body, offering the viewer a 'female' gaze. What Mary looks upon is a body-on-display rather than a body-in-action, which, as Kent Brintnall has noted, is the more typical presentation of the male body in film (2008, 301).

It could be argued, however, that the viewer is still presented with a 'male' gaze—it is just that this is a male gaze on a female perspective. This may be true to an extent, and it is certainly common to see women's reactions depicted in this sequence of the passion narrative,¹⁶ but there are elements that distinguish 'the gaze' at this point in *Mary Magdalene*. Mary's reaction is primarily one of shock and horror, leading her to back away from the crowd following Jesus with his cross, instead collapsing on the street. We hear her crying but hardly see her,

15 The miracles in Pasolini's film are often affected by Jesus looking at something (e.g. the fig tree, which he curses). The next shot is of the object of the miracle, which has already changed form. The miracle process of the object is not witnessed; the viewer is drawn into Jesus's eyes as the site of the miraculous.

16 E.g. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which primarily focuses on the viewpoints of Jesus's mother and Veronica (alongside Simon of Cyrene and a chaotic crowd).

because her hair covers her face and acts as a partial barrier between the viewer and Mary's grief. By contrast, in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), to give one example, although the crowd who watch Jesus carrying his cross features both men and women, it is primarily the women who are most upset, whereas the men are more aggressive and vocal, either shouting out in support of Jesus or to condemn him as having betrayed them. Therefore although there is a sense in which *Mary Magdalene* fits the pattern of other Jesus films at this point in the narrative, the 'gaze' is multi-faceted: Mary is not simply a passive object for the viewer's consumption.¹⁷

Indeed, even after Mary has left the crowd the viewer is still presented with front-on shots of Jesus's face and body, so that the gazing continues from a different perspective. This has the effect of construing the male body as vulnerable as Jesus continues to stumble under the weight of his cross. Although all Jesus films that incorporate a passion sequence have to decide how to depict Jesus's death, the axis around which these scenes revolve is Jesus's response to the violence he is subjected to. In *Mary Magdalene*, the violence is swift and defeating; only seven minutes elapse from Mary witnessing Jesus carrying his cross to his burial. In contrast, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) negotiates masculinity through the endurance of excessive violence. As the title implies, the film focuses on the final 12 hours of Jesus's life, and thus it is important to take the film on its own terms; its purpose is to showcase a particular part of Jesus's life, not to offer a comprehensive narrative.¹⁸ And yet the relentless violence inflicted upon Jesus before he even gets to the cross leaves one wondering how he could still possibly be alive.¹⁹ Reinhartz suggests that by focusing on his body so intently, and specifically his body's ability to withstand violence, Jesus is neither God nor human 'but a hunk of raw flesh' (2013, 78).

This is particularly striking if one compares Jesus on the cross as depicted in *Mary Magdalene* versus *The Passion*. It is hardly the case that the crucifixion is downplayed in *Mary Magdalene* by its lack of overt violence, but the sheer amount of blood covering Jesus's body in *The Passion* constructs him as hyper-masculine; he does eventually succumb to death, but not without having put

17 I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers who suggested the gazing dynamics in this scene might be more complicated than I had initially appreciated.

18 Mark Goodacre (2004, 36–37) alludes to this in an article that resists the more common critical scholarly response to *The Passion*.

19 Goodacre rightly points out that *The Passion* is hardly the most violent film ever made and based on Josephus's accounts of crucifixion it could arguably have been more violent (2004, 35–36). That being said, by making the body's ability to withstand wounding a central motif of the film it cannot help but construct a masculinity that is mediated through violence.

up a good fight against the Romans first. Of course, it is not surprising that *The Passion* offers a more violent struggle to the cross given its narrow narrative timeframe, but the point in comparing these two translations of text to film is to highlight the vast creative scope available to filmmakers in terms of how to present Jesus's body, particularly when a different character perspective is adopted.

