

The Medieval Fate of Apocrypha Stories of First Century Women—the Marys

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Abstract

This article discusses evidence of the survival and transmission of non-canonical stories about the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene from the first centuries of Christianity (C.E.) to the Late Middle Ages and endeavors to illuminate the written-oral textual tradition surrounding them, considering their appeal to a contemporary medieval audience and the heretical challenges their stories presented to canonical Scripture. In looking at the plays available to lay Christian English audiences between 1350-1500, we not only see what materials were passed down through the centuries, we also have a window into the vernacular religion practices and beliefs at that time, as reflected in these texts.

The discovery of *Nag Hammadi* in the last century, in addition to the Berlin (1896) and Askew (1795) codices and the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus (1922), as well as the many fragments dating back to the sixth century and the subsequent deciphering of these texts, many of which did not become canonical, has led scholars to determine that there were many Christianities rather than a single Christianity in the first centuries C.E. (Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* 93-158 and 247-258, *Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels* 102-118). Most of the material was rejected by Eusebius, Athanasias, Augustine of Hippo, and other major voices of Catholicism in the fourth century in the codification of the New Testament and sanctioned by the Synod of Hippo in 393 (Ehrman, *Lost* 241-246). Many of these texts were considered apocryphal, heretical, or produced by falsifiers, and the Church demanded that they be destroyed.

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In the canonical New Testament, women arguably appear minimally and sporadically. Among the rejected texts were many in which women played more prominent roles. The number of surviving copies post tenth century tells us that more stories were produced than had seemed to have been preserved by the Church. Among the most popular was *The Infancy Gospel of James (Early Christian Writings)* of which about one hundred and thirty copies were found, the earliest from the third century. In addition, we have four partial copies of *The Gospel of Mary*—Codex Berolinensis 8502, the Berlin Codex, and two papyri, Rylands 463 and Oxyrhynchus 3525—the earliest from the third century and all very damaged, and containing less than one half of the text (Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, 3-11).

As the Church established its structure, theology, and practices, perhaps one of the reasons these texts would be considered heretical was their presentations of positive or powerful women (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* 178-186). However, during the first two centuries, Christianity was in fact a movement supported by women, often more than by men. Women became invested in Christianity since it denied polygamy, prohibited infanticide and gave more financial security to the first widows and heirs of any man, denying the legitimacy of future marriages and children (Pagels 60-69). Women sat with Christ and other men and were allowed to be leaders until approximately 150 C.E. when, separation of the sexes, the tradition of the synagogue, began to take hold again (Pagels 63). Intermarriages of Christian women and pagan men would often mean that not only the husband but the whole household would later convert to Christianity (Stark 95-100 and Pagels 147), and depending on the family's status, this could also induce further conversions throughout a whole community. Various Christian groups/sects met in homes, rather than churches, and became their own social networks united by their beliefs. In addition, they may have been in possession of their own copied texts (Ehrman, *Misquoting* 41-42; Stark 30-39, 192). Despite these facts, one can imagine that texts such as the *Infancy Gospel of James*, which contains the story of Mary before giving birth to Jesus, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and other apocryphal materials on these women would be problematic for the young Church determined to establish its written authority and define its articles of faith, as was the situation in the fourth century.

Many texts, both canonical and non-canonical, written from about fifty years after Christ's death down through the third century indicate a degree of literacy during this time, though certainly not across all classes, which declined after the fall of the Roman Empire (Pagels 62, Ehrman, *Misquoting* 37-38).

This allowed both for the reading and dissemination of written texts. After the fall of the Roman Empire and the Synod of Hippo, literacy fell, and the orthodox Catholic Church took tight control of the access of textual materials which were kept in monasteries and other Church properties; further copies were made in Latin only, never in the vernacular. The Church controlled the dissemination of the Latin Bible throughout Europe, and congregations simply listened to the priest, having no access to the written text itself for centuries. Clearly there were some copies of non-canonical materials that did survive, as our recent discoveries have indicated; moreover, Christians could also keep the stories alive through oral and literate traditions and transformations.

Evidence of this is found all the way down to the late Middle Ages, suggesting that we should examine the characters, events, stories, and beliefs that continued to be transmitted—sometimes modified—to better understand the influence of unorthodox Christian materials throughout their first fifteen hundred years. Says Amodio, “performance was the most important conduit for literary dissemination” (*Writing the Oral Tradition* 98), but “this general aurality may not always indicate that the text derives from an underlying oral tradition” (96-97), as texts may be altered to suit their own contextual (social, historical and ideological) situation. The intersection of aural and written at the end of the Middle Ages, as evidenced in the English Mystery and Conversion plays, gives us insight into the vernacular religion of the common people. These plays were very popular during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; while the first complete cycle appeared around 1375, and subsumed individual and smaller sets of plays first recorded in 1311 (Woolf, *English Mystery Plays* 50). Plays started in the churches in Latin and involved processions, but Pope Innocent the III, in 1210 -- whose edict was echoed in Lafranc’s *Constitutions* (Woolf 17, 79) -- banned priests’ participation in these dramas. This resulted in the plays moving to the streets and being performed by laymen. They became the property of the laity and took on the qualities of vernacular religion, illustrating the common beliefs and attitudes toward religious materials held by the general populace.

