

## The Legends of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs: Illuminating Issues of Gender and Virtue

Sarah Spencer

Although Mary Magdalene may now be the most commonly known legend of the penitent prostitute saint, a vast number of other legends of similar saints exist, from the satanic Pelagia to the mystical courtesan Thaïs.<sup>408</sup> Surprisingly, at first glance the actual legend of Mary Magdalene seems atypical of the traditional “holy harlot”, but the fundamental ideological themes are quite in alignment. More specifically, the underlying issues of gender and virtue in the evolution of the legends of Magdalene and of Thaïs, a typical saintly prostitute, progress similarly from the time of their inception to the late Victorian era.

While in the most fundamental sense Mary Magdalene is by definition a “holy harlot”, her legend displays many discontinuities with the legend of the typical prostitute turned saint. According to a study of this subset of saints, “The Legends of the Holy Harlots”, the average legend tells of a bereft young woman led to prostitution through circumstance and monetary necessity, who spends the rest of her life in a state of harsh repentance and asceticism after being convinced to repent by a male cleric.<sup>409</sup> Taking Saint Thaïs as the archetypal “holy harlot”, this pattern is clear in even her earliest Greek legend. Left to fend for herself by her mother at a young age she becomes an actress and courtesan due to necessity. At this point in her life she is converted by a monk, in later versions named Paphnutius and then Athanaël, who convinces her to burn her earthly possessions and travel painfully across the desert to be locked in a remote nunnery to plead for forgiveness and divine grace.<sup>410</sup> In contrast, the Mary Magdalene from the twelfth century medieval Cistercian account comes instead from a wealthy noble family and therefore her fall into sin is completely unrelated to monetary circumstance.<sup>411</sup> Furthermore, in the Gregory Homilies using the “composite” Mary Magdalene, which attributes several stories of unknown women to Magdalene, she is the one who physically seeks out Christ to gain redemption instead of the male church authority figure seeking her.<sup>412</sup> Finally, Mary Magdalene is shown divine mercy for her sins first and *then* goes about a life of penance and asceticism inspired by her conversion – a path that is the reverse of Thaïs’ journey towards redemption. Mary’s journey appears to be in contrast to the typical “holy harlot”.<sup>413</sup>

However, despite these superficial differences in the legends’ basic premises, the story of Mary Magdalene has more in common ideologically with the typical reformed prostitute legend than is immediately apparent. One of the common pre-

<sup>408</sup> Andrew Beresford, *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature* (Great Britain: Antony Rowe Ltd, 2007), 25.

<sup>409</sup> Beresford: *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature*, 34, 36, 39, 40.

<sup>410</sup> Beresford, *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature*, 42; Anatole France, *Thaïs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1976); Jules Massenet, *Thaïs*, trans. William Weaver (New York: G. Schirmer Inc, 1977).

<sup>411</sup> Samantha Herrick, lecture for “Mary Magdalene: History of a Legend,” Syracuse University, 6 October 2010; David Mycoff, ed., *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1989).

<sup>412</sup> Luke 7:36, John 12, Mark 16:9 (NRSV); Gregory the Great, trans. Dom Hurst, *40 Gospel Homilies* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 269.

<sup>413</sup> Gregory the Great, *40 Gospel Homilies*; Mycoff, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*.

requisites, along with virtue, for a lady saint in the Middle Ages was noble heritage, a requirement to which the medieval legend of Mary Magdalene adheres.<sup>414</sup> Contrasting with Magdalene's inherited nobility, Thaïs lacks the status of nobility, seeming to make her the atypical medieval saint. However, even though Thaïs is not of noble birth, her nobility and grace of character is heavily emphasized in many renditions of her legend, most notably in Anatole France's 1890 novel, *Thaïs*.<sup>415</sup> Whenever France physically describes Thaïs, there is always a mention of the grace or nobility of her movements or carriage; This approach is apparent in the description of the scene where Paphnutius first sees Thaïs at the theater; "The crowd recognized this woman's power of clothing with superhuman grace the forms and acts of life".<sup>416</sup> This is a clear instance of physiognomy, or implying the nature of a person's character through their physical description. This same literary technique is also used in a rendition of the legend of Mary Magdalene in Wilkie Collins', *The New Magdalen*. In this work, the "Magdalene" character, Mercy Merrick, is constantly described in a noble light like France's Thaïs. In fact, the first description given for Mercy is that "there was an innate nobility in the carriage of this woman's head, an innate grandeur in the gaze of her large gray eyes" – a description sure to immediately bias any reader in Mercy's favor.<sup>417</sup> Therefore, while a nobility of birth is not shared between Mary Magdalene and Thaïs in the legends, there is a definite effort in both legends to establish a nobility of nature.

