

To Touch or Not to Touch The “*Noli me tangere*” and “Incredulity of Thomas” in Word and Image from Early Christianity to the Ottonian Period

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Introduction

The goal of this paper is to begin an inquiry into the relationship in both word and image between the *Noli me tangere* and what I consider to be one of its natural foils, the Incredulity of Thomas.¹ This “pair” has been largely overlooked by scholars, probably because the events are not systematically linked in either the visual or verbal cultures. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from examining instances when they are paired, since both events are recorded only in the Gospel of John, and both present eyewitness testimony of Christ’s Resurrection that hinges on touch, or at least, proffered touch. When treated as *pendants*, the events highlight important questions about the probative value of the human senses in matters of faith, the relationship between gender and the senses, gender reversal, and apostolic primacy. This paper attempts to locate the earliest examples of the pairing in both word and image.

As shown in Part I, the issues raised by the comparison of the experiences of Saints Mary Magdalene and Thomas are engaged, directly and indirectly, by Early Christian writers, beginning in the 4th century. Nevertheless, there appears to have been a divergence between the verbal and visual cultures in Early Christianity: the Incredulity of Thomas can be found in early Christological cycles by the fourth to fifth centuries, while the *Noli me tangere* is not found until the ninth. Moreover,

¹ I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the International Conference, “*Noli me tangere*: Word, Image, Context” (Rome, Academia Belgica, April 1-4 2008) for inviting me to participate, for generously sharing their own work and ideas with me, and for asking insightful questions that helped me to delve deeper into issues I had raised. In particular, I benefited enormously from conversations with Drs. Barbara Baert, Esther de Boer, and Victor Schmidt. I would also like to thank Hector Gonzalez and Dr. Megan Cifarelli for reading this paper in draft form.

in early pictorial cycles, the doubting Thomas often appears in close proximity to representations of the *myrrhophores*, or myrrh-bearing holy women, a group that includes, but does not single out, the Magdalene. Such pairings allow visual artists to explore issues of sense engagement and the assignment of gender to sensory experience (issues raised by the pairing of the Magdalene and Thomas in the Gospel of John and exegesis), whilst eliding the more problematic issues posed by the *Noli me tangere* – the Magdalene’s privilege as the solitary, female witness to the Resurrection.

Part II briefly recapitulates some of the reasons for the growing devotion to Saint Mary Magdalene in the West beginning in the ninth century, setting the stage for the emergence of new Magdalenian iconographies in the visual culture, including the *Noli me tangere*. At this point, I argue, we begin to see the convergence of the visual and verbal cultures, as artists begin to create images of the Magdalene as a flesh and blood woman, full of the complexity and contradictions spoken of in feast day sermons, Easter dramas, and popular legend. At the same time, artists also begin a visual discourse specifically concerned with the nature and meaning of the interaction between the Resurrected Christ and the solitary Magdalene. As a natural outgrowth of this creative explosion, artists explore the differences between the experiences of the Magdalene and Thomas by juxtaposing the *Noli me tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas – giving visual form to some of the most difficult and compelling questions raised by that pairing – questions that until now were the province of the word, but not the image.

I. Early Christian Traditions: The Textual Culture

None of the four Gospels describes Christ’s actual Resurrection, that is, his emergence from the tomb. Instead, the accounts of Christ’s Crucifixion and death are immediately followed by details of the search for his missing body, and his post-Resurrection appearances. The four Evangelists offer proof of the Resurrection in the form of the testimony of Christ’s followers and persecutors. Their experiences – all that they did, heard, saw, touched, were forbidden to touch, doubted, and believed in the days following the Resurrection – confirm the veracity of this most sacred mystery. “He who saw it has borne witness,” John writes, “his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth – that you also may believe” (John 19:35).

Given the significance of the eyewitness testimony, it is extraordinary that the Gospel accounts all lead off with the experiences of women, most prominent among them Mary of Magdala. The three synoptic Gospels all essentially agree that she, in the company of other women, discovered that Christ had risen on the Sunday morning after the Crucifixion. There are nevertheless rather significant differences among these accounts as to the exact form of proof offered to the women – visual, aural, tactile, or spiritual – and to the role played by the women in the revelation of the news to the male Apostles. The most extraordinary account is found outside the synoptic tradition, in the Gospel of John, where it is the Magdalene alone who encounters the risen Christ, and she alone who brings the news to the men.

The Gospel of Mark

According to Mark (16:1-8), Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome set out for the tomb early Sunday morning to prepare Christ's body for burial, bringing aromatic oils or spices, such as myrrh. Since Christ was buried late on Friday evening just before the Sabbath, his followers were unable to complete the funeral preparations (*compare* Luke 23:49-54). Therefore, as soon as it was practical, the *myrrhophores* set out to the grave. As they approach the site, described earlier in this Gospel as a rock-cut tomb (15:46), they worry if they will be able to roll back the stone covering the entry. But when they arrive, they find the tomb already opened. They enter and see an angel of the Lord, dressed in white, who tells them Christ has risen. He asks them to spread the news to the disciples – but they are confused and afraid. They flee in fear and are disobedient, telling no one what they have seen.²

In the “longer ending” of Mark (16:9-11), Christ is said to appear *first* to the Magdalene on Easter morning. The author provides no other details, nor does he reconcile this longer ending with what was written earlier. Clearly, the passage is meant to align Mark's Easter narrative with those of the later Gospels, which feature the Magdalene more prominently. In this longer ending, the Magdalene brings the news of the Resurrection to the other mourners, thereby undoing the harm done by the first group of women, who refused to speak. And yet, no one believed her.

² On the silence of the women, see Gerald O'Collins, “The Silence of Three Women (Mark 16:8c),” *Gregorianum* 69 (1988) 489-503.

The Gospel of Matthew

According to Matthew (28:1-15), Mary of Magdala and “the other Mary” (the mother of James and Joseph) visit the grave of Jesus during the early morning hours on Sunday. As the women approach the rock-hewn tomb, an angel of the Lord wearing resplendent white garments appears to them. He pushes the stone covering out of the way to reveal the empty tomb. Soldiers, assigned by Pontius Pilate to guard the tomb, tremble and fall “like dead men,” and are thus deaf and blind to the revelations that follow (28:4). The angel tells the women that as prophesied, Jesus has risen from the dead. The women hurry away “with fear” and “great joy” to tell the disciples the news of what they have seen and heard. The women, in other words, have seen and heard enough – they believe the news of the Resurrection, and are willing to talk.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, their faith, the women are provided with physical proof of the Resurrection: Jesus appears to them, and they fall prostrate before him, clasp his feet. This is significant: the body of the Resurrected Christ is touched for the first time. Christ welcomes this gesture of humility and reverence, and instructs the women to “go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me” (28:8-10). The Gospel does not make clear whether the women deliver the news, although we can assume they act upon Christ’s request since the “eleven” make their way to Galilee, where Christ appears to them (28:16).

The Gospel of Luke

According to Luke (24:1-12), Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and an unspecified number of unnamed women visit the tomb early Sunday morning, bringing with them spices and perfumes. When they enter the open, empty, rock-cut tomb (23:53), they see two angels of the Lord dressed in dazzling garments, who tell them of the Resurrection. The women appear to believe without further proof – they neither see nor touch Christ. Moreover, they do as they are instructed and they bring the news of the Resurrection to the “eleven and all the rest.” As in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples do not believe them. Luke’s account also details Christ’s later appearances to the male apostles. When they do not recognize him, he reprimands them for not believing the women (24:25). When they appear terrified, he asks why they doubt, and invites them to look closely at him, and to touch him (“*[p]alpate me et videte*”) (24:38-39).

The Gospel of John

The Johannine account of the Resurrection is distinct from synoptic tradition. It is here, for example, that we learn that Christ was entombed in a garden, in “a new tomb where no one had ever been laid” (19:41). This description links the end of Christ’s life to the beginning of time and to the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8). The description of the virgin tomb also sets up a parallel between Christ’s birth to the Virgin Mary and his death and rebirth.

Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John then begins, “[n]ow on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.” She runs to find Simon Peter and “the other disciple” whom Jesus loved. Apparently confused, she says to the men, “[t]hey have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:1-2). As scholars note, the Magdalene’s use of the pronoun “we” is confusing, and suggests that, at first, she visited the tomb with the other women.

Upon hearing her news, Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb. Peter enters first and is confused by the sight of the discarded graveclothes; when the beloved disciple enters, he sees the same graveclothes and “believe[s].” It is never made clear what he believes – the truth of the Resurrection or Mary Magdalene’s words – since the next sentence implies that the men had not reached a full understanding. “[A]s yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (20:3-9). Indeed, the men give no indication that they understand the meaning of the empty tomb. They tell no one what they have seen, and instead, return home.

The Magdalene remains at the tomb after the men have gone, weeping. She peers into the tomb once again, only to see two angels dressed in white. They ask why she is crying, and she replies, “Because they have taken away my Lord: and I know not where they have laid him” (20:13). She then turns toward an approaching gardener, who also asks why she is crying. She asks if it was he who removed the body. Instead of answering her, he addresses her by name. When she hears her name spoken, she recognizes that the gardener is Christ in disguise. She turns toward him again, calling him “*Rabboni*,” or teacher. The Gospel does not mention what if anything happens next, except that Christ says, “*noli me tangere*” (do not touch me) for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your

Father, to my God and to your God” (20:17). She runs and tells the male disciples, “I have seen the Lord; and these things he said to me” (20:18).

Saint Thomas was absent when the Resurrected Christ appeared to the other apostles later that evening (20:19). As a result, he did not believe the others when they told him the news. According to John, Thomas proclaimed that unless, “I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger in the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (20:25). One week later, Christ appeared to Thomas and the other men – entering through a locked door, and offering Thomas the proof he sought. “Put in thy finger hither and see my hands; and bring hither thy hand, and put it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing” (“*Infer digitum tuum huc et vide manus meas et affer manum tuam et mitte in latus meum, et noli fieri incredulous sed fidelis*”) (20:27). The Gospel gives no actual proof that Thomas acted upon Christ’s offer to touch. Instead, the apostle proclaims, “My Lord and my God!” Christ responds, “Because thou hast seen me, Thomas, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed” (20:29).

The Writings of the Church Fathers

As literary foils, the experiences of Saints Mary Magdalene and Thomas raise important questions about the probative value of the human senses in the acquisition of knowledge and faith – particularly hearing, sight, and touch. It is not surprising therefore that the issue of the Saints’ sense engagement is addressed by Church Fathers beginning in the 4th century.³

³ Of course, other non-canonical Early Christian or Gnostic texts are important to understanding both the identity and experiences of the Magdalene. I limit myself to canonical texts, because these are the writings that are most important for the formation of the Early Christian visual culture discussed later. Moreover, the Gnostic texts discuss the Magdalene’s experiences as a follower and interlocutor of Christ, and as a rival of the male apostles, but do not compare her experiences directly to those of Saint Thomas, nor is the issue of touch treated at any great length. For the Magdalene in Gnostic literature see Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); and Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); id., *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources Behind the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2006); see also Ellen de Boer’s essay in this volume.