Appearances of texts throughout that time can also be used to trace a literate tradition and add to our understanding of changes in ideology—historical, political, and theological factors— that may have affected texts. In considering oral evidence, we must look at thematics, images and similarity of descriptions, since we are talking about fifteen hundred years and multiple languages.

Renoir writes, "certain oral-formulaic elements transcend time, geography and language boundaries within the Indo-European family" (Renoir, "Oral-Formulaic Rhetoric" 244). We know that the literature of the Middle Ages and earlier represents a unique challenge to scholars, since much of the written material of literate poets may have been lost, and when we speak of oral tradition, we only have a written record of a particular oral performance or related set of performances that cannot reproduce the variations in the material that occurred both before and after the written copy was made: the line between oral and written literature was not so easily drawn during this time. Alain Renoir argues that written literature can be orally composed and thus "written oral formulaic," and an oral formulaic poem could later be written down ("Rhetoric" 237).

The primary difference between the two is that the orally derived piece is more concerned with immediate communal audience recognition of the textual elements that recall rituals and traditions, both literary and socio-historical, while the written piece draws attention to unique individual style and idiosyncratic elements of the poet, and connections within the text often have to be made explicit, since these novel aspects of the text would be unfamiliar to the audience (Foley, "Implication of Oral Tradition" 33-45; Amodio, *Writing* 83-97 and "Post-Conquest" 7; Lord, "Oral Composition and 'Oral Residue'" 9-25; and Renoir, "Rhetoric" 237-242). What we have is a continuum rather than two definitively unique traditions: "Oral and aural interact in a complex way in Middle English, sometimes cooperatively and sometimes conflictively" (Amodio, *Writing* 93); a partnership is formed between the older and newer traditions (Amodio, *Writing* 28). Elsewhere Amodio astutely adds, "the intersection of orality and literacy is squarely in the center of the complex economic, linguistic, and political dynamic of the Middle Ages" (Amodio, "Post-Conquest England" 5).

In the case of the the two Marys, since in addition to the canonical texts, apocrypha existed and legendary materials were later added, Irvine argues that a literature of two languages was created; he is speaking particularly of the Latin textual tradition and the oral-tradition of Old English ("Medieval Textuality and the Archaeology of Textual Cultural" 182-83). When we consider the first languages of many of these texts, the numerous translations into other languages as well as the alterations made deliberately or unintentionally by performers, authors, and scribes, both literate and illiterate, and the countries they have appeared in, we are more likely talking about multi-language stories (Metzger and Ehrman, *Text of the New Testament* 250-68; Ehrman, *Misquoting* 155-205).

The issue of the vernacular religion created and embedded in the surviving texts then becomes particularly interesting, as a glimpse into what the populace saw and heard, remembered, and repeated—perhaps to the best of their ability, perhaps altered to suit their own contextual, social-political situation and needs. Since we will need to work with early century texts in translation that crosses language and geographical boundaries, we will confine our discussion to events, themes, thematic elements, images and descriptions which can cross these boundaries and endeavor to illuminate the written-oral textual tradition surrounding these two women, while considering their audience appeal and the heretical challenges their stories presented to orthodoxy, as well as what of their stories survived to the end of the Middle Ages.

The Virgin Mary

In the Late Middle Ages, one set of cycle plays contained a complete set devoted to Mary, the *Ludus Coventriae* or *N-Town Plays*, which includes: “Mary’s Conception,” “The Presentation of Mary at the Temple,” “The Betrothment and Marriage of Joseph and Mary,” “The Parliament of Heaven and the Annunciation,” “Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth,” “Joseph’s Doubt,” “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” and “The Nativity.” These plays contain elements that are not scriptural; some of the additions appear to address more of the worldly concerns about conception and delivery and the doubts of common people, having appeal to both audiences of the first centuries and the Late Middle Ages. In the New Testament, aside from Anne’s miraculous conception of Mary at an advanced age, there is nothing much on Mary life prior to the Annunciation.

The primary apocryphal sources are Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend* and *Meditationes Vitae Christi* based upon the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* of the late 6th century, which is believed to have been derived from the *Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*. Sugano adds: Nicholas Love’s *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyf of Christ*, *Nativity of Mary*, the *Life of St. Anne*, and the *Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost* (note to *N-Town plays*, TEAMS, 2007), though I would argue these are further derivations of the primary apocryphal and scriptural texts. Certainly, this suggests a sustained interest in the life of Mary beginning with the *Infancy Gospel of James*. The one hundred and thirty surviving copies of the *Infancy Gospel of James* are in Greek (*Early Christian Writings*), but there are no surviving Latin copies, which would indicate Church censorship of this material.

The first play that contains material about Mary's life before the circumstances of the Immaculate Conception is the *Infancy Gospel of James*. Here, a toddler Mary is presented at the temple:

The priest received her, and kissed her, and blessed her, saying: "The Lord has magnified thy name in all generations. In thee, on the last of the days, the Lord will manifest His redemption to the sons of Israel. And he set her down upon the third step of the altar, and the Lord God sent grace upon her; and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her." (6)

In the play, at the age of three, she repeats the Gradual Psalms (not found in the *Infancy Gospel*), is tested on her knowledge of her faith, and announces her desire to be chaste and to serve God; in this gospel, she chooses to stand with a lamp, indicating that she chooses service to God over worldly family. Considering Jesus' presentation in the Temple in Scripture, we can imagine that comparison of the two may have been undesirable to the Church fathers choosing the materials to include in the New Testament, because it detracts from the unique divinity of the story of Jesus in the temple, where "all that heard him were astonished at his wisdom and his answers" (Luke 2:47 all references to *Douay-Rheims Catholic New Testament*). *The pseudo-Matthew* (ca. 9th century) does not include the episodes of the child Mary in the temple and only references her in constant prayer and her other charitable activities to establish her good character.