Also noteworthy about Phoenix-as-Jesus is the way in which he speaks, particularly because the viewer (or rather, the hearer) hears Jesus before seeing him in the film. Phoenix keeps his American accent, but exaggerates his vocal register, particularly by speaking more frequently at a higher pitch. In a piece for *The Conversation*, Katie Edwards and Meredith Warren comment that 'Christ delivers lines as if he's stoned' (Edwards and Warren 2018).²⁰ Their observation is justified; comparing Phoenix's delivery of lines to his usual manner of speaking, his voice sounds strained in a way that his regular voice does not. Of course, it is not uncommon for actors to adjust the way they speak for a part in a film, but one wonders what this particular voice of Jesus is meant to do for the viewer's perception of his character.²¹

Gill Branston has convincingly argued that sound carries as much identity as visual imagery, though the visual is often prioritised over the oral—even referring to 'the viewer' reflects this (1995, 37–38). She continues by observing that masculinity is often signalled by a deep voice (1995, 39); actors such as Morgan Freeman in *Bruce Almighty* (2003) or Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky* (1976, and sequels) embody this with their deep, bassy voices, to give two examples. Beyond film, this can also be observed in other arenas. It is well known that Margaret Thatcher undertook voice training to lower the pitch of her voice because she was perceived as sounding shrill and lacking authority. She subsequently reduced the pitch of her voice by 46 Hz, which Branston remarks is 'almost half the average difference in pitch between male and female voices' (1995, 39). In effect, Thatcher was required to perform like a man, specifically in the way she spoke, in order to command more authority.

20 Edwards and Warren also note the curious fact that Chiwetel Ejiofor (Peter) speaks with an African accent in place of his natural English one. It is rather odd that he is the only one to adopt a different accent when Phoenix and Mara retain their American ones (though as noted, Phoenix does seem to adjust his voice tonally), and has contributed to accusations of whitewashing (Edwards and Warren 2018).

21 In conversation with Joan Taylor, an historical consultant for the film, I learned that a vocal coach was employed to work with the cast in an attempt to offer a range of broadly Mediterranean accents (oral communication, 6th November 2018), though this seems to have had mixed success among the characters.

Thinking about Jesus in *Mary Magdalene*, Phoenix's voice often lacks the gravitas one might typically associate with a strong male lead. This is not true for the entire film: he has his moments of outrage which exposes the viewer to an 'angry' sounding Jesus, who speaks at a louder and deeper pitch. But these moments are rare: more typical is the 'stoned' Jesus, to borrow Edwards and Warrens' assessment. Phoenix's voice-under-strain, I suggest, reflects the Jesus character's identity-under-strain as he negotiates his divine calling and its implications throughout the rest of the film.²²

4 Case Study: The Raising of Lazarus

Turning attention to a specific scene, the raising of Lazarus sequence offers a good case study for contemplating what sort of man the Jesus in *Mary Magdalene* is. Despite only appearing in John's gospel, it is a scene often depicted in Jesus films and therefore serves as a useful comparison with other filmic Jesuses. It also illustrates the composite parts of Jesus's identity through the demonstration of his divine power in raising Lazarus from the dead, but also imagining the impact such an expression of power has on his human body. The reason for choosing this particular scene as a case study for the construction of masculinity through body and voice, in addition to its popularity as a gospel scene to depict in film, is its strategic function within the film. As in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus takes place in the midpoint of the film, inaugurating the full reality of Jesus's identity while also foreshadowing his own death and resurrection to come. It is a strategic signpost in the film which is as rich theologically as it is emotionally, revealing the depth of Jesus's identity.

The scene begins when Jesus arrives in Bethany. He sees Lazarus on the ground, goes over to him, touches his chest, and then lays down next to him. After a breathing and muttered prayer sequence, Lazarus turns to face Jesus so that they are almost nose-to-nose. Eventually, the tension breaks as Lazarus gasps for air and the miracle is complete. The aforementioned eye-motif is prominent in this scene, as is the effect that the miracle has on Jesus. There are

22 There are echoes of *Last Temptation* here: *Mary Magdalene*'s Jesus might not be as conflicted as Scorsese's, but there are still moments when the viewer wonders about the fragility of Jesus's health (for example, and in addition to the various healing scenes, when he appears to faint after confronting the temple authorities because 'God's kingdom is not to be bought and sold'). The psychologising account offered by Scorsese has been explored by Stefanie Knauf, who considers the way in which Jesus in *Last Temptation* wavers both physically and psychologically (2018, 279–283).