To Touch or Not to Touch

The words used to describe the act of touching in the Johannine Gospel are varied. Christ’s invitation to Thomas seems rather literal: *infer digitum tuum*, and *affer manum tuam et mitte in latus meum*. The phrase *noli me tangere* is more ambiguous. *Noli me tangere* or *noli me trattenere* is the Vulgate translation of the Greek (*mê mou haptou*). Exegetes have long argued about whether the syntax of the original phrase implies an on-going action, and thus that Christ’s words meant “do not hold on to me,” or “do not continue to cling to me,” rather than “do not touch me.” This is not the place to resolve such issues.⁴ What is important is the fact that writers of the Early Church repeatedly interpreted the phrase *noli me tangere* to refer to an actual or proffered touch – even though such a literal interpretation raised some troubling questions that then had to be addressed.⁵ Did the Magdalene attempt to embrace or touch Christ? Did she succeed? Were Christ’s words meant as a reprimand or a rebuff? Why? Was it because the Magdalene was a woman? Was there another reason, such as her initial confusion as to Christ’s identity? Was John suggesting that Christ did not wish to be touched because he was in a transitional state – somewhere between Resurrection and Ascension?

For example, in response to an inquiry from the Roman matron Marcella, Saint Jerome (342-420) addresses the question of how to understand the Magdalene’s touch – differentiating between her experience as a *myrrhophore* in the Gospel of Matthew, where she was allowed to touch Christ, and in John, where she was not. In John, Jerome explains, the Magdalene does not yet believe in the Resurrection – thus she cannot touch.⁶ Saint Ambrose (342-397) reaches a similar conclusion, explaining further that the Magdalene’s inability to touch is linked to the fact that she is less “perfect” than the male disciples.⁷ “[T]he Resurrection cannot come

⁴ I leave this task to Prof. Dr. Reimund Beiringer, whose exegetical analysis in this volume, “Touching Jesus? The Meaning of μή μου ἅπτου in Its Johannine Context,” demonstrates that the original meaning of the phrase *mê mou haptou* was in fact, “do not touch me.”

⁵ The work I present herein is drawn largely from my dissertation. Lisa M. Rafanelli, *The Ambiguity of Touch: Saint Mary Magdalene and the Noli me tangere in Early Modern Italy*, Ph.D., New York University, 2004 (unpublished), especially Ch. 1. De Boer, *Cover Up*, now provides the most thorough and accessible compilation of translated Early Christian texts dealing with Mary Magdalene.

⁶ Letter 59.4, cited and translated in De Boer, *Cover Up*, 101-102.

⁷ “Quia resurrectio non facile nisi a perfectioribus capi potest, fundatioribus hujus fidei praerogativa servatur: Mulieribus autem docere in Ecclesia non permitto, domi viros suos interrogat (1 Cor 14:35). Ad eos ergo mittitur, qui domestici sunt: et accipit

easily into one's reach, but only of those who have made further progress."⁸ She must go to them for guidance. He then quotes scriptural support for the fact that women are not able to teach in the gathering.

One might argue that this reasoning reveals the disquiet many men felt in reconciling the privileged status of the Magdalene as first and solitary witness to the Resurrection, to say nothing of her "apostolic" role, with cultural and ecclesiastical assumptions about women's inferiority, untrustworthiness, and legal incapacity. This ill-will is more forcefully articulated in the Gnostic tradition; Ambrose comes up with a more oblique criticism. Perfect understanding is a prerequisite to the right to touch; and in turn, touch (inevitably a male prerogative) confers authority to offer public testimony. This interpretation *implicitly* privileges the experiences and apostolic primacy of the men, and in particular it would seem, Saint Thomas.⁹

Augustine explicitly rejects the notion that Christ would not allow himself to be touched by a woman. Not only was Christ borne of a woman, but in the Gospel of Matthew, the *myrrhophores* clasped Christ's feet.¹⁰ He also struggles over reconciling Christ's admonition to the Magdalene with his more indulgent response to the male apostles (Luke 24:38-39), and even more dramatically, his invitation to Saint Thomas. To Augustine, Christ's words to the Magdalene concealed a sacred mystery.¹¹ *Tangere* must be understood as a metaphor for belief. He who believes in Christ, touches Christ.¹² Thus, Christ's admonition must have been meant to

praescripta mandata (1 Tim 2:19)," *Expositionis in Lucam, Lib. X*, PL 15, col. 1845; see also De Boer, *Cover Up*, 102-103.

⁸ Translation from De Boer, *Cover Up*, 103.

⁹ It must be said that Ambrose came up with a number of strategies seemingly designed to deny the Magdalene her privileged status as first witness. It is he who suggests that although the Gospels are silent on the issue, Christ's devotion to his mother was so great that he must have visited with her first (and therefore not the Magdalene) immediately after the Resurrection: "Vidit ergo Maria resurrectionem Domini: et prima vidit et credidit," Ambrose, *Liber de Virginitate, Caput III*, PL 16, col. 270. For the iconography of the appearance of Christ to his mother, see Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); James D. Breckenridge, "Et Prima Vidit': The Iconography of the Appearance of Christ to his Mother," *Art Bulletin* 39 (1957) 9-32.

¹⁰ "Si feminam horreret, non nasceretur ex femina... Ipse enim narravit, occurrisset mulieres Dominio resurgenti, in quibus erat et ipsa Maria, et tenuisse pedes ejus," *Sermo CCXLIV in diebus Paschalibus XV*, PL 38, col. 1149; see also id., *In Joannis Evangelium, Tractatus CXXI*, PL 35, col. 1956ff.

¹¹ "Restat ergo ut aliquod in his verbis lateat sacramentum," *In Joannis Evangelium, Tractatus CXXI*, PL 35, col. 1957.

¹² "Sed ille tactus fidem significat. Tangit Christum, qui credit in Christum," *Sermo CCXLIII in diebus Paschalibus XIV*, PL 38, col. 1144.

urge the Magdalene to believe in the right thing: “do not lose heaven by touching earth; do not fail to believe in God by clinging to the Man in Christ.”¹³ In putting it this way, Augustine implies that the Johannine prohibition against touch should not be understood literally.¹⁴

Some commentators were critical of Thomas for his initial lack of faith,¹⁵ but most turned vice into a virtue, and rationalized his need to touch. Thus, for example, Saint Leo the Great (461) suggests that Thomas did not actually doubt in the Resurrection, but professed doubt for the benefit of the faithful.¹⁶ Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) argues that the Magdalene was ultimately *less useful* to believers than Thomas: his doubt persists longer than hers, and the proof he is offered gives believers greater opportunity to affirm their own faith.¹⁷ Augustine’s equation of touch with belief also made the Saint’s doubt seem less egregious, especially since we are never told in the Scripture whether his touch is actually consummated. Augustine muses, however, that it is “better not to touch Him with one’s hands and to touch Him by faith, than to feel Him with one’s hands and not to touch him by faith.”¹⁸

¹³ “Noli tangendo terram, coelum perdere; noli remanendo in homine, in Deum non credere,” *Sermo CCXLIV in diebus Paschalibus XV*, PL 38, col. 1150.

¹⁴ Such a position seems more closely allied with non-canonical Early Christian traditions. For example, the Manichaean Psalm II, 187, describes the garden encounter recorded in the Gospel of John in similar terms, where touch is directly equated with knowledge. For a full translation, see Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 204-206. It is believed that for a time, Augustine was a follower of Manichaeism, a radical and ascetic movement of the third century. For more on the Magdalene in Manichaean texts, see J. Kevin Coyle, “Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?,” *Le Muséon* 104 (1991) 39-55.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Chrysostom, *In Joannem Homil. LXXXVII*, PG 59, cols. 473-478.

¹⁶ *Sermo CLXII (a) De Pascha, IV (b)*, PL 39, col. 2064. Aquinas also rebukes Thomas, although he reasons that faith is not excluded unless a man refuses to believe anything except that which he sees. Quoting Gregory the Great, he adds that this was not the case with Thomas because he saw one thing: the wounds, but believed in another: God (“vidit vulnera, et credit Deum”). A more perfect faith does not need assistance (“[e]st autem perfectioris fidei qui non requirit hujusmodi auxilia ad credendum”). Saint Thomas Aquinas, “The Resurrection of the Lord (3a: 53-59), Article 5, 55-57,” *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964-). For a more extensive review of the exegetical history of the Doubting Thomas, see Sabine Schunk-Heller, *Die Darstellung des ungläubigen Thomas in der italienischen Kunst bis um 1500 unter Berücksichtigung der lukianischen Ostentatio Vulnerum*, Beiträge zur Kunstwissenschaft, 59 (Dissertation, München, 1995); and Ulrich Pflugk, *Die Geschichte vom ungläubigen Thomas in der Auslegung der Kirche von der Anfängen bis zur Mitte des 16 Jahrhunderts* (Dissertation, Hamburg, 1966).

¹⁷ “Minus enim mihi Maria Magdalene praestitit quae citius credidit quam Thomas qui diu dubitavit,” *Homiliarum In Evangelia, Homil. XXIX*, PL 76, col. 1213.

¹⁸ “Viri non potuerunt eum tangere nisi in terra, mulieres eum habebant tangere in coelo? Quid est ergo tangere, nisi credere? Fide enim tangimus Christum: et melius est

And of course, true faith should ultimately transcend the limitations of the senses. “[K]nowledge is attributed to the mind, whether the object of its perception and recognition came to it through the bodily senses or through the mind itself... [Thus] the Lord himself said [to Thomas] ‘Blessed are they that have not seen and have believed’.”¹⁹

No commentator goes so far as to suggest that the Magdalene somehow had a more intellectual understanding of the divine truth of the Resurrection than Thomas precisely because she did not touch, even though most agree it is better *not* to touch Christ. Nevertheless, the verbal culture reveals a hint of discomfort with this undeniable – but unstated – possibility. In the Gnostic tradition, the fears are overtly expressed. In the second century “Gospel of Mary” (9:5–10:16), the Magdalene describes her vision of the Resurrected Christ to the gathered disciples, and Saint Peter responds harshly: “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?”²⁰

Patristic exegetes seem to have responded to this same fear. Why else would Ambrose make touch a prerequisite to the offering of testimony (again, implicitly privileging Thomas)? Why else Gregory the Great would argue that the Magdalene was ultimately *less useful* to believers than Thomas? We might also ask whether such concerns informed Gregory the Great’s late sixth-century sermons “clarifying” the parameters of the Magdalene’s identity. Whether intended or not, these sermons *neutralize* some of the discomfort caused by the Magdalene’s status as first and solitary witness to the Resurrection, and have consequences for our understanding of the Magdalene’s touch. Henceforth (at least until the question was revisited during the Reformation),²¹ Mary of Magdala was identified as

manu non tangere, et fide tangere, quam mano palpare, et fide non tangere. Non magnum fuit manu Christum tangere,” *Sermo CCXLVI in diebus Paschalibus XVII*, PL 38, col. 1155.

¹⁹ Augustine, “On Seeing God,” *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*, trans. M. L. Clark (New York: Paulist Press 1984), Ch. 8, 370.