Brought again to the temple at the age of fourteen, Mary objects repeatedly that she wants to remain a virgin, as in *pseudo-Matthew* Chapter 8: "But a new order of life has been found out by Mary alone, who promises that she will remain a virgin to God," which may have sounded a familiar note with the audience of the Middle Ages, where woman were afforded the opportunity to join abbeys and nunneries and adopt such a life. As for the Mary plays, "The Presentation in the Temple," as an episode of her early childhood, derives more from *The Infancy Gospel*, and the material found in *pseudo-Matthew*, appears more in the "Betrothment."

Her betrothal occurs between ages twelve and fourteen in various texts. In the "Betrothment" play, Joseph is chosen as her husband by casting rods. Much more developed than the simple two or three declarative scriptural sentences in Matthew and Luke, this event is transmitted and elaborated on in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel* and in other texts through the Late Middle Ages *N-Town* play. In the *Infancy Gospel*, Joseph is summoned with widowers who would respect her chastity, and a dove came out of his rod signaling God has chosen him (9), though he vehemently objects.

In the *Infancy Gospel*, the betrothment is a summoning of all young men and women to choose mates (8); on the second day Joseph appears along with the young men, is chosen for Mary to his chagrin, and takes five other virgins home, all to await later marriages and console Mary since her choice to remain a maiden has seemingly been dismissed. It falls to Joseph to be her guardian; he would like to marry her later to one of his sons, though Zacharias says he must wed her. *Pseudo-Matthew* makes it clear that marriage is not a woman's choice but an historical and political necessity. To adopt such a life was even more problematic in the first centuries of Christianity, especially among the aristocratic Romans who feared their numbers were already dwindling (Stark 97, 102).

As further evidence of Mary's special status, both the *Infancy Gospel* and *pseudo-Matthew* include an episode in which virgins cast lots to spin cloth. In the *Infancy Gospel*, the priest asks God to choose who shall spin what colors, spinning the purple for the veil of the temple is viewed to be the highest honor and falls to Mary:

"Choose for me by lot who shall spin the gold, and the white, and the fine linen, and the silk, and the blue, and the scarlet, and the true purple." And the true purple and the scarlet fell to the lot of Mary. (*Infancy* Ch. 10)

In *pseudo-Matthew* when they return home to spin, the other virgins express their jealousy of Mary:

As it were in words of annoyance, [they] began to call her queen of the virgins. While however, they were so doing, the angel of the Lord appeared in the midst of them These words shall not have been uttered by way of annoyance but prophesied as a prophecy most true. (8)

This will play significantly into affirming Mary's credibility later.

There is further evidence that the *Infancy Gospel* was a more significant source for the *N-Town* plays than *pseudo-Matthew*. For example, like the *Infancy Gospel*, the betrothal includes a lengthy discussion in the temple about not only what to do with Mary, but also what is being asked of Joseph, who clearly voices his desire not to wed, since he may possibly be made a cuckold: "What, should I wed? God forbid! I am an old man, so God me speed,/ And with a wife, now, to live in dread (ll. 212-14)" in *N-Town*.

The much elongated concern of Joseph with cuckoldry reflects how cuckoldry is a major source of comedy in more bawdy and humorous late Middle English literature, while also acknowledging concerns about virginity and the ability of women to enter the convents and abbeys. Coletti, "Purity and Danger," (79-82); Fitzhenry, "Politics of Metatheater," (33-36); and Carlson, "Mary's Obedience," (348-53), all argue that the play is about controlling sexual behavior in the late Middle Ages, in a way that seems to reduce other ideological concerns and traditions presented in earlier texts.

In Luke, Joseph just accepts his espoused wife is pregnant; Matthew tells us Mary was pregnant "before they came together" (1:16), and Joseph thinks about "putt[ing] her away privately" to protect her (1:19). A dream from an angel confirms the Immaculate Conception: "Fear not that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost" (1:20-21). In Scripture, any issue of infidelity is quickly and simply dismissed. In the *Infancy Gospel*, Chapter 13: "Joseph came back from his building, and, entering into his house, he discovered that she was big with child . . . Who has done this evil thing in my house, and defiled the virgin?" In the *pseudo-Matthew*, his doubts are almost immediately put to rest by the virgins who have lived in his home with her and who can act as her witnesses attesting to her chastity, but Joseph worries someone disguised himself as an angel, until an angel visits him that night and puts his fears to rest (Ch. 10 and 11).

In *N-Town* "Joseph's Doubt," he complains on his homecoming, "Thi wombe to high doth stode:/I drede me sore I am be-trayed" (ll. 26-27). She wept bitterly, replying: "I dede nevyr forfeite with man" (l. 40). In the *Infancy Gospel*, Chapter 13, Joseph said to her: "Whence then is that which is in thy womb?" And she wept and said: "I am innocent, and have known no man . . . As the Lord my God liveth, I do not know whence it is to me" (Ch. 13). The similarity is striking: Joseph of *N-Town* worries a great deal, as any husband would, about the truth and what other people may think, echoing the *Infancy Gospel of James* as the source where these concerns are most elaborated.