two points in particular in the film's retelling of this story that contrast it with the gospel account in John 11. First is the significance of the body. In the film, Jesus restores Lazarus to life by being physically proximate to him. Lazarus is not in a tomb but dead on the ground, which allows Jesus to lie next to him side-by-side. In John 11, it is Jesus's words that affect the resurrection. Verses 41b–44 reads:

And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Translation from the NRSV (1989)

In the film, words are almost insignificant: the viewer cannot hear what Jesus says to Lazarus. Jesus seems to pray quietly and makes a deep, guttural noise, but neither offer any intelligible words to the hearer. Even watching this scene with subtitles gives no further clues as to the audio; perhaps a hint to the divine mystery that is about to take place. This reflects the *via negativa* style of the film generally: the story is offered in an understated way, perhaps best illustrated by the scene of Jesus's own resurrection.²³ Instead, it seems to be Jesus's closeness to Lazarus that instigates the miraculous.

Second, the effect the miracle has on Jesus again diverges from the gospel narrative. There is no reference in John's account to Jesus's physical state after performing such an awe-inspiring miracle. Instead, after Jesus gives the command to unwrap Lazarus, the narrative focuses on the crowd's reaction, and thus is reflected in the reaction of others. *Mary Magdalene* takes stock of those witnessing, but it reads between the lines of John's narrative to consider the physical investment required of Jesus (fig. 2). This is quite unique among the filmic Jesuses. Compare this version with Christopher Spencer's *Son of God* (fig. 3), in which Jesus, after raising Lazarus, is practically beaming as he comes out of the tomb. *Mary Magdalene*'s Jesus, on the other hand, is exhausted and

23 The resurrection scene is incredibly casual in comparison to the many ways it could have been dramatised: the morning after his death, Mary spots Jesus sitting away from the tomb. She is pleased to see him, but hardly surprised at the fact that he has come back from the dead, which is a bit jarring, particularly when compared to her response to Lazarus's coming back to life. On the *via negativa* in film, see Detweiler (2009, 109).

FIGURE 2 Jesus lies on the ground, exhausted. *Mary Magdalene*, 2018
FOCUS FEATURES/FILM4/FILMNATION/PORCHLIGHT FILMS/SEE-SAW FILMS

FIGURE 3 Jesus emerges from the tomb in *Son of God*, 2014
HEARST ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTIONS/LIGHTWORKERS MEDIA

at the point of tears. He embodies a vulnerability, even weakness, that is not explicit in John's account.

This unique presentation of the raising of Lazarus parallels the equivalent scene in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) in terms of its function for signposting Jesus's complex identity. In particular, the way in which the body behaves is significant in both scenes, albeit nuanced differently. For Scorsese's Jesus it is the hands (fig. 4), combined with words, that affect the miraculous. As Jesus calls out to Lazarus and casts his hands before him, the camera switches to a slow-motion sequence, causing the viewer to linger on the outstretched hands as arbiters of divine power. Lazarus grasps Jesus's outstretched hand, and for a moment Jesus is pulled into the tomb. Scorsese remarks that this scene is 'an image of the struggle between life and death'

FIGURE 4 Jesus uses his hands to connect with Lazarus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988
UNIVERSAL PICTURES/CINEPLEX ODEON FILMS

(Thompson and Christie 1989, 118–119); Jesus’s own death is foreshadowed as he temporarily journeys into the tomb and then out again. The way the eyes behave in *Mary Magdalene* fulfils a similar function, connecting the living and the dead, the human and the divine (fig. 5). Jesus is metaphorically pulled into the tomb; he stares death in the face and realises the path he is being directed towards. For both, it is the moment at which the true nature of their identity is realised. For Scorsese’s Jesus, the reaction is one of terror.²⁴ There is no doubt that *Mary Magdalene*’s Jesus is also struck with fear, but as the following scene shows (to be discussed in greater detail below), this is mitigated by a solemn acceptance of ‘the path [that] goes into darkness’.