²⁰ “I saw the Lord in a vision and I said to him, ‘Lord, I saw you today in a vision’. He answered and said to me, ‘Blessed are you that you did not waver at the sight of me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure’. I said to him, ‘Lord, now does he who sees the vision see it through the soul or through the spirit?’ The Savior answered and said, ‘He does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which is between the two...’” Translated in Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 112–113. For more on the Gospel of Mary, see Karen L. King, “Prophetic Power and Women’s Authority: The Case of the ‘Gospel of Mary’ (Magdalene),” *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly M. Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1998), 21–41.

²¹ See generally, Anselm Hufstader, “Lefèvre d’Étaples and the Magdalen,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 16 (1969) 31–60.

the unnamed sinner who came to the house of the Pharisee to anoint Christ's feet (Luke 7:36-50, 8:2-3), the woman who anointed Christ in the house of Simon the Leper of Bethany (Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, John 12:1-8), and Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38-42, John 11:1-44). In other words, the Magdalene was not only a dear friend of Christ and a loyal follower,²² but also a penitent sinner, and a reformed prostitute.²³ Moreover, before the Resurrection, the Magdalene is not only allowed but encouraged to touch Christ for the purposes of doing him honor and performing an act of penance. The second touching episode, the *Noli me tangere*, can now be filtered through the lens of the first. Christ's appearance to the Magdalene is not only a reward for her devotion and penitence, and proof of Christ's love for even the most egregious of sinners, but there is now the implication that her proffered touch is rejected because it is tainted.

Gender and the Senses; Gender Reversal

The experiences of Saints Mary Magdalene and Thomas as recorded by John also raise a number of important questions about the relationship between gender and the senses. At the most basic level, the pairing is inclusive: both male and female followers of Christ are witness to the Resurrection. Nevertheless, the *Noli me tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas confuse expectations about normative gendered behavior.

Philosophical traditions dating back to Plato and Aristotle deem touch to be the most material, and therefore least intellectual sense. Not unexpectedly, in the patriarchal system of the West, somatic experience is associated with women.²⁴ This same system holds sight and hearing to

²² On the basis of the evangelical record alone, we know that Mary apparently came from the city of Magdala, that she was afflicted by seven demons or devils that were cast out by Christ (Luke 8:2-3, Mark 16:9). It is also said that she provided for Christ with her own resources in Galilee (Luke 8:3), implying that she was a woman of independent means.

²³ "Hanc vero quam Lucas peccatricem mulierum, Joannes Mariam nominat, illam esse Mariam credimus de qua Marcus septem daemonia ejecta fuisse testatur," *Homiliarum in Evangelia, Lib. II, Homil. XXXIII*, PL 76, col. 1239 (given in the church of San Clemente); and *Homiliarum in Evangelia, Lib. II, Homil. XXV*, PL 76, col. 1189 (given in S. Giovanni in Laterano during Easter week) ("Maria Magdalene, quae feurat in civitate peccatrix, amando veritatem, lavit lacrymis maculas criminis... venit ad monumentum").

²⁴ On this point, see generally Janet Martin Soskice, "Sight and Vision in Medieval Christian Thought," *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge 1996), 29-43. This disposition coincides with the division of the female and male principles or "cosmic-religious principles or archetypes" in the Christian tradition: the female principle signifies the

be the least material senses, and therefore most clearly associated with the intellect and the mind²⁵ – and as one might expect, male experience. And yet, it is a man, Thomas, who touches Christ, or at least *may* accept the offer to touch. Although it appears that the Magdalene attempts to touch Christ (as we would expect a woman to do) she is rebuffed. Ultimately she perceives the truth – presumably by higher sensory means – hearing, and sight.

The assignment of sensory experiences to the Magdalene and Thomas in John may have been meant to demonstrate that the world was turned upside down at the moment of Christ's death, creating, in effect, a gender reversal: Thomas touches, behaving more like a woman; the Magdalene does not, acting more like a man. Although it is not easy to find direct textual support for the idea that the Magdalene behaved as a man, we can find evidence of the discomfort this implicit possibility provoked by reading between the lines in canonical texts – in the denials and rationalizations found in the words of certain exegetes. Thus, Saint John Chrysostom (late 4th century) asserted that the deeds and strength of the *myrrhophores* were testimony only to the fact that the world was turned upside down at the moment of Christ's death.²⁶ The seeming indecorousness of Christ's choice to appear first to the Magdalene also bothered Saint Peter Chrysologus (c. 400-450), and led him to assert that Christ's appearance to the women in no way made the male apostles inferior.²⁷ As mentioned above, Ambrose adds that Christ in fact visited his mother (and not the Magdalene) first. In the Gnostic tradition, Saint Peter complains about Saint Mary Magdalene, stating “[w]omen are not worthy

realm of humanity and matter, the male, the realm of the intellect and heaven. For more on this issue, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 274.

²⁵ See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), Book I, 980a; and Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), Section 47, 107 (on the primacy of sight); but see also Aristotle, “On the Senses and Sensible Objects,” *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia and On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 437-439 (for the argument that hearing also makes a great contribution to wisdom). On the material nature of touch, see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), Section III. x. 11. For the hierarchy of the senses in the Western tradition generally, see David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); see also Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

²⁶ *In Joannem Homiliarum, Homil. LXXXV*, PG 59, col. 462 (“[i]nfirmitior sexus, fortior tunc apparuit: ita omnia tunc invertabantur”).

²⁷ *Sermo LXXX De Christi Resurrectione*, PL 52, col. 426.

of life.” Christ responds to him, “I myself shall lead her in order to *make her male*, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven (emphasis added).”²⁸

Gender and Apostolic Primacy

In many respects, the Magdalene acts with the capabilities and authority of a man: she hears and comprehends the Word of God, recognizes Christ, and tells the male disciples that she has seen the Lord. In offering this testimony, she not only behaves like a man, but she assumes apostolic primacy, however short-lived. The irony and theological challenge is of course that ancient Judaic law and custom required three witnesses for the substantiation of testimony against someone,²⁹ and forbade women, children, and slaves from testifying at all because of their presumed incompetence.³⁰ These requirements may explain why there are at least three women witnesses in the accounts of Mark and Luke, why the women in the Gospel of Mark are incapable of speech, and why the testimony provided by the Magdalene (in Mark), or by the *myrrhophores* (in Luke) is disbelieved. But they do little to explain why the women were asked to bring the news of the Resurrection to the men in the first place.

According to feminist theologians, this question is at the heart of the matter. Early Christianity (the “Jesus movement”) broke with Judaic and other ancient traditions by encouraging women to participate more fully in the faith.³¹ Not only were women disciples of Christ, but in certain cases, they also assumed ministerial and leadership roles. The elevated status of women in the new faith, the argument goes, can be read between the lines of the synoptic Gospels – and is testified to directly in the Gospel of John. Ultimately, of course, this would change – and the first century writings of Saint Paul would become the unequivocal position of the Early Church on the matter of female speech. “Let women keep

²⁸ From the third century Gnostic “Gospel of Thomas” (Logion 114), translated by Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 43-44. See also De Boer, *Cover Up*, especially Ch. 3.

²⁹ André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 123.

³⁰ Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 27.

³¹ On the status of women in the Early Church and in later centuries, see generally Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; Anderson and Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, 25, 67-84.

silence in the churches: for it is not permitted them to speak, but to be subject, as also the law saith. But if they would learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church" (1 Cor 14:34-35). "Let the woman learn in silence, withal subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve" (1 Tim 2:11-13). Thus, scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza contend, it is surprising that evangelical accounts such as the Gospel of John survive at all. The fact that they do shines a light into "the darkness of patriarchal repression and forgetfulness,"³² and helps to contextualize the charge of the second century critic, Celsus, that Christianity was based upon the ravings of a "half-frantic woman."³³

In Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition, the Magdalene's role as *annunciatrix* of the Resurrection would have been particularly startling had it been understood to confer legitimacy on female preaching.³⁴ Nevertheless, the Magdalene was at times identified as an apostle by Early Christian writers. As I argue in my dissertation, this identification is infrequent, and tends to appear in writings that examine the Magdalene's identity in a more poetic or metaphorical sense. As early as the third century, Hippolytus, a priest of Rome and Anti-Pope (and later, a martyr), refers to the figure of Mary-Martha as an apostle and a Bride in his exposition on the Cantic of Canticles (*De Cantico*, 24-25).³⁵ Jerome also specifically refers to Mary Magdalene as an apostle.³⁶

³² *Ibid.*, 334.

³³ Recorded in Origen, *Contra Celsus*, Book 2, Chapter 55, translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), Vol. IV, 453.

³⁴ Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), explores the ramifications of the Magdalene's identity as an apostolic figure and herald of the news of the Resurrection, finding evidence that female mystics and other heterodox and semi-orthodox religious groups in the Middle Ages turned to the Magdalene as an exemplar for female preaching.

³⁵ For analysis, see Victor Saxer, "Marie Madeleine dans le commentaire d'Hippolyte sur le Cantique des Cantiques," *Revue Bénédictine* 101 (1991) 219-240; and see now De Boer, *Cover Up*, 100-101, 108-109.

³⁶ *Epistola CXXVII Ad Principiam Verginem*, P.L. 22, col. 1090 ("prima ante Apostolos Christum videre meruit resurgentum"). According to De Boer, *Cover Up*, 113, Jerome is the first to use the term *apostolorum apostolae*. This appellation becomes much more common in the 12th century, when it refers to her legendary apostolate in France, and not to her role as *annunciatrix* of the Resurrection. See Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, Ch. 2. According to the *Legenda Aurea*, the Magdalene took up preaching during her stay in France. J. de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* (1266), trans. W. G. Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Vol. 1, 376.

It was more common to see Mary Magdalene or the *myrrhophores* characterized in what might be called tradition-bound ways that tended to neutralize their authority to speak by drawing attention to their feminine weakness.³⁷ For example, commentators drew sharp lines of distinction between types of speech, namely, public and private. Christ charges the male apostles with the evangelical mission: “Go in all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation...” (Mark 16:15). As noted earlier, when Ambrose made physical touch a *prerequisite* to understanding (and therefore to the giving of testimony), he dispatched handily of the Magdalene’s authority to speak publicly, and then closed the case by reiterating that the women only brought news of the Resurrection to the house of the disciples – a private forum within which they could appropriately speak.³⁸

Another commonplace was to make reference to the sinful nature of women. Thus, it was frequently said of the *myrrhophores* that they were given the honor of bringing the news of the Resurrection to the male apostles so as to undo the harm done by the first woman to speak – Eve.³⁹ Therefore, even though as a general rule women should be silent, the *myrrhophores* were able to speak and announce the Resurrection. Their words, however, did not constitute preaching – they simply provided a vehicle for female salvation. The rectitude of this logic can only have been strengthened by the Magdalene’s identification as a penitent prostitute.

³⁷ This corresponds to De Boer’s findings in this volume that the *Noli me tangere* became a motif in Early Christian texts only in the 4th century, and when it did, it was used to highlight female shortcomings.

³⁸ “Mulieribus autem docere in Ecclesia non permitto, domi viros suos interrogant (I Cor 14:35). Ad eos ergo mittitur, qui domestici sunt: et accepit praescripta mandata (I Tim 2:19),” *Expositionis in Lucam, Lib. X*, PL 15, col. 1845.