The *Infancy Gospel* also includes his worry that she would receive a death sentence (14), if discovered. In his homily on this passage, "The Eve of Christmas," Bede says that Joseph tries to act justly to protect her reputation and to save her from stoning (45-46), an ancient method of putting adulterers to death. This material is only found before the *N-Town* and in one of the Old English "Advent Lyrics" from "Advent Hymns A:3":

Is þæt wide cuð þæt ic of þam torhtan temple dryhtnes onfeng freolice fæmnan clæne, womma lease, ond nu gehwyrfed is þurh nathwylces.

Me nawþer deag, secge ne swige. Gif ic soð sprece, þonne sceal Dauides dohtor sweltan, stanum astyrfed. Gen strengre is þæt ic morþor hele; scyle manswara, laþ leoda gehwam lifgan sibban, fracod in folcum. (A:3 189-196)

(I freely accepted the pure virgin without defilements, of the Lord from the glorious Temple, and now she is defiled by one unknown. If I speak or if I keep silent I am afraid, then the daughter of David will be stoned. It is worse that I should cover up the crime; the perjurer is loathed by every man, hated by the people.)

Before the angel appears in *pseudo-Matthew*, Joseph considers hiding, fleeing, and sending her away (10-11). As the abused husband, in the "Advent Lyric" and *N-Town* "Joseph's Doubt," he considers taking her to the bishop and demanding the law: "To the busshop, I wole it telle/ That he, the law, may here do/ with stonys her to qwelle" ("Joseph" 95-97). However, knowing her to be a good woman, he decides to leave the country so he will not be known as a cuckold, "I lewyer forsake the coundre foevyr . . . For and men knew this velany" (ll. 111-12, 114).

The theme of doubt is transmitted through fifteen hundred years, with small variations in the elements, elaborating his considerations of what to do and how to hold on to his own reputation. The added dramatic and emotional aspects concerning fidelity would speak to the audience and allow them to identify with Joseph. In all texts, including Scripture, the angel's visit to Joseph during the night puts his concerns to rest:

ANGELUS Joseph, Joseph, thou wepyst shyrle;
Fro thi wyff, why comyst thou owte?

JOSEPH Good sere, lete me wepe my fylle;
Go forthe thi wey and lett me nowght.

ANGELUS In thi wepynge, thu dost ryght ylle;
Agens God thu hast mys-wrought.

Go chere thi wyf with herty wylle
And chawnge thi chere, amend thi thought;
Sche is a ful clene may. (ll. 147-155)

Joseph, greatly relieved, accepts his role in helping Mary raise the Son of God. Richard Moll warns that through “‘The Betrothal of Mary’ . . . ‘Joseph’s Doubt,’ and ‘The Trial of Mary and Joseph’ . . . Joseph’s role is so fully developed that at times he appears more prominent than the Virgin Mother” (“Staging Disorder” 146–47), and this upstaging is done to emphasize the chaste marriage (149-50). But it may be more useful to say that the plays reflect vernacular religion, the concerns of an audience of real men and women.

While Joseph’s doubts may have been put to rest, in both the *Infancy Gospel* (15-16) and *pseudo-Matthew*, the priests accuse him of defiling Mary, and the pair is ordered to prove their innocence through trial by ordeal. This thematic element, which involves a drink that will poison liars, persists down through the Late Middle Ages. In *the Infancy Gospel*:

And the priest said: I will give you to drink of the water of the ordeal of the Lord, and he shall make manifest your sins in your eyes. And the priest took the water, and gave Joseph to drink and sent him away to the hill-country; and he returned unhurt. And he gave to Mary also to drink, and sent her away to the hill-country; and she returned unhurt. (16)

In the *N-Town* play, not only does the trial by ordeal appear, but they are avenged when the priest takes a sip and gets a terrible headache (ll. 362-4). He repents, and Mary asks God to make it go away:

Here is the botel of Goddys vengeauns —
 This drynk shal be now thi purgacyon . . .
 If he be gyilty sum maculacion,
 Pleyn in his face shal shewe it owth.
 (“The Trial of Mary and Joseph” ll. 234, 235, 240 -241)

This adds a comic dimension, as is often found in the mystery plays, and will later resonate with the disbelief of Salome, thematically, as another example of the punishment of disbelievers in the *N-Town* Mary plays.

“The Nativity” has a few additional interesting features. The miracle of the cherry tree that bows to Mary (ll. 43-44), so she can eat its fruit on the way to Bethlehem, relates to the *pseudo-Matthew*, though in *Matthew*, it is presented as part of the flight into Egypt after Jesus’ birth, and it is a palm tree. Mary says:

I wish it were possible to get some of the fruit of this palm. And Joseph said to her: I wonder that thou sayest this, when thou seest how high the palm tree is; and that thou thinkest of eating of its fruit. . . .Then the child Jesus, with a joyful countenance, reposing in the bosom of His mother, said to the palm: O tree, bend thy branches, and refresh my mother with thy fruit. And immediately at these words the palm bent its top down to the very feet of the blessed Mary; and they gathered from it fruit. (20)

(It may in fact also reflect a synchronic connection with the "Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play," where one shepherd offers holly. Both the holly and cherry are round representing the eternal, red representing martyrdom, and the plants themselves representing fertility in the winter, life in death.) This formulaic image, the bowing tree, informs a ballad called the "Cherry-Tree Carol" reportedly sung in the early fifteenth century (Woolf 177).