This focus on the performance of the body is most apparent in the way this scene parallels Mary’s behaviour. As previously mentioned, there is a birthing scene early on in the film’s narrative in which Mary lies down next to Leah, the woman giving birth, staring into her eyes and cupping her face with her hand (fig. 6). This is the same posture that Jesus adopts in relation to Lazarus; his body and eyes behave in the same way that Mary’s do (fig. 7).

24 Scorsese’s reflections on *Last Temptation* could almost be substituted for *Mary Magdalene*: ‘... instead of Jesus smiling at these miracles, He’s terrified. Each miracle takes Him a step closer to something He knows is going to be difficult; and according to Kazantzakis [the author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, upon which Scorsese’s film is based] He eventually finds out that it is the cross’ (Thompson and Christie 1989, 118–119).

FIGURE 5 Lazarus stares into Jesus's eyes, *Mary Magdalene*, 2018
FOCUS FEATURES/FILM4/FILMNATION/PORCHLIGHT FILMS/SEE-SAW FILMS

FIGURE 6 Mary looks into Leah's eyes as Leah gives birth, *Mary Magdalene*, 2018
FOCUS FEATURES/FILM4/FILMNATION/PORCHLIGHT FILMS/SEE-SAW FILMS

By establishing this 'new life' trope early on in the film, Mary is positioned as a 'foil' for Christ, to use Lloyd Baugh's terminology. Baugh uses this term to refer to central characters in film that offer a glimmer or reflection of Christ in their own characterisation. He argues for a 'reciprocal relationship' between the foil and Christ which deepens understanding of both characters (Baugh 1997, 112). In *Mary Magdalene*, the reciprocal relationship between Mary and Jesus contributes a new perspective to filmic representations of Jesus: for the first time, Jesus's story is told through the eyes of a woman.

It is significant that in this instance the foil is female, carrying out a female role in the birthing scene, which then paves the way for Jesus's masculinity to be constructed through birthing imagery. Jesus's body is reinscribed with this female imagery through the 'new life' trope, yet his body is not just a 'pas-

FIGURE 7 Jesus repeats Mary's body language in the raising of Lazarus scene, *Mary Magdalene*, 2018

FOCUS FEATURES/FILM4/FILMNATION/PORCHLIGHT FILMS/SEE-SAW FILMS

sive medium' that is acted on, but is itself re-constituted through the act of bringing life (Butler 1990, 12). Given that masculinity is routinely defined in opposition to femininity (Connell 2005), this act 'unmans' him, as it were, by associating him with the feminine (Creangă 2014, 5). He is also 'unmanned' by his physical reaction to the miracle, presented as weak and fragile (Spencer's Jesus is nowhere to be found here). And yet these actions are juxtaposed by the revealing of his divinity through the miracle, and at the end of the scene when Peter speaks the divine proclamation. The performance of masculinity in this scene disrupts traditional constructions of gender: Jesus goes through a cycle of 'unmanning' and 'manning' by associating simultaneously with the feminine and the divine.

As is consistently the case throughout the film, Mary is the only one to witness this paradox, as the remaining disciples are in awe of the miracle without registering Jesus's need for rest. As Jesus retreats to a cave, Mary is able to minister to him. By shooting Jesus's face from above and Mary's face from below, Jesus's vulnerability and dependency on Mary in that moment is emphasised as she is positioned as the stronger, more confident character. In this scene, Jesus is overcome by the enormity of what lies ahead of him, but he is resolute in pursuing it. He does not seek Mary's advice, but he does seek her comfort, resulting in a tender moment at the end when he rests in Mary's lap. For the scriptwriters to portray Jesus seeking solace in the arms of Mary subverts the more Stoic masculinity usually accorded to filmic Jesuses where he takes his salvific destiny on the chin—one might say, takes it like a man. *The Passion* is a good example of this. By depicting Jesus as enduring endless violence and suffering which he then triumphantly overcomes through the resurrec-

tion, the Jesus character becomes a kind of invincible action hero. Even *Last Temptation* models this to an extent because although Jesus wavers about his calling at the beginning of the film, after receiving the confirmation he has been searching for he returns to his disciples in a hyper-masculine presentation, ready to enact violence. Conversely, *Mary Magdalene*'s Jesus acknowledges his salvific destiny and, perhaps, takes it like a *woman* through the 'stylized repetition' (to quote Butler again) of Mary's actions as modelled in the 'new life' motif.