³⁹ See, e.g., *ibid.*, col. 1843 (“Per os mulieris mors ante processerat, per os mulieris vita reparatur”); Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium, Tractatus CXX*, PL 35, col. 1953 (“Hic secundus Adam inclinato capite in cruce dormivit, ut inde formaretur ei conjux, quod de latere dormientis effluxit”); Chrysologus, *Sermo LXXIV De Resurrectione Christi*, PL 52, col. 409 (“Vespere, inquit, sabbati quae lucescit in prima sabbati, venit Maria Magdalene et altera Maria videre sepulchrum. Sero mulier currit ad veniam, quae mature cucurrit ad culpam. Vespere quaerit Christum, quae in matutinis Adam se noverat perdisse.”); *id.*, *Sermo LXXX De Christi Resurrectione et secunda manifestatione facta mulieribus a monumento regredientibus*, PL 52, col. 426 (“Neque hic mulieribus apostoli postponuntur, sed mulier absoluitur a reatu, dum portat vitae, potat resurrectionis auditum, quae auditum mortis portaverat et ruinae.”); Gregory the Great, *Homiliarum in Evangelia, Lib. II, Homil. XXV*, PL 76, col. 1194 (“Ecce humani generis culpa ibi absciditur unde processit. Quia enim in paradiso mulier viro propinavit mortem, a sepulchro mulier viris annuntiat vitam; et dicta sui vivificatoris narrat, quae mortiferi serpentis verba narraverat.”)

The Visual Culture

There are no visual representations of Christ's Resurrection – that is, his actual emergence from the tomb – in Early Christian art. The *lacuna* in the visual culture parallels that of the textual culture. Once again, this fundamental tenet of the religion remains a matter of faith – it was not and could not be seen. As in the four Gospels, however, Early Christian artists represented the Resurrection as a *fait accompli*: by depicting either the arrival of the witnesses to Christ's empty tomb, or Christ's post-Resurrection appearances. These representations serve as “pictograms” or “pictorial synonyms” for the Resurrection, and make visible the testimony of the eye witnesses who were given sensory confirmation that Christ had Risen.⁴⁰

Among the earliest pictorial synonyms for the Resurrection found in both the Latin West and Byzantine East are the Incredulity of Thomas (John 20:24-29) (Fig. 3),⁴¹ the visit of the *myrrhophores* to Christ's tomb (Mark 16:1-8, Matthew 28:1-15, and Luke 24:1-12) (Fig. 1),⁴² and Christ's post-Resurrection appearance to the *myrrhophores*, referred to as the *Chairete* (χαίρετε, or “all hail”) (Matthew 28:1-15).⁴³ These motifs appear

⁴⁰ These terms are taken from Anna D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 19-20.

⁴¹ The iconography of the Incredulity of Thomas has been explored in depth by Schunk-Heller, *Ungläubigen Thomas*; see also Gertrud Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst* (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1971), III, 108-114. A dissertation in progress by Erin Behay, “The Pursuit of Truth and the Doubting Thomas in the Art of Early Modern Italy,” (Rutgers), promises to add to the discussion. In the earliest images, Christ reveals his wounds (*ostentatio vulneris*) to Thomas, who approaches with an outstretched hand and reaches up toward Christ's chest. He may or may not make direct contact, but the proffered touch is the dramatic impetus for the scene. The Byzantine type also consistently includes a setting, the *porta clausa*, through which Christ makes his appearance; whereas in the West, this door is often omitted, or is replaced by a gate or building.

⁴² An extensive analysis of this image type can be found in Gabriel Millet, *Recherches sur l'icongraphie de l'évangile aux XIV^e, XV^e et XVI^e siècles d'après les monuments de Mistra, de la Macédoine et due Mont-Athos* (Paris: E. Leroux 1916), 542-543; see also M. LaRow, *The Iconography of Mary Magdalen: The Evolution of a Western Tradition until 1300*, Ph.D., New York University 1982 (unpublished dissertation); and Rafanelli, *Ambiguity*, Ch. 1. There are a limited number of variations for the earliest images: the *myrrhophores* may number two or three, may approach the tomb (which can vary in form) from the left or the right, may be addressed by one or two angels, and may or may not be carrying ointment jars.

⁴³ Millet distinguishes between two basic *Chairete* types: the symmetrical or monumental, in which the women flank Christ, and the asymmetrical or narrative types, in which they approach from one side. The women may be kneeling or standing, and may number two or three. In Byzantine art, the women's hands are often covered, whereas they tend to be exposed in Western representations. For a review of the literature, see Rafanelli, *Ambiguity*, Ch. 1.

individually or in close proximity to one another in longer Christological narrative cycles by the fourth to fifth century, most notably on sarcophagi and on ivory carvings, although they probably emerged at an earlier date, in illustrated manuscripts.⁴⁴ The history of these image types has been written (and in certain cases, is being rewritten), and it is not my purpose to revisit what has been done so well by others. Instead, I want to draw attention to what is missing from this list: the *Noli me tangere*.

A Divergence between the Visual and Textual Codes?

Although one must always be sensitive to the vagaries of image survival, representations of Saint Mary Magdalene's solitary, Easter-morning encounter with the risen Christ as it is recorded in the Gospel of John (what will come to be known as the *Noli me tangere*) have not been found in Early Christian art.⁴⁵ By most accounts, the image type does not appear until the ninth to tenth centuries, and at first, only in the Latin West.⁴⁶ The apparent absence of Early Christian representations

⁴⁴ Of course it should be pointed out that Early Christian manuscripts, which have not survived the ages, are thought to have contained illustrations that came to serve as the models for iconographical motifs carried out later in fresco, mosaic, ivory, and stone. For more on this issue, see *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann, (New York: M.M.A., 1979), 405; and H. Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination: An Historical Study* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ It is important to note that a small number of Early Christian ivory carvings of Christ healing the woman with the issue of blood (the *Haemorrhissa*) have occasionally been misidentified as the *Noli me tangere*. As recounted in the Gospels of Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48, a woman suffering from chronic hemorrhages was cured by touching the hem of Christ's robe as he passed her in the street. According to Mathews, this scene was especially popular in Early Christian art because it represented Christ's miracle-working abilities. Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Ch. 3. Sharon Marie Salvadori, *Per Feminam Mors, Per Feminam Vita: Images of Women in the Early Christian Funerary Art of Rome*, Ph.D., New York University, 2002 (unpublished dissertation) demonstrates just how popular such depictions were. The similarities between the stories of the *Noli me tangere* and the *Haemorrhissa* are obvious. In both, a woman kneels before Christ and reaches out to him. There are, however, subtle but important distinctions between the stories that find their way into the visual code, and can help in the identification process: the absence of Christ's tomb in the *Haemorrhissa*, and the fact that the kneeling woman appears to reach out to touch Christ's garment or hem. For brief treatment, see Rafanelli, *Ambiguity*, Appendix I. The dissertation of Liesbet Kusters, *The Woman with the Hemorrhage (Mark 5:24-34): An Iconological Study of the Interpretation of the Haemorrhissa in Medieval Art (4th-15th century)* (Leuven, in progress), will undoubtedly clarify many issues, and add much to this discussion.

⁴⁶ Representations of the *Chairete* and *myrrhophores* remained the norm in the Byzantine East through this period, see generally Millet, *Recherches*.

of the *Noli me tangere* points to a divergence between the visual and verbal cultures. While Church fathers – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly – explored the theological meaning of the Magdalene’s solitary encounter with the risen Christ from the fourth century on, we do not have pictorial representations of the event known as the *Noli me tangere*.

Perhaps there was no need to represent the *Noli me tangere*, as the early pictorial tradition had richly detailed and decorous alternatives. The synoptic Gospel accounts, particularly Matthew, offered a variety of proofs of the Resurrection that included the Magdalene. Furthermore, representations of the *myrrhophores* characterized female experience in ways that did not present a challenge to the male hierarchy of the Early Church. Two (or three) women – not a solitary heroine exhibiting uncharacteristically male behavior – visit Christ’s tomb, motivated by love, a sense of duty, and a desire to complete the preparations for the burial, a traditional female task. They are instructed by the angel that the tomb is empty. They flee in fear, but also with great joy. When Christ subsequently appears to them, there is no ambiguity – they humble themselves before him, and reach out to touch his feet. This interaction demonstrates what might be called bodily hierarchies that conform to the philosophical traditions mentioned earlier: the lower body is associated with earthly matters, and the upper with more spiritual matters. As Augustine wrote, “pedes in terra, caput in coelo.”⁴⁷ These hierarchies parallel philosophical traditions differentiating between the efficacy of the senses – and the assignment of gender values to the relative senses – mentioned earlier.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that other post-Resurrection scenes found only in the Gospel of John, most notably the Incredulity of Thomas, were represented as early as the fourth to fifth centuries in the East and the West. In this case, it would seem that the ambiguity (specifically whether or not Thomas touches Christ) fueled the pictorial tradition. Thus, it was not the nuanced account of John that was avoided – only the *Noli me tangere*. And although it is admittedly speculative, I am inclined to believe that the avoidance was purposeful – that there was a reluctance to give visual form to the *Noli me tangere*, with all of its troubling evidence of female empowerment. This assertion seems to be supported by the fact that the Incredulity of Thomas was often paired with or placed

⁴⁷ Augustine, *In Epistolam Ioannis Ad Parthos Tractatus Decem*, http://www.augustinian.villanova.edu/Augustinian_Studies/John/jnep10.htm (accessed 6/21/2004).

in close proximity to representations of the *myrrhophores*. As stated earlier, such pairings allowed for the exploration of sense engagement and the gendered assignment of sensory experience, whilst eliding the more problematic issues posed by the Magdalene’s solitary experience.

The Sarcophagus of Saint Celsus, Milan

What is thought to be the earliest extant representation of the Easter morning visit of the *myrrhophores* to the tomb of Christ is found on the late fourth to early fifth century sarcophagus of Saint Celsus (Fig. 1), found in Santa Maria dei Miracoli presso San Celso in Milan.⁴⁸ From left to right, the pictorial program of the front panel of the sarcophagus includes the Nativity (Matthew 2:1-12, Luke 2:1-20), the Adoration of the Magi (Matthew 2:1ff.), Christ standing between (or giving the law to) Peter and Paul, the *myrrhophores*’ visit to the tomb (Matthew 28:1-15), and what is thought to be the earliest known representation of the Incredulity of Thomas (John 20:24-29). The left and right side panels, respectively, contain scenes of Moses drawing water from the rocks (Ex 17:1-7, Num 20:1-13), and Christ healing the woman with the issue of blood (Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48).

Because each event of this cycle is taken from a different scriptural source rather than a single narrative account, it is clear that each one was chosen not only for its content, but for its symbolic or typological value. The scenes highlight key moments in Christ’s life – from his birth to his death and Resurrection – and give visual form to a series of complex theological ideas, including the Incarnation, the recognition of Christ’s authority and sovereignty on earth and in heaven, the Resurrection, and the dissemination of the Word of God to the peoples of the world – the apostolic mission. The side panels speak of fluid-related miracles – emblematically enough, water and blood – and establish parallels between the new and old orders, while also referring to Christ’s sacrifice.