Also in this play, Joseph goes to seek midwives to help, as Mary's delivery becomes imminent: In the *Infancy Gospel*, Joseph turned and saw her sorrowful, and he said to himself:

Likely that which is in her distresses her. And again Joseph turned and saw her laughing. And he said to her: Mary, how is it that I see in thy face at one time laughter, at another sorrow? And Mary said to Joseph: Because I see two peoples with my eyes; the one weeping and lamenting, and the other rejoicing and exulting. (17)

This is one of the first instances in literature of divine laughter, a laughter that recognizes transitory earthly pain and rejoices in the eternal joy of heaven made possible through Christ. This laughter is also in *N-Town*, with an additional response from Joseph, who fears a normal person's response, such as the midwives who might refuse to help her because of it:

"Why do ye lawghe, wyff? Ye be to blame!/ I pray yow, spowse, do no more so!/ In happ the mydwivys wyl take it to game" (II.182-84). In slight contrast to the *Infancy Gospel of James*, the midwife who sees Mary after the birth goes forth and meets Salome and proclaims Mary's virginity. Salome demands proof and goes to Mary: "And Salome put in her finger, and cried out, and said: Woe is me for mine iniquity and mine unbelief, because I have tempted the living God; and, behold, my hand is dropping off as if burned with fire. . . . And, behold, Salome was immediately cured" (20).

In the *N-Town* play, it is two midwives who show up; Zelomi and Salome, as in *pseudo-Matthew*, though here Salome stays outside. The doubting Salome tests Mary by examining her and exclaims, "myne hand is ded anddrye as claye;/ My fals untrost hath wrought myscheve" (ll. 255-6). Like the Salome of the earlier gospels, she proclaims her belief and is healed after praying for forgiveness, and the thematic unfounded doubting of the Immaculate Conception has now been twice repeated and made more memorable. Indeed, this first miracle in the presence of Jesus is not included in either the canonical New Testament or the "Advent Lyrics" but could have been used to further confirm his divinity from his birth. The Church may have objected to the prominence of women in this event and the mere suggestion that midwives were present may have been a concern, in that it would make the birth look less miraculous and more commonplace; either reason could have kept these elements of the Nativity story out of Scripture.

Evidence suggests that some Late Middle English playwrights were as concerned with the memorability of what their audience would hear and see as with Scriptural accuracy.

Addressing common concerns such as the doubts of Joseph and Salome and adding more emotion and humor would help the primarily illiterate audience to identify with and remember the characters and the message, as well as explain possible motives for the extended scenes in *N-Town*. Says Granger, "it seems a considerable body of liturgical material was already familiar to the likely audience, or the author was concerned it should become familiar Audiences, particularly women, were also confirmed and encouraged, through a variety of play characters, using prayers and paraphrases, in their personal devotional lives" (317).

It may be interesting to note, as attested to by the popularity of the cycle plays, that the Catholic Church did not interfere with the performances, perhaps accepting them as a viable way of disseminating religious material.

Unlike most Protestant movements, the Catholic Church has a tradition of tolerating vernacular or native elements going as far back as the inclusion of the shamrock as a symbol of the trinity, the sun in the Celtic cross in Ireland to the more recent inclusion of elements of voodoo in Catholicism of Haiti, when the salvation of pagan souls could be obtained.

The *N-Town Mary* plays derive some elements from the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel by James*, giving a life to Mary before the Annunciation. The doubting of Joseph and the priests of the temple, and the midwives, all suggest that this apocryphal text was very popular, appearing and occasionally re-edited as evidenced by the written *pseudo-Matthew*, the "Advent Lyrics," etc. This also indicates the apocryphal tradition traveled geographically throughout Europe. We see evidence of a blended written and oral tradition, and clear evidence of a written tradition from the texts we still have, which in all probability depended on dissemination of oral texts across Europe as well. As Lord maintains, most Old English texts, especially those containing religious material like the "Advent Lyrics," are oral-formulaic ("Implications" 55 and Amodio, *Writing* 182-3). In addition, in the transition from oral to written, Lord argues that written material could make use the traditional familiar formulas and rhymed couplets of oral compositions ("Oral Residue" 21). In plays, end rhymes and liturgical and formulaic diction would make the material easier for the actors to memorize.

Some of the apocryphal material, such as the appearance of the toddler Mary in the temple may have been redacted for theological or other ideological reasons or simply left out. There are indeed additions building upon the apocrypha as well as involving contemporary social and ideological responses to the original material. Across time, the story of the Virgin Mary is evidence of an intertwining relationship of written and oral traditions. The Virgin Mary was to become a controversial character after the Middle Ages. The reason much of the non-liturgical Mary material may have dissipated and virtually disappeared in the vernacular in later centuries can most probably be attributed to the Protestant reformation and their rejection of the adoration of Mary by Catholics, which they perceived as idolatry, and their efforts to make her a more marginal character. In response to these charges, the Catholic Church may have tightened its control on her image, keeping it closer to Scripture to deflect criticism.