In terms of how the voice behaves, Mary speaks empowering, reassuring words over Leah, designed to comfort her and encourage her that she can withstand her labour pains. In contrast, Jesus says very little. He utters a few words in prayer that are not discernible to the viewer, nor is his mouth even visible as it is obscured by Lazarus's chin, and then the camera cuts to a shot of Mary. This signifies that his words are not intended to be heard, because they communicate something beyond human understanding. This sets the film apart from other representations of the raising of Lazarus in which the Jesus character confidently proclaims life over the dead body.²⁵ Given the relative silence of Jesus's voice in this scene, masculinity is not conveyed orally and so attention to the male body performing as female is magnified. When Jesus does speak to Mary in the cave, his voice is quiet, serious, and filled with emotion as he speaks between tears and shudders. It is Mary's voice that is the one of authority. This scene parallels and inverts a scene from the beginning when Mary meets Jesus for the first time, when it is *him* comforting *her* as she tries to process the conflict she feels between her spiritual calling and the expectations others have for her life.

5 Conclusion

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: what sort of man does *Mary Magdalene* invite the viewer to behold? By using insights from gender theory, in particular combining Butler and Connell's work, I began by tracing the plot of the film and its interactions with gender constructions. Then I homed in on the casting of Phoenix as Jesus, situating him within a broader conversation about filmic Jesuses, before highlighting two main areas for masculinity analysis: the body and voice. These observations were then analysed within the raising of Lazarus scene to act as a kind of 'test case'. This enabled

²⁵ Again, *Last Temptation* is a good example of this.

me to demonstrate that when he performs the miraculous, Jesus's body and voice problematise more dominant ideals of masculinity by mirroring Mary's body language from earlier in the film. The paradox of Jesus's character is that he performs powerfully, by affecting the miracle, but this same act also renders him temporarily powerless.

As to whether Peter is right that Jesus is weakened, this rests on what he is weakened in comparison to. For Peter, Jesus is weak in comparison to the strong revolutionary he expects Jesus to be. Yet for viewers, the suggestion is rather that this is a weakness in Peter's logic, as evidenced by Mary's counter-interpretation of Jesus's death and resurrection: what Peter views as weakness, Mary views as strength. This exposes the competing expectations for what Jesus should be like, reflected not only within the film but also in conversation with other filmic Jesuses. Exploring the stereotypical gender dynamics associated with 'weakness', it was argued that the presentation of Jesus in *Mary Magdalene* is not readily complicit with hegemonic masculinity. *Mary Magdalene's* Jesus models a new way of understanding the Jesus character, uniquely presented through his performative alignment with Mary—not just in the repetition of her body language, but also because he is best understood *through* Mary as she narrates his story.

What emerges are atypical presentations of familiar biblical characters, offering an opportunity to 'reverse the hermeneutical flow' (Kreitzer 1993); to use the film as a chance to reconsider biblical stories, but also gendered expectations for those present in the narrative (and indeed in a contemporary context). This is of course most true for Mary but also for Jesus, who becomes more tangibly human in this filmic rendering. Given the particular focus of this article, one can see how the film's depiction of the raising of Lazarus, for example, might be used to re-read John 11 (how *might* Jesus's body have reacted to being a conduit for divine power?) But it also causes us to examine the gendering of Jesus, as the film produces a masculinity different in kind to other filmic Jesuses—perhaps closest to *Last Temptation*, but also distinct from it, as I have shown above. 'Beholding the man' is thus a continuous and culturally mediated task, which *Mary Magdalene* offers a refreshing and broadly positive perspective on.²⁶

26 I say 'broadly' because there is one scene in particular that has attracted feminist criticism: Edwards and Warren (2018) denounce Jesus's interaction with the women who tell him about the rape and femicide they have experienced, to which he responds with a speech on forgiveness. His delivery comes off as condescending and lacking compassion.

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