⁴⁸ The sarcophagus is said to contain the bones of Saint Celsus, who was martyred and beheaded in Milan during the reign of Emperor Nero. Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, is believed to have discovered the body of Celsus in 395, and brought the remains to the Church of the Apostles in that city. *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, rev’d and ed., H. Thurston and D. Attwater (New York: Kenedy 1956), Vol. III, 200. The relics were then moved to the Basilica of Saint Celsus. At a later date and on the order of Cardinal Schuster, they were transferred to the neighboring Santa Maria dei Miracoli presso San Celso. See generally *Santa Maria at Saint Celso*, Itineraries of the Christian Faith, 9 (Milan, 1998), 8. The sarcophagus is now part of an elaborate altarpiece by Camillo Procaccini (1555-1629), located in the left transept of the church.



Fig. 1. Sarcophagus of Saint Celsus
 Marble relief sculpture, Mid- to Late 4th or Early 5th Century C.E.
 Milan, Santa Maria dei Miracoli presso San Celso
 (Photo Credit: Santuario S. Maria dei Miracoli presso S. Celso – Milano)

The Pairing of the Myrrhophores and the Incredulity of Thomas

The two *myrrhophores* walk toward the tomb of Christ. A single, winged angel (a detail common to Mark and Matthew) appears above and to the left of the tomb, pointing toward the open door. While the second of the two women looks up at him, the first (presumably Mary of Magdala) looks down and into the empty tomb. The *myrrhophores* do not carry ointment jars to prepare the body for burial, although the figure identified here as the Magdalene does carry what appears to be a censer. Censers, which burn incense (such as myrrh), were commonly used in

funeral preparations, as well as in church ritual, where the censing of the altar recalls funeral rites and rites of purification before a sacrifice.⁴⁹ The inclusion of this detail thus gives both women, but especially Mary Magdalene, an official, even priestly air. It also strengthens the parallels between the Magi (who also brought Christ the gift of myrrh) and the *myrrhophores*, and between the place of Christ's birth with that of his death and rebirth. Although the relief vignette appears to be largely derived from the Gospel of Matthew, there are other inspirations. For example, grass appears under the feet of the women – a detail that is evocative of the sepulchral garden mentioned only in the Gospel of John. Moreover, the tomb is not shown to be a rock-hewn cave as it is described in synoptic accounts, but as a narrow, cylindrical, domed structure reminiscent of the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.⁵⁰

The visit of the *myrrhophores* to Christ's tomb on the Celsus sarcophagus immediately precedes (and is therefore juxtaposed with) what is generally thought to be the earliest extant depiction of the Incredulity of Thomas. These two events are derived from different evangelical accounts, and therefore their pairing is not a matter of narrative necessity, but a richly symbolic choice. These scenes provide compelling and varied visual evidence of Christ's death and Resurrection. In so doing, they engage in a visual discourse that parallels the visual culture by addressing the hierarchy and efficacy of the senses, and the role of gender, in apprehending and comprehending divine truth. Thomas, accompanied by another male figure, reaches over to touch the chest wound that Christ exposes and invites him to touch (*ostentatio vulneris*). He appears to make contact in this representation. In conformity with more Western types, the tomb of Christ substitutes for and makes reference to the *porta clausa*, which is otherwise not included.

The women are engaged in appropriate female behavior (they set out to prepare the body for burial). They are given visual and aural proof of

⁴⁹ E. Parker McLachlan, "Liturgical Vessels and Implements," *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Press 2001), 409.

⁵⁰ The erection of the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in the fourth century appears to have stimulated both general interest in and the appearance of representations of Christ's tomb. As Grabar shows, in Early Christian art from the mid-fourth century on, particularly in the Latin West, Christ's tomb appears as a small, centralized, domed edifice, as it is here. André Grabar, "La fresque des saintes femmes au tombeau à Doura," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 8 (1956) 16; on the tomb of Christ generally, see John Wilkinson, "The Tomb of Christ: An Outline of Its Structural History," *Levant* 4 (1972) 3-97.

the Resurrection – they hear the words of the angel, and see the empty tomb. And even though it was a theological and philosophical commonplace that sight is the highest of the senses, in this case the final proof of the Resurrection is tactile – and it is a man, Thomas, who touches Christ. In this regard, it is of great interest that it was Ambrose, who recovered the relics of Saint Celsus, who asserted that touching the risen Christ's body was prerequisite to the evangelical mission, and was a man's prerogative.

II. The Ninth to Eleventh Centuries – Expanding Discourses

As chronicled by Saxer, Jansen, and others, the cult of the Mary Magdalene grows from the ninth to eleventh centuries in the West, for reasons that include Benedictine and Cluniac devotion to the Saint, the emergence of feast day sermons dedicated to her, the emergence of a body of hagiographical literature detailing heretofore unknown aspects of her life, the growth of liturgical drama, and what appears to have been devotion to the Magdalene in the Carolingian and Ottonian courts. All of these factors contributed greater and more widespread knowledge about the Magdalene's life, and more widespread devotion to the Saint in the West – particularly as an exemplar of penitence. These factors, together with the expanded Christological imagery coming out of the Carolingian and Ottonian courts, set the stage for the emergence of new Magdalenian iconographies in the visual culture (including the *Noli me tangere*).⁵¹ It is at this point that we begin to see the convergence of the visual and verbal cultures, as artists begin to create images of the Magdalene as a flesh and blood woman, full of complexity and contradiction. It is also at this point that artists began a visual discourse concerned with the nature and meaning of the interaction between the Resurrected Christ and the solitary Magdalene, from time to time exploring the differences between the experiences of the Magdalene and Thomas by specifically pairing the *Noli me tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas.

⁵¹ What is presented here is drawn from my 2004 dissertation. I would also like to acknowledge a forthcoming, independently-prepared study by Barbara Baert and Liesbet Kusters, "The Twilight Zone of the *Noli me tangere*: Contributions to the History of the Motif in Western Europe (ca. 400-1000)," which contains many conclusions that parallel my own. I take comfort in having synergy with like-minded colleagues; nevertheless, I have tried to preserve my own wording and conclusions in this essay.

*The Textual and Popular Culture**Cult Devotion*

According to Saxer, there is evidence of heightened devotion to Mary Magdalene in the West by the eighth century, when her feast day, July 22, began to appear on liturgical calendars.⁵² Soon after the eighth century, the Saint's feast day became one of the most significant and solemn on the liturgical calendar, both in the secular church and monastic communities, especially the Benedictine and Cluniac.⁵³ The Magdalene's penitence (particularly now that the reasons for her penitence had been "clarified" by Pope Gregory the Great) appealed to the reform minded monks, as did certain other aspects of her personality that appeared for the first time in this period: her eremiticism. In a growing corpus of contemporary hagiographical literature, the Magdalene's identity was merged with that of hermit and former prostitute, Mary of Egypt.⁵⁴ At this point, the Magdalene's penitence came to be linked with a solitary life as a contemplative, ascetic hermit. Sermons and hymns written for the Magdalene's feast day expanded upon these themes.

The Sermo II In Veneratione Sanctae Mariae Magdalena

Perhaps the most influential medieval sermon written about the Magdalene during the early Middle Ages was the late ninth to early tenth century *Sermo II In Veneratione Sanctae Mariae Magdalena*, once

⁵² Bede's Martyrology (c. 720) marks the first appearance in the West of the Magdalene's feast day ("d. natale"), July 22. PL 94, col. 982 (cited by Victor Saxer, *Le Culte de Marie-Madeleine en Occident des origines à la fin du moyen âge* [Paris: Clavreuil 1959], 40-41).

⁵³ Saxer, *Le Culte*, 294-306. Prior to the eleventh century, the Magdalene's feast day, July 22, was a simple feast day (*ibid.*, 163), but by the twelfth century came to be observed with a full Mass, and in the thirteenth was often listed in liturgical calendars as a *double*. *Ibid.*, 165, 286-290; see also Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 135, and 426, Note 5. Saxer observes that there is no archetypical Mass for this feast day. Saxer, *Le Culte*, 169, 294. In most cases, however, the Apostles' Creed (a declaration of belief thought to be of apostolic origin) was recited. The only other woman to have this honor is the Virgin Mary. Anderson and Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, 387; Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, trans. Francis Brunner (New York: Benziger 1950-55), Vol. I, 470.

⁵⁴ By the ninth century, the so-called *Vita eremitica*, an account of Mary Magdalene's solitary life as a hermit after the Resurrection, appeared in southern Italy, perhaps penned by Byzantine monks. BHL 5453-5456; see now Jansen, *Making of the Magdalen*, 37, Note 62 (with additional citations). This *Vita* merged the Magdalene's life with that of Mary of Egypt. For the life of Saint Mary of Egypt, see Maria Kouli, "The Life of S. Mary of Egypt," *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saint's Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice Mary Talbot (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 65-93.

attributed to Odo, Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny (founded 910), but today thought to have been penned by an anonymous Clunian monk.⁵⁵ The sermon's author draws upon all available sources and paints a vivid portrait of a flesh and blood woman whose early life, motivations, descent into sin and eventual redemption were easily understood. This sermon, repeated annually on the feast day of the Magdalene at Cluny,⁵⁶ inspired countless other sermons, hymns, and *laude*. It also provided the foundation for later, well-known legendary *vitae* of the Saint, including that of Voragine. The Magdalene we meet now is a beautiful young maiden who comes from a wealthy, well-regarded family, who squanders her heritage by abandoning herself to a life of sin. Converted by Christ's teachings, she tearfully repents at the house of the Pharisee. She anoints the feet of Christ, and receives clemency. This sister of Martha and Lazarus, an exemplar of the contemplative way of life,⁵⁷ demonstrates extraordinary constancy to Christ during his trials. She remains by his side during the Crucifixion, and like the devoted Bride of the Cantic of Canticles, searches for him, her beloved, after his death. As a reward for her great devotion (and despite her scandalous past), she is given the privilege of being the first witness of the Resurrection. Christ's words to her during their garden encounter are less a rebuff than an attempt to elevate her mind, allowing her to bring the good news to the apostles. The author places great importance on her apostolic mission, and suggests that her announcement not only makes up for the sins of Eve, but also parallels the opening of the gates of paradise brought about by the Virgin Mary.

Liturgical Drama

A group of special ceremonies or embellishments for the Holy Week celebrations are believed to have been created in the tenth and eleventh

⁵⁵ PL 133, cols. 713-721; BHL 5439. On the question of attribution, see LaRow, *Evolution of a Western Tradition*, 88; see also Dominique Iognat-Prat, "La Madeleine du 'Sermo in Veneratione Sanctae Mariae Magdalene' attribué à Odon de Cluny," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 104 (1992) no. 1, 37-70.

⁵⁶ Haskins, *Myth and Metaphor*, 217.