Mary Magdalene

In the orthodox *Gospel of John*, Mary alone discovers the empty tomb and is sent by Jesus to the apostles to tell them of his resurrection (20:1, 17-18); in all other gospels, she is accompanied by other women. The *Gospel of Mary* says Jesus commends her in a vision, "for not wavering from seeing him" (7).

She is trying to comfort the apostles after his departure, and Peter then asks her to teach them the hidden things Jesus has taught her (6). But the apostles, especially Peter, become contentious and question how Christ could choose to speak to a woman (10). Levi takes up her defense, but the words that she spoke are lost, except for a fragment of BG8502 verse 9, which is on the soul rejecting powers (resembling Christ's rejection of Satan's offer of earthly power in the wilderness). Here, she is clearly presented as the most trusted confidante of Jesus. Mary is also among the apostles listening to Christ in other apocryphal texts: Mary appears in *The Dialogue of the Savior* asking questions (126:4, 137:3, and 144:5) and is said to speak wisely "as a woman who understood everything" (139:13) and again is distinguished from the male apostles in her understanding.

Coletti calls this a sign that Mary has a spiritual maturity that the other apostles lack (*Mary Magdalene* 87). Both Mary and a Salome appear in The Gospel of Thomas asking questions, Mary asking about the nature of his disciples (21:1). Again, we see the friction between Peter and Mary, as he singles her out and says, "Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life" (114:1).

The *Gospel of Thomas* not only shows women receiving the same teaching as the men, it names James the Just not Peter as leader (12:2) and shows Peter in an unappealing light and promotes the Gnostic belief that it is the teachings of Christ rather than the resurrection that brings salvation, which explains how this text could be considered heretical. King notes that the Nag Hammadi discovery is very important here, since the texts found within it identify Mary as a significant disciple of Jesus in *Pistis Sophia*, *Gospel of Philip*, *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *First Apocalypse of John* (143).

In 591, Pope Gregory the Great, using the canonical gospels only, declared that Mary was the sinner (prostitute) in Luke; she was then believed to be Mary of Bethany with the woman who anoints Jesus' feet (Luke 7:37-48), and the woman from whom Jesus exorcizes demons (Luke 8:2). He concluded that the woman of Luke 8:2 is the same as in the next verse which refers to Mary Magdalene as a woman of means who supported Jesus and his followers (8:3). In fact the *Douay-Rheims New Testament* names the Magdalene as the woman from whom the demons are exorcised and does not name her as a woman of independent means like Joanna and other women supporting Jesus and the apostles.

In England, *Bede's Homilies* (ca. 720) follow the Scriptural materials; Bede renders Mary as the sinner and penitent, forgiven by Christ. The interpretations sealed her image as penitent sinner redeemed (King 153).

This error was addressed by the Vatican in 1969 when it finally stated that Mary Magdalene was not Luke's Mary of Bethany, the sinner. Contention continued, and both Pope John Paul and Benedict were asked to again address the error that has endured for almost two millennia. Yet, as King contends, based on non-canonical texts—and even Scripture—Mary deserves to be considered a female apostle, and arguably Christ's most favored disciple (148).

Noting that the gospels spread “primarily by mouth and ear: [they] were preached and heard” (94) in the early centuries, King suggests that this is why there are so many versions of Mary's life starting in the second century. She asserts that written text was often suspect and many believed that true teaching and prophetic revelation were spoken (95). Of course, the prophetic revelation became a problem since it would allow for a large range of interpretations of Scripture and the inclusion of numerous potentially unauthorized texts (often containing Gnostic heresies) and challenging the determined “truly” apostolic, written tradition which the Church deemed orthodox Scripture (Ehrman, *Lost*, 242).

Unfortunately, this meant the *Gospel of Mary* was dismissed, but as King contends, Mary was the apostle to the apostles, and to the Goths, and there is a high historical probability that she was the leader of some sect of early Christians (142).

The French legend actually adds to the image of apostle created in canonical and non-canonical materials by demonstrating that she went forth like the others to convert pagans to Christianity, having her sail to Marseilles and convert the king and queen. Rabanus Maurus (ca. 844) claims post-ascension, she preached and converted people in Gaul. The written legend of her converting the whole of Provence can be found in the *Legenda Aurea* Vol. 4, by Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1275). She is also credited with interceding with God to make the barren queen of Marseille pregnant. The king and queen were sent to Rome to be further educated by Peter, to whom Mary shows clear deference (I.377), and during their passage to Rome, the queen dies in childbirth and she and the child are left on a rock.

Miraculously, on the king's return from Rome, she and the child "who Mary Magdalene had kept" are found alive on that same rock. They are baptized by St. Maximin in this version, respecting the Church's rule that women cannot perform baptism.

In the eleventh century, Sigebert of Gembloux claims she was venerated and her relics were moved from the oratory at St. Maximin to Vezelay in 771, and she is venerated again at St. Maximin-the Sainte-Baume in 1279. Bokenham follows Jacobus' *Legenda Aurea* closely in his version of Mary Magdalene's life in his *Lives of the Saints* (ca. 1443) and is the longest of thirteen Middle English legends highlighting her transformation from sinful woman to apostle and preacher (Coletti 73). The evidence of the popularity of the cult of Mary Magdalene is unquestionable: the Cult of Tears (which traces back to both the Virgin and the Magdalene) and her influence on Cathars and Beguines, who had ties to France and eastern England (Coletti, 189), attests to her popularity and helped to keep her stories alive. Coletti argues that "late medieval holy women invoke Mary Magdalene's patronage and example to authorize their own spiritual impulses" (129).

