Mary Magdalene and Martha: Sor Isabel de Villena's Self-fashioning through Constructing Her Community

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Much has been said about Isabel de Villena and how she favors Christ’s interaction with women in her *Vita Christi*. I will look afresh at how Sor Isabel treats two of the female saints who meet Christ, Mary Magdalene and Martha of Bethany. I also contrast how other writers in the same tradition narrate their stories, not to determine how Isabel de Villena’s work is derivative but, rather, to show how the differences illuminate her authority and purpose as an author. By emphasizing points of divergence, I aim to determine her priorities, as she guides her nuns’ steps towards the heavenly kingdom which awaits them. I will use the stories of Martha and Mary to show how she fashions her sex, trying to discern how she constructs female identity and how she fashions her own self through the pages of the *Vita Christi*.

In the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene was the stuff of legend. She was a woman of extremes, for she sinned so gravely and was so deeply contrite that she became...
the prime example of the penitent sinner pardoned by and beloved of her Lord. She was also the contemplative par excellence. Her renowned penitence led her to close relationship with the Lord, enabling her to stand by as a witness to his death, to anoint his body before and after death, and to be present as first witness to his Resurrection. She was the preacher whose words and deeds led to the conversion of Provence. Legend placed her grave in several different cities. Mary Magdalene was enormously popular in Valencia in the late 15th century. About Martha of Bethany, less has been written, but legends about her life as a preacher also exist.

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4 Barbara Baert discusses such elements of Mary Magdalene's medieval persona in her study of the Wernigerode antependium, which centers on Mary Magdalene's transition from penance to chosen one. See her article, “The Embroidered Antependium of Wernigerode, Germany: Mary Magdalene and Female Spirituality in the Thirteenth Century,” Konsthistorik Tidskrift 76, no. 3 (2007): 151. On Mary Magdalene's role as one of the first witnesses to the Resurrection, see my article, "Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary: Women Seeing the Resurrection in Isabel de Villena's Vita Christi and the Vita Christi Tradition," La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Literatures, and Cultures 42, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 321–48. For a study of Mary Magdalene's role in each of the Gospels and in the fragmentary Greek and Coptic Gospels of Mary, see Esther A. De Boer, The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene (London: Continuum, 2004), and Esther A. De Boer, Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth (London: SCM, 1997).

5 See, for example, on her preaching in Marseilles, Voragine, The Golden Legend, 1:379; and Ubertino (Umbertinus) de Casale or Casali, Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu, ed. Charles T. Davis (Turin: Bottega d’Erasmo, 1993), 269. A precursor of Mary Magdalene, the preacher, is found in the second-century Gospel of Mary, in which Mary Magdalene teaches the disciples. De Boer, The Gospel of Mary, 65–70, 97–99.


7 See, for example, two narratives contemporary to Isabel de Villena's. Jaume Gaçull's poem about Mary Magdalene about which Joan Fuster writes in his introduction: “Es tracta de una lliçó, o de unes lliçons, ben radicides en la doctrina que s’hi predicava: la conversió-penediment, l’oblació generosa, l’actitud contemplativa, la companya fidel en els moments abruptes del drama. Hi ha, encara, l’escena gratificatòria del noli me tangere” (It is a matter of a lesson or lessons well rooted in doctrine being preached there: conversion and penitence; generous giving, attitude of contemplation, faithful presence at key moments of the drama). Joan Fuster, “Jaume Roig i Isabel de Villena,” in Misògins i enamorats, ed. Albert Hauf, Biblioteca Joan Fuster, vol. 6 (Alzira: Bromera, 1995), c. i. There is also the gift of grace in the Noli me tangere scene. See also Joan Roís de Corella's Istitra de la santa Magdalena: segons els manuscrits i primeres edicions, ed. R. Miquel i Planes (Barcelona: Biblioteca Catalana, 1913), 309–48.