⁵⁷ According to the Gospel of Luke (10:38-42) Christ praised Mary, the sister of Martha (identified as Mary Magdalene since the sixth century sermons of Pope Gregory the Great), for sitting at his feet and listening to him speak, while Martha did all of the household chores. When Martha complained, Jesus said to her: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful, and art troubled about many things: But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her." For the iconographical tradition, see Jane Couchman, "Action and Passio: The Iconography of the Scene of Christ at the Home of Mary and Martha," *Studi Medievali* 26 (1985) no. 2, 711-719.

centuries by Benedictine monks who, spurred on by Carolingian and Ottonian religious reform, sought to encourage piety and to make more vivid the meaning of the Mass. As Chauvin has demonstrated, the Magdalene's role as witness to and messenger of the Resurrection is an important part of these ceremonies,⁵⁸ which include the *Depositio* and *Elevatio* (marking the opening and closing of the Easter services with the placement of the Cross into a specially fashioned "sepulcher" on Good Friday and its elevation therefrom on Easter morning.)⁵⁹

The more expansive dialogue, or *trope*, the *Quem quaeritis* ("whom do you seek?"), was developed in the tenth century. It featured the *myrrhophores'* visit to Christ's tomb.⁶⁰ The *Quem quaeritis* was expanded throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries into a more elaborate Easter "drama," generally referred to as the *Visitatio sepulchri*. In this, the Magdalene is singled out and asked by the disciples, "Tell us, Mary, what have you seen along the way?" She replies, "[t]he sepulcher of the living Christ, and I have seen the glory of him."⁶¹ Thus, over time, the Magdalene arguably becomes the most important witness in the Easter "drama." The impact of this Magdalene on a semi-literate populous can not be underestimated – it offered a compelling reminder to artists, patrons, and parishioners alike of the Magdalene's importance as the primary witness to and messenger of the Resurrection.⁶²

⁵⁸ Mary John Chauvin, *The Role of Mary Magdalene in Medieval Drama*, Ph.D., Catholic University, Washington 1951.

⁵⁹ O. B. Hardison, *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 171; on the sepulcher as a liturgical prop, see Neil C. Brooks, "The Sepulchre of Christ in Art and Liturgy With Special Reference to the Liturgical Drama," *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature* 7 (1921) no. 2, 7-110.

⁶⁰ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), Vol. 1, 205. In the simplest versions of this *trope*, the Magdalene appears as one of the *myrrhophores* who approach Christ's tomb, and are asked by the waiting angels: "Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, Christicolae?" They respond: "Iesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o caelicolae." "Non est hic, surrexit sicut predixerat; ite, nunciate quia surrexit de sepulchro," the angels reply. Thus, the audience thus hears the news of the Resurrection proclaimed by the angels together with the "women." *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶¹ "Dic nobis, Maria, quid visisti in via?" the disciples ask. "Sepulchrum Christi viventis, et gloriam vidi resurgentis," she replies. *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶² For the importance of liturgical drama to the expansion of visual iconography in the Middle Ages, see Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France. The Twelfth Century: A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 126-153; Gustave Cohen, "The Influence of the Mysteries on Art in the Middle Ages," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 24 (1943) 327-343.

Devotion at the Imperial Court

There is also evidence that members of the Imperial court had a special devotion to the Magdalene. The court's ties to the Benedictine Order, which was partly responsible for the spread of Magdalenian devotion in the West, has been mentioned. There were also Cluniac ties. In 951, Emperor Otto I married Princess Adelaide of Burgundy, protectress of the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny.⁶³ Finally, there is a possible Eastern connection. In 972, the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto II, married the strong-willed and wealthy Byzantine Princess Theophanu. Saxer proposes that she may have brought an interest in the Magdalene with her from the East.⁶⁴ Mayr-Harting asserts that their son, Otto III, was deeply devoted to the penitent Magdalene,⁶⁵ a dedication he appears to have shared with his teacher, Saint Bernward of Hildesheim.⁶⁶

The Visual Culture

It is well known that the visual arts flourished under the Carolingian and Ottonian Emperors, particularly in the lavish illuminated manuscripts produced in Imperial *scriptoria*. Christological imagery was not only represented with new majesty and creativity in these manuscripts, but new scenes were also added to the traditional iconographical *reper-toire* – many of which focused on the hypostatic union of Christ's human and divine natures. As Mayr-Harting and Deshman, among others, have shown, such images were implicitly and often explicitly understood to

⁶³ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (New York/London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 44.

⁶⁴ Saxer, *Le Culte*, 358. LaRow, *Evolution of a Western Tradition*, 65-71, proposes that the Eastern monk Saint John Cassian brought an appreciation of the Magdalene as well as a passion for the eremitical way of life to the Provençal region of France as early as the fifth century.

⁶⁵ Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination*, I, 173.

⁶⁶ Partial evidence of this devotion is arguably found in the many representations of the Magdalene associated with Bernward, including Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene (Frontispiece for Gospel of Mark), Gospel Book of S. Bernward of Hildesheim, c. 1011-1014, Hildesheim, Cathedral Treasury, Cod. 18, folio 75v; and the *Noli me tangere*, top right panel, Bronze doors of Cathedral of Saint Michael Hildesheim, Germany, c. 1008-1015. Rafanelli, *Ambiguity*, Cat. Entries 13-14. To my knowledge, these doors are the first public monument containing a representation of the *Noli me tangere* – and the depiction of the motif needs to be understood in light of its public function. Adam S. Cohen and Anne Derbes, "Bernward and Eve at Hildesheim," *Gesta* 40 (2001) no. 1, 19-38, make a compelling argument that the iconographical program on the doors reflects Bernward's beliefs about the dangers posed by "seductive and insolent women."

refer to the human and divine natures of both Christ and the Emperor.⁶⁷ Although this is not the place for a litany of “firsts,” visual representations of Christ’s bodily Resurrection, in addition to the Magdalene’s anointing of Christ at Bethany (or at the House of the Pharisee), and the *Noli me tangere* appear to have entered the visual lexicon at this time.⁶⁸ Nor is this the place to rewrite a detailed history of beginnings of the *Noli me tangere* motif. I have done this work elsewhere, as have Baert and Kusters.

Nevertheless, it should be stated that the compositional and narrative strategies in what appear to be the earliest *Noli me tangeres*, are not fixed. For example, the *Noli me tangere* on Folio 63v of the ninth century Sacramentary of Drogo, is heavily dependent on earlier pictorial traditions (Mary Magdalene kneels partly and reaches out toward Christ’s lower body, reminiscent of the lead *myrrhophore* in the kneeling, asymmetrical variant of the *Chairete*). More importantly, little or no attention is given to the precise nature of her interaction with Christ.⁶⁹

Ottonian Art

By the Ottonian period, there are more numerous and nuanced representations of the *Noli me tangere*. It bears repeating that the Johannine

⁶⁷ See generally Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination*, 1, 60-61; Robert Deshman, “Christus rex et magi reges’: Kingship and Christology in Ottonian and Anglo-Saxon Art,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 10 (1976) 367-405.

⁶⁸ On the first images of the Resurrection of Christ – that is, his bodily emergence from the tomb, see Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 123 and Fig. 293; Schiller, *Ikongraphie*, III, 68-88; Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 131-133; Evelyn Sandberg-Vavalà, *La Croce dipinta italiana e l’iconografia della Passione* (Verona: Apollo, 1929), 339-345. For the Magdalene’s anointing of Christ at Bethany or at the house of the Pharisee, see Thomas Zeller, *Die Salbung bei Simon dem Pharisäer und in Bethanien: Studien zur Bildtradition der beiden Themen in der italienischen Kunst von den Anfängen im 9. Jahrhundert bis zum Ende des Cinquecento*, Ph.D. Frankfurt, 1997; Schiller, *Ikongraphie*, II, 27-28.

⁶⁹ Drogo was the Archbishop of Metz (844-55), and the illegitimate son of the first Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne. He maintained close ties with the Imperial court. Christopher DeHamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (Oxford: Phaidon 1986), 52; Peter Lasko, *Ars Sacra: 800-1200* (Harmondsworth/Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1972), 38. The Sacramentary was produced in Metz around 850 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Lat. 9428). For extensive analysis of this manuscript, see generally W. Koehler, *Die karolingischen Miniaturen* (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1960), Vol. 3, 143-62, and Plates 76-91; id., *Drogo-Sakramentar: manuscrit latin 9428, Bibliothèque nationale Paris* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1974). There are two *Noli me tangeres* in the manuscript. Folio 63v has a *Noli me tangere* found in the initial “D,” aligned with abbreviations for the rites of Holy Thursday. See Rafanelli, *Ambiguity*, Cat. 9. Folio 58r contains the *myrrhophores’* visit to the tomb, a *Chairete*, and another diminutive *Noli me tangere*.

text gives few specifics about the interaction between Christ and the Magdalene, other than the facts that she turns (twice, in fact) toward Christ, Christ is standing, and she perceives him to be a gardener. Ottonian artists begin to make choices about the Magdalene's posture, demeanor, attributes, and the Magdalene's and Christ's gestures and gazes, not to mention the details of the garden setting and the tomb, that draw on the rich descriptions available in the textual and popular cultures. In so doing, they begin a visual discourse that focuses explicitly on the exact nature of the Magdalene's interaction with Christ, creating prototypes for the motif that will be influential for centuries to come. And, as stated above, artists also explore the differences between the experiences of the Magdalene and Thomas to great effect.

The Codex Egberti

The late tenth century Codex Egberti, is a lavishly decorated *pericope* book.⁷⁰ This Codex may contain the earliest surviving Christological cycles of such a large scale. As Grzelak argues, the expansive nature of the cycle allows the individual illuminations to have more of an illustrative or story-telling function (as opposed to typological) – and encourages the reader to perceive correlations between text and image. Moreover, since the illuminations are often placed consecutively, they provide a visual flow that allows the reader to have an episodic visual experience paralleling the narrative flow. The Codex Egberti contains one of the earliest Ottonian *Noli me tangeres*, which is followed, two pages later, by the Incredulity of Thomas. This successive placement invites (even if it does not compel) comparison.

The Noli me tangere

The *Noli me tangere* (Fig. 2) appears on Folio 91r of the Codex Egberti, aligned with readings for Holy Thursday. The image is by necessity innovative – since it is one of the first of its kind – although, like the illumination in the Sacramentary of Drogo, it draws on prior pictorial traditions of the *myrrhophores*. It includes a tomb, two angels of the Lord, a tree, and the solitary Magdalene kneeling at Christ's feet. Nevertheless,

⁷⁰ The Codex Egberti was made for Egbert, the Archbishop of Trier (977-993), during the reign of Otto II, and was produced in Reichenau (Trier, Stadtbib., Codex 24). See generally Franz J. Ronig, *Codex Egberti der Stadtbibliothek Trier* (Trier: Spee-Verlag, 1977); Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination*, II, 70-81; and E. Grzelak, *The Christological Cycle of the Codex Egberti: A Study of Western New Testament Iconography* (Ph.D., Louvain Catholic University, 1976).