Oral and written traditions again intertwine; clearly, her story was told in the female religious houses of France and England, spread among the populace and was even written down by male religious authors.

Given the popularity of *The Early South English Legendary* (ca. 1260), of which there are over fifty copies, it is probable that it is one of the most direct sources of the *Digby* play, echoing other earlier texts that assign her an evangelical mission along with the other apostles: "Sixti and ten disciples togadere heom hadden inome/ Marie the Maudeleyne and hire brothur Lazarus/ And heore suster Martha and the bischop Maximus" (170-172). In this version, her intervention again works to save the queen from bareness, and her and her child from death. It credits her with converting Provence, and going to the wilderness in her later life, and gives her an aristocratic background, complete with the castle shared with her brother Lazarus and Martha; all of which are found in the *Legenda Aurea*, although here she acts along with her siblings rather than alone:

Aftur that He was iwend, Marie wax egleche;
 Crist hire havede aboute isent to sarmoni and to preche.
 To sunfole men heo was ful rad to wissi and to teche. (*Legendary* 157-159)

Here, she threatens the prince at night, and he and his wife convert. She again shows deference to the patriarchal Church sending them to Peter to learn (285). When the Prince's wife and child seem dead, the Prince, in a sense like Abraham since his son is also eventually saved, offers them to God, though blaming Mary for their death:

"Marie Maudeleyne," quath the prince, "alas, that evere kneu ich thee! . . .
 Mi wif and mi yungue child, Marie, ich bitake
 To Jhesu Crist, thi owene Loverd, that alle thing of nought gan make,
 That, yif He is so corteys and mightful ase thou seidest to me,
 He save mi wif and mi child, furfare that ich ne be." (390, 396-99)

After Peter teaches him, he sends him home unbaptized; he finds his wife and child alive; he is baptized by Maximus along with all the people of his land, with Mary, Martha and Lazarus acting as sponsors (527-30). She then goes and lives in the wilderness for thirty years fed by "angeles mete"—manna.

The Digby Mary Magdalene is an incredibly interesting play that makes use of the canonical gospels, apocrypha, and legend. And often changes place and time, in ways not common in prose and cycle drama at this time that generally observe chronological linearity.

Scenes of the leaders of Rome worrying about their their position and hold on their people add a political dimension; scenes from Scripture keep orthodox theology in the forefront. Scenes in the temple of Mohammad not only denounce pagan religion but also add comic relief (for example, "A fart, master, and kisse my grenne" l. 1170), as do the scenes of the sailors which also add a contemporary flavor to the play:

For swich a cramp on me sett is,
 I am a point to fare the worse;
 I lie and wring till I pisse . . .
 Nothing butt a fayer damsell
 She shold help me. (ll. 1407-10, 1412-13)

As Bevington points out, "the play includes historical or legendary enemies of Christians, such as Tiberius Caesar, Herod, Pilate and the king of Marseilles . . . members of her family, sailors, tavern keepers, and so on. . . . actions occur simultaneously, for example Mary sleeps in her arbor while Simon invites Christ to his banquet, and later the king and queen of Marseilles enjoy a feast while a devil bemoans the harrowing of hell" (688-89).

The play uses the apocrypha in establishing her converting as do the male apostles, and in this play her siblings, who were not witnesses to the risen Christ and much of his private teaching, do not accompany her. The legendary materials, the castle, the materials surrounding Marseilles, are still there with a few significant differences worthy mentioning here. The king agrees to convert, if Mary makes sure he first gets the heir he desires. She tells him she can't guarantee that, but that if he converts, he "may" get his wish (ll. 1567-74).

In both *Legenda Aurea* and *The Early South English Legendary*, he and his wife agree to accept Christ and ask for a son in return, which happens immediately, making it sound more like a contract between the King and God; she preaches of the creation, and according to Coletti, uses *Daniel* and delivers something quite close to the Sermon on the Mount (145); whether this would be considered preaching or not at the time is controversial.

Clearly the issue is Paul to the Corinthians 1 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which say women are not to preach; though Ehrman argues that the first is a later addition and that Timothy was not written by Paul (*Misquoting* 181-183, *Lost* 37 and Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament* 289-90). It may seem odd given his relations with women leaders and the earlier instructions for women to participate in church in 1 Corinthians, though Paul was clear that they were always to be subservient to men. Even in the Middle Ages, there was the issue as to whether this edict not to preach meant only in the pulpit. Dixon says Mary does nothing which challenges or transgresses clerical authority, and she is certainly correct in saying she cannot and does not baptize or administer the Eucharist or last rites (221-44). She finally convinces the king to convert and to abandon his "lewdness" by appearing at night with two angels (*Digby Mary Magdalene* ll. 1618-19). Rather than converting out of fear after being threatened a sin the contrived vision as in earlier texts, he is convinced by the "marvellous shewing in my sleep" (1621). The queen tells him the vision must have been sent from God (l. 1670).

Mary sends the King and Queen to Peter to be made Christians and baptized (*Digby* 1701)--and again the queen and baby are left for dead on a rock--but here upon their return to Marseille, they are charged with converting their people. Mary then becomes an ascetic, retiring to the wilderness as can be found in other hagiographies. Saints and angels descend from heaven and raise her from earth to feed her manna daily, as Jesus directs (*Digby* 2003-2039).

Her daily ascension remind the audience of the Assumption of the Virgin and Christ's ascension, making its function as a formulaic image. Coletti notes (124) that the king also addresses her with "hail Mary" (175), and the play deliberately works to conflate the two Marys to create a salvation history and foster the vernacular religious experience of the people of this period (171-179). Finally, we actually witness, through the priest, her soul ascend into heaven: "Now receive we this sowle, as reson is/ In heven to dwelle us among" (2118-19). Though she does not ascend in body as does the Virgin Mary, this veneration of Mary appears to place her closer to Christ and his mother in heaven, placing her above other saints and Christians in heaven and again indicates that Christ favors her.

Interestingly, a priest in vestment is required to witness this event; Davidson says this is done so the priest can turn to the audience and deliver the moral to "live in imitation of the saint who is the model of penance For the drama was designed to inspire intense religious devotion for which Mary was understood to be the greatest example of sinner saved through total alignment of her will [with Jesus]" (87).

Coletti observes that Norwich had a disproportional amount of female religious, and East Anglia has a large population of devout Christian women engaging feminine religious subjects, symbols, and experience (44). Most importantly, this passage recognizes the conditions of the sacraments: a priest being present to deliver extreme unction as well as seeing that her body is properly interred (ll. 2091-92), respecting the canonical laws of the time and reminding the audience of that need in their own live. The priest is also presented as the only one reverent enough to witness the ascension of her soul and see angels. Coletti contends that this is a nonconformist pre-Reformation text (144). The play does adheres to the orthodox position on the sacraments, reinforcing that this is the manner in which the audience is to engage in them, and incorporates traditional views of Mary Magdalene already known, while offering insights into vernacular religion at the time. Plays were unpopular among Reformists, the last probably performed in the 1520s and banned in 1534.

I would argue that *Digby* represents a further movement toward the written end of the spectrum of oral-written tradition, where the individual writer takes care to make his mark, particularly in the non-linear inclusiveness of orthodox materials, as well as apocrypha and legendary materials stemming from different eras and covering different geographic regions. Some of the legendary thematic material, such as her mission to Marseille and conversion of Provence, were most probably orally transmitted, and then performed, first aural, and later visual in performance and play, replicating some oral traditional elements. The image of the repentant sinner is still powerful today as being to which an image ordinary people can aspire. Ironically, that one mistake that is based in the canon—the confusion of her identity—was not corrected until the twentieth century.

Women obviously become a problem for the emerging Catholic Church as it established itself as a patriarchal institution in the fourth century. Despite the aid women offered converting men—having taught and preached Christian messages—the clergy found the need to limit their influence. While Roman women enjoyed more freedom than Jewish women, Rome did not renounce male supremacy.

Over the following centuries, as men rose to control the Church, in their need to establish their supremacy and authority, they felt a need to limit women's positions. Often texts, particularly those propagated as orthodox, were altered to legitimize the limits on women's behavior and actions as Christians, as Ehrman observes in *Misquoting Jesus*, almost every instance in which an alteration to a text concerning the behavior and demands upon women led to "limit[ing] the role of women and minimiz[ing] their importance in the Christian movement" (183).

Historical and political forces, as well as theological, determined the canon. When Constantine embraced the Church and credited God for his success in creating the Holy Roman Empire (Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* 250) and the Synod of Hippo met and codified the New Testament, material concerning women was deemed heretical—such as that produced by the Gnostics and other sects—and all were ordered destroyed. Still Christianity, until the time of the printing press and advances in literacy, was subject to oral tradition, performance, and word-of-mouth transmission. The rediscovery of early texts has made it evident that some of these forbidden texts survived.

In addition to the relatively recent discoveries, if we look at the materials available to us through the first fifteen hundred years, we must conclude that these stories were kept alive through oral renderings as well as by occasional being transcribed; literate authors may also have been intrigued enough by some of these stories to write their own versions, since obviously some remnants of earlier texts and traditions are found in their work.

We have investigated the history and fates of the stories of two women who made their first appearance in the first century C.E. Through their long oral-written tradition, their stories were likely subject to emendation, as deemed appropriate by performers and authors as well, as for the audience of the time. Familiarity with known liturgical and legendary words and images and the ability to recognize elements that spoke to the socio-historical situation of the audience, as well as devices that made the telling more entertaining and memorable, may have all been factors in what was added and kept, just as that which disturbed listeners as being heretical, insignificant, or poorly told may have influenced what passages and stories were deleted. Changes in form, as from prose to poetry, as well as the status of the various forms throughout history, and the quality of the translation from one language to another may also have affected the survival and accuracy of material. What may be best to remember is that this was not a literate age in the way that we would describe ours. The Middle Ages is an era in which literacy was aural; oral tradition was most important even while some written text were being produced and read.

The first fifteen hundred years of the common era was a time when oral and written traditions intertwined to such an extent that we will never be able to separate them. Accepting that was probably the case takes nothing away from the literature but instead challenges us to illuminate the reception of textual material in its real historical context.

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