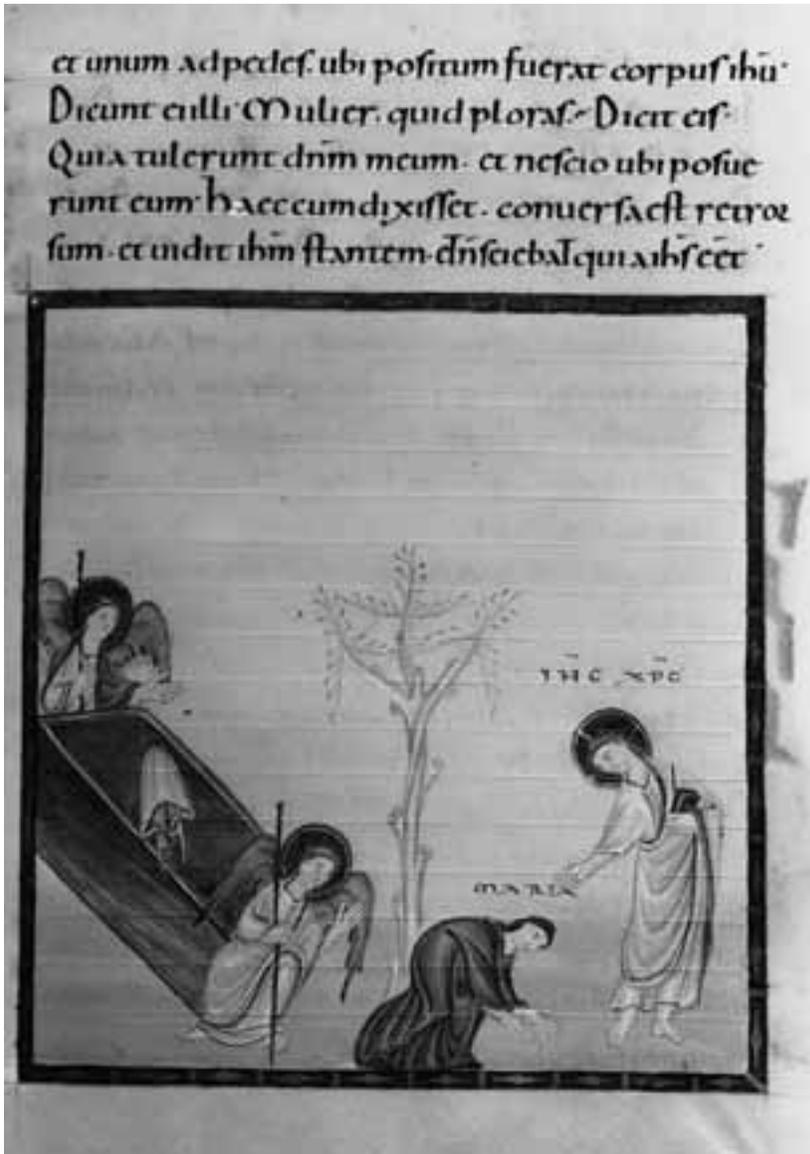


Fig. 2. *Noli Me Tangere*
 Codex Egberti (produced in Reichenau), c. 977-993
 Trier, Stadtbib., Codex 24, folio 91r
 (Photo Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, N.Y.)

new meaning is injected into the postures, gestures, and gazes of the protagonists – not to mention the setting – in light of the Johannine context.

The *Noli me tangere* is set in a garden symbolized by a single, conspicuous-looking tree that serves a compositional and thematic purpose. It separates the encounter of Christ and the solitary Magdalene (both identified by name), from the remainder of the scene to the left. The centrality and prominence of the tree also invites comparison with the Tree of Life, bringing to mind Christ's identity as a second Adam, and the Magdalene's as a second Eve. The anthropomorphic branches of the tree resemble the body of Christ on the Crucifix – thereby making explicit Christ's triumph over death, and the restoration of Paradise brought about by the Resurrection and Ascension.

To the left of the tree, two angels guard Christ's sarcophagus, in which we see the discarded grave clothes. There is no tomb edifice, only an open casket. The attending angels look on and signal the importance of the events unfolding in the foreground with the open-palm gesture of their left hands – a gesture that connotes speaking and bearing witness, as well as adoration.⁷¹ To the right of the tree, Mary Magdalene, who has turned away from the angels, prostrates herself before Christ, her eyes downcast. She carries no ointment jar or censer; instead, she reaches out for Christ's feet. Her supplicant gesture brings to mind the *myrrhophores'* encounter with Christ given visual form in the *Chairete*. As in the typical *Chairete*, the Magdalene's proffered touch is not consummated. Because she is alone, however, and because of the Johannine context, the Magdalene's gesture is subject to reinterpretation. Her stance and downcast gaze suggest that she is little aware of the drama unfolding literally and metaphorically above her head. Her gesture confirms the earth-bound nature of her thoughts – she reaches out for Christ's feet, because she is not yet ready to look up at Christ's face (“pedes in terra, caput in coelo”). The fact that her touch is unconsummated – a detail that becomes a standard part of the new image type – appears to give visual form to Christ's words: *noli me tangere*.

There is something new and complex about Christ's posture, as well, that gives visual form to many of the concerns debated in the verbal culture. Christ holds a book in his left hand, a traditional symbol of the

⁷¹ For more on this complex gesture, see Richard Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art: The Uses of Gestures to Denote Status in Roman Sculpture and Coinage* (New Haven, CT: Academy, 1963), 23–26, 30.

Christian scriptures, and of an elevated social and intellectual status. He extends his right arm in a gesture of greeting and blessing that again resembles the *Chairete*, but now there is a greater sense of reprimand and/or instruction built into his gesture of blessing, perhaps because his hand is poised above her head. Christ also appears to move away from the Magdalene with his lower body, while he simultaneously bends toward her with his upper body. This *chiastic* or bi-directional posture makes clear Christ's own ambivalence about leaving behind his earthly life and loyal follower, while also subtly suggesting rebuff. Christ avoids the Magdalene, while also seeking contact. He seeks to elevate her consciousness by calling her attention to spiritual matters (symbolized by his upper body) and away from mundane concerns (symbolized by his lower body). Christ's body language also conveys the impression that he is somehow straddling two worlds: no longer human, but nevertheless not fully ascended.

There is an intriguing correlation between text and image that should be pointed out. The *Noli me tangere* illumination accompanies the readings from Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John; and the reading spans from Folios 90v to 91v. The text immediately above the illumination, however, is from John 20:14 "... *conversa est retrorsum et videt [Iesum] stantem et non sciebat quia [Iesus] est*" ("she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus"). The placement may be a matter of coincidence, but it seems rather clear that the artist has chosen this precise moment to illustrate – the moment before the Magdalene recognizes her Savior – rather than the moment of proffered and rejected touch.

The Incredulity of Thomas

The Incredulity of Thomas also appears in the Codex Egberti, on Folio 92r (Fig. 3). As in the *Noli me tangere*, the actors are identified: Christ, Thomas, and three male apostles who accompany him. In certain respects, the composition is less innovative than the *Noli me tangere*, since it draws on the traditional *ostentatio vulneris* type, with Christ drawing aside his garment to allow Thomas to see and presumably touch the wounds. Thomas steps up onto a small hill, reaching out to touch. As is common in the Western type, the *porta clausa* is not represented. Although Thomas' touch is not consummated in the image, the text immediately beneath the illumination, "[i]nfer digitum tuum huc et vide manus meas et affer manum tuam et mitte in latus meum," makes clear that the prospect of touch is what provides the dramatic impetus for the illustration.



Fig. 3. Incredulity of Thomas
 Codex Egberti (produced in Reichenau), c. 977-993
 Trier, Stadtbib., Codex 24, folio 92r
 (Photo Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, N.Y.)

The Comparison

As stated above, the consecutive placement of these two illuminations invites comparison, but does not compel it. The comparison, however, is inevitable and quite revealing. The *Noli me tangere* is innovative, and creates a model for the motif that will inform countless later compositions. The Incredulity is somewhat traditional. The *Noli me tangere* is ambivalent about the issue of touch – an ambivalence that appears to be mirrored by the textual accompaniment. The image, like the text, focuses on the need for the Magdalene to understand, to look up, to achieve enlightenment. The image of the Incredulity of Thomas, with the words *infer digitum tuum* immediately underneath, is where issues of touch are engaged. When taken together, the pair of images transmits a traditional interpretation of the Resurrection events that is in keeping

with the writings of Church Fathers such as Jerome and Ambrose: the Magdalene does not touch because she does not yet understand; Thomas is given the choice because he does.

The Gospel Book of Otto III

It is in one of the most famous and opulent books produced in the Ottonian period, the Gospel Book of Otto III,⁷² that we find one of the first outright pairings of the *Noli me tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas. According to Mayr-Harting, while the Gospel obviously served a liturgical purpose, it appears to have been made principally for the private perusal of the Emperor. He cites as support for this theory the fact that so many of the illuminations are for liturgically insignificant feasts, and thus probably reflect the interests of Otto III.⁷³ It is also worth mention that the iconographical *repertoire* has been expanded in this manuscript to the point where the illuminators appear to have been compelled to combine a large number of scenes into single folios divided into two registers. Therefore, it seems almost a matter of course that when certain scenes are paired they will also be compared. In other words, the artists are given the multiple chances to juxtapose related themes, and to explore likeness and contrast, thesis and antithesis.

Folio 251r: The Noli me tangere and Incredulity of Thomas

It is in this context that we can better understand Folio 251r of the Gospel Book of Otto III (Fig. 4), which is aligned with the text of John 20:11-19. The full-page illumination contains Christ's empty tomb and the *Noli me tangere* in the top register, and Christ's appearance to the Apostles and the Incredulity of Thomas beneath. All four subjects give visual form to the variety of evidence the risen Christ offered to his followers in order to prove the truth of the Resurrection. The average believer must rely on the testimony of these witnesses recorded in the Gospels. For the viewers of this Gospel, the proof offered is given visual form as well. The juxtaposition of the *Noli me tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas on the right half of the page is of particular interest, because the *Noli me tangere* is so innovative, and because it is here that the palpability of

⁷² The Gospel book was made for Emperor Otto III in 998 in Reichenau just after his coronation on Ascension Day in 996. See generally *Das Evangeliar Ottos III: CLM 4453 der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek München*, ed. Florentine Mütterich and Karl Dachs (München: Prestel, 2001); and Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination*, I, 157-178.

⁷³ With the exception of the Nativity and Passion scenes, *ibid.*, I, 176.



Fig. 4. *Noli Me Tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas
Gospel Book of Otto III, produced in Reichenau, c. 998-1000
Munich, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek, CLM 4453, folio 251r
(Photo Credit: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, N.Y.)

Christ's body is more fully explored, and that the many issues raised by the pairing of these two events are finally addressed in the visual culture.

The composition of the Incredulity of Thomas is not, in and of itself, radically innovative. Indeed, it is quite similar to the illumination found in the Codex Egberti. As in that illumination, Thomas steps up to touch Christ, who exposes his wounds to the Saint. Touch is again the dramatic impetus of the vignette. Here, however, the Saint's hand seems to come closer to Christ, seemingly making contact. He is the only one in the entire image that touches Christ. Nevertheless, by highlighting Christ and the Saint's mutual gaze, the illuminator draws attention to the complexity of the interaction, setting up a tension between touch and vision as the basis of Thomas's belief. "Because thou hast seen me... thou hast believed," Christ says.

In the *Noli me tangere*, the nuanced and multivalent meanings of the gestures, postures, and gazes of Mary Magdalene and Christ are treated with even more new-found creativity. This creativity may spring from the energy that flows from having the representation of Thomas nearby, but it may also be fueled by details drawn from the textual and popular cultures. For example, the Magdalene rises from a kneeling position, and like Thomas, exchanges a gaze with Christ. It is important to remember that it was not an iconographical necessity for the Magdalene to look at Christ's face – or, for that matter, for Christ to return her gaze (*compare* Fig. 2). But once again, by highlighting the mutual gaze, the illuminator draws attention to the complex nature of their relationship. The Magdalene's upward gaze arguably shows her to be assuming a more privileged, elevated status akin to that of a man – indeed akin to that of Thomas – suggesting that she is becoming enlightened. Since there is a long tradition in the visual arts associating the upward gaze with men and with enlightenment,⁷⁴ it seems that the idea of gender reversal and of the Magdalene behaving like a man has now entered the visual code.

The mutual gaze of Christ and the Magdalene may have another dimension. Gazing into one another's eyes is the pastime of lovers, and the gaze of a lover was believed to mirror or reflect the true nature of the beloved's soul. (In this regard it seems worth recalling that in medieval homiletic literature, the Magdalene was compared to a mirror⁷⁵ – and,

⁷⁴ Jan Bremmer, "Walking, Standing and Sitting in Ancient Greek Culture," *A Cultural History of Gesture*, ed. J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 15-35, especially 23.

⁷⁵ Helen M. Garth, *Saint Mary Magdalene in Medieval Literature* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1950), 76-77 (with citations).

on occasion, her name was said to mean enlightened or illuminated⁷⁶). As Baldwin and others have shown, mutual gazing in the visual arts often signifies the reciprocal love of a matrimonial or amorous union, as well as the more spiritual love of the union between God and the human soul.⁷⁷ Thus, the mutual gaze of the Magdalene and Christ might simultaneously refer to her enlightenment, and to her identification with the Bride in the *Canticle of Canticles*. If so, another literary allusion has found its way into the visual culture.

The Magdalene not only looks up at Christ, she reaches out for him. In this case, she reaches for his outstretched hand. This is not insignificant, given traditional hierarchies of the body, and the fact that in the more common *Chairete*, the Magdalene reaches for Christ's feet. Nevertheless, as with most representations of the *Noli me tangere*, she does not make contact. This fact makes it all the more curious that in this illumination, Christ extends his right arm and hand toward the Magdalene in a gesture of greeting, and based on the downward extension of his fingers, potential contact. Christ's apparent intention to reach out to the Magdalene suggests that here at least, *touch* is being interpreted in an almost Augustinian way, where *tangere* signifies belief.⁷⁸ As long as the Magdalene believes in Christ's divinity, as long as she looks up, she *will* be able to touch him, and she will be saved.

As Christ's and the Magdalene's hands nearly touch, their finger tips contain the space between them, and their gesture mirrors the burial cloths that are wound up into a circular form in the tomb to the left. The discarded clothes offer visual proof of the tomb's emptiness and the Resurrection, while in the open air, the post-Resurrection promise of salvation is symbolized by the empty but energized space between Christ's and the Magdalene's hands.

The pairing of Thomas's penetration of the wound with the unsummated touch of the Magdalene lends clarity and concreteness to the difficult concept of Christ's bodily Resurrection. It is a compelling visual strategy – one that can be found in other notable image pairings. For example, Grabar demonstrates that the Annunciation and Visitation were often paired in Early Christian art in order to give visual form to the

⁷⁶ Voragine, *Golden Legend*, I, 375.

⁷⁷ Robert Baldwin, "Gates Pure and Shining and Serene': Mutual Gazing as an Amatory Motif in Western Literature and Art," *Renaissance and Reformation* N.S. 10 (1986) no. 1, 23-49, especially 25.

⁷⁸ "Sed ille tactus fidem significat. Tangit Christum, qui credit in Christum," *Sermo CCXLIII In diebus Paschalibus XIV*, PL 38, col. 1144.

doctrine of the Incarnation. Elizabeth’s touch provided physical confirmation of that which was consummated by the Word in the Annunciation – Christ’s Incarnation.⁷⁹ The correspondence between the two sets of images seems obvious: Thomas’s touch confirms what the Magdalene heard and saw. And not unlike the Virgin Annunciate, the Magdalene’s belief springs from the Word of God – specifically the calling of her name, which parallels Gabriel’s greeting to the Virgin Mary. Not surprisingly, the Magdalene was often referred to as a maternal figure in medieval texts,⁸⁰ again suggesting that this nuanced reading would not have been lost on the literate Imperial audience, especially if they were devoted to the Saint.

Final Thoughts

In a sense, the story can end rather simply at this point. In this era of burgeoning cult worship of the Magdalene and expanding Christological imagery at the Carolingian and Ottonian Imperial Courts, it was natural for the *Noli me tangere* to be given visual form, especially since it might be seen as a metaphor for the dual nature of the King, who like Christ himself, was a human and divine ruler. Once it was given visual form, artists began to explore the nuances and multivalent meanings of the

⁷⁹ Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 131ff. I make this argument in Lisa M. Rafanelli, “Seeking Truth and Bearing Witness: The *Noli me tangere* and Incredulity of Thomas on Tino di Camaino’s Petroni Tomb (1315-1317),” *Comitatus* 37 (2006) 32-65.

⁸⁰ The Magdalene’s identity as a mother figure became particularly popular with medieval commentators. Voragine, *Golden Legend*, I, 378-379 (the Magdalene’s post-Resurrection miracles included helping a barren couple conceive). Mary Magdalene is on occasion even described as being pregnant with the Word of God, much like the Virgin Mary. In *De Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae et sororis ejus Sanctae Marthae*, PL 112, cols. 1431-1508 (once attributed to Rabanus Maurus, but more recently reattributed to an anonymous thirteenth century Cistercian monk), Christ is said to have driven the seven demons from the Magdalene, and “filled her anew with the seven gifts of the spirit. Impregnated by thee, by faith she conceived a good hope within herself, and gave birth to a fervent charity.” For translation and commentary, see Rabanus Maurus, *De Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae et sororis ejus Sanctae Marthae*, trans. D. Mycoff (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications 1989), 225 (Ch. 6), and 491 (Ch. 11). Klapisch-Zuber also discusses what might be seen as a related phenomenon: the Quattrocento Florentine tradition of giving life-like dolls of the Magdalene to young brides as a fertility talisman. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. L. Cochrane (Chicago, IL: Chicago Univ. Press 1985), Ch. 14. For the Magdalene as a mother-figure (perhaps inspired by or related to ancient-style fertility goddesses, such as Diana), see Haskins, *Myth and Metaphor*, 44ff.; Marjorie M. Malvern, *Venus in Sackcloth: The Magdalen’s Origins and Metamorphoses* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).

interaction between Christ and the Magdalene – even at times contrasting the experience of the Magdalene with that of Saint Thomas. Once this occurs, issues that were heretofore part of the verbal culture – the parameters of the identity of the Magdalene, the ambiguity of the word *tangere*, and the question of her privilege and apostolic primacy – found their way into the visual culture.

Nevertheless, there is also an epilogue to this tale. In the Ottonian *Noli me tangere*, the Magdalene carries neither an ointment jar nor a censer, as she will in later centuries. It is not her task to anoint the body or prepare it for burial. Instead, it falls to her to recognize Christ's divinity, and to herald the foundation of the Kingdom of God in heaven – a fitting parallel to the King's reign on earth. Arguably, then, the first visual representations of the *Noli me tangere* serve a political purpose by celebrating royal, patriarchal power. The subject – ostensibly one of female empowerment and privilege – makes its first appearance as a symbol of male power. This analysis casts the *Noli me tangere* in the Gospel of Otto III, made shortly after the Emperor's coronation, in a new light: the image celebrates both Christ's and the Emperor's foundation of paradisiacal Christian Empires. Christ's Resurrection signifies the foundation of the Church, and parallels Otto's assumption of the throne. It may also be possible that Christ's *chiastic* stance, which signals the imminence of his Ascension, had a biographical resonance for Otto III, who according to Mayr-Harting, was crowned on Ascension day in 996.⁸¹

There is at least one nagging question, however. How can we understand the rather startling changes to the figure of the Magdalene over the very short period of the motif's evolution? After all, her posture, gesture, gaze, and overall demeanor appear to have been altered much more than that of Christ or Thomas during the same time – a brief comparison of the Codex Egberti and the Gospel of Otto III makes this quite clear. I have already proposed that proximity to Thomas and or the growing familiarity with the Magdalene's identity encouraged court artists to flesh her out, as it were. But could there be more to the story?

My dissertation traces the history of the *Noli me tangere* in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance period, where I have shown that the motif becomes an icon of empowerment and privilege for elite women, during a time when women's status in religion and society was a topic of debate.⁸²

⁸¹ Mayr-Harting, *Ottonian Book Illumination*, I, 65.

⁸² Rafanelli, *Ambiguity*, Ch. 6; id., "Sense and Sensibilities: A Feminist Reading of Titian's *Noli me tangere* (1509-1515)" (forthcoming article).

Can we use this later insight to look back at the Ottonian *Noli me tangere*? Elite women are known to have made great strides in the Ottonian period, and both Adelaide, mother of Otto II, and Theophanu, mother of Otto III, had considerable influence within the Imperial court.⁸³

There are not enough representations of the Magdalene in this Gospel Book, nor are there other examples of the Saint assuming an Imperial guise to support the suggestion that the Saint was an alter-identity for Ottonian royal women, in the same way that Christ was used to mirror the Emperor. Furthermore, issues of decorum raised by the Magdalene's sinful past cast further doubt on the possibility that the Saint represents, in any direct sense, either Adelaide or Theophanu. Nevertheless, women in the Ottonian court had access to power and knowledge, and unprecedented influence at court. It is tantalizing to imagine that the presence of such women fueled an interest in an image type that celebrated the Magdalene as a uniquely privileged, enlightened woman, who was also an active participant in the faith. Perhaps it is justified to look once more at the Gospel of Otto III. Like the Magdalene encountering the Resurrected Christ, Adelaide heralded Otto's rise to power and signaled the reopening of the gates of paradise: she served as his regent after the death of Theophanu, until the day of his coronation.⁸⁴

⁸³ William Wixom, "Byzantine Art and the Latin West," *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843-1261*, ed. Helen Evans and William Wixom (New York: M.M.A., 1997), 435; Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 44ff.; see also Madeline Caviness, "Anchoress, Abbess, and Queen: Donors and Patrons or Intercessors and Matrons?," *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 105-154, especially 124.

⁸⁴ Baert and Kusters have voiced support for this line of reasoning. It is of related interest that De Boer has found that Saint Jerome's rather sympathetic reading of Mary Magdalene and the *Noli me tangere* in particular comes about as a by-product of his time spent with the strong, pious, well-educated Roman matron, Marcella.