Another key element of the legends of the saintly prostitute, seemingly not shared by Mary Magdalene, is the physical transformation of the courtesan's beauty to ugliness that accompanies their transition towards sainthood.<sup>418</sup> In the legend of Thaïs, after being locked away in the nunnery to live out a life repenting for her past sins, she is ordered by Paphnutius to "Break your body, destroy your flesh!", and, in earlier versions, to even allow herself to become "befouled by filth".<sup>419</sup> This ruination of the body, and therefore the ruination of the physical element that led her into sin, is very symbolic. Mary Magdalene does not adhere to this physical prerequisite of redemption, she does undergo a similar symbolic transformation. Once again using Gregory the Great's Homilies, he states that after Mary Magdalene's repentance "What she had earlier used disgracefully for herself she now laudably offered for the Lord".<sup>420</sup> Both the physical denial of the body and the descent from beauty that results during Thaïs and Mary's transition, turn the vehicles for sin into vessels for God. This idea is even further emphasized in Anatole France's novel, *Thaïs*, when the abbess is relating Thaïs's participation in the monastic community's presentation of biblical plays to the returned Paphnutius; "You yourself would have been touched if you had seen her, in those pious scenes, shed real tears and stretch out her arms, like palms, to heaven".<sup>421</sup> This illustrates how after her conversion Thaïs no longer uses her gifted acting skills for the pagan stage, but only to help others in the convent experience affective piety – the practice of achieving the emotional states of biblical characters in order to reach their state of grace.<sup>422</sup> In this way, both the legends of Thaïs and Mary Magdalene demonstrate

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<sup>414</sup> Brigitte Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), 50.

<sup>415</sup> Massenet, *Thaïs*, iii.

<sup>416</sup> France, *Thaïs*, 61, 62, 85, 89.

<sup>417</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen* (BiblioBazaar, 2007), 15.

<sup>418</sup> Beresford: *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature*, 46.

<sup>419</sup> Massenet, *Thaïs*, 15; Beresford, *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature*, 12.

<sup>420</sup> Gregory the Great, *40 Gospel Homilies*, 269-270.

<sup>421</sup> France, *Thaïs*, 181.

<sup>422</sup> Samantha Herrick, lecture for "Mary Magdalene: History of a Legend," Syracuse University, 16 October 2010.

a tangible conversion of their talents and gifts from perpetrators of sin into glorifications of God.

This physical transformation of Thaïs also speaks to the underlying reason for both the saints' downfalls – beauty. As the Cistercian account of Saint Mary Magdalene explains, “outward beauty is rarely allied to chastity”.<sup>423</sup> This same sentiment is reflected in the 1890's op Massenet,” where Thaïs herself claims “I have no more chosen my lot than my nature!...it is not my fault if I am beautiful!”.<sup>424</sup> So while the typical holy harlot's profession may seem to have been a result of their impoverished conditions, the language of the legends keeps focusing on physical feminine beauty as the fatal component. In this way the legends of both Thaïs and Mary Magdalene are perfectly in harmony.

Another strong connection between the legends of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs is the parallel evolutions of their legends, specifically in reference to the ideas of gender roles and virtue in society. Both legends undergo a definite progression from a relatively authoritative and active woman to a passive saint clearly subservient to and reliant on men. In the earliest version of the legend of Thaïs, *she* is the one who chooses to follow the example of the monk and repent, *she* chooses to burn her past possessions and money, and *she* locks herself in the nunnery to repent for her many sins.<sup>425</sup> Similarly, the first mention of Mary Magdalene in the Bible is of her in a role of some authority, referring to her as “apostle to the apostles”, as Christ commanded her to announce his resurrection to the other apostles.<sup>426</sup> However, in both these legends the women are still shown the way by men and therefore only attain salvation through the presence of men. Despite this both women retain a comparatively strong autonomy as shown by their authority over life decisions or position of some authority over select men.

The next step in the evolution of both of the legends of Mary Magdalene and of Thaïs is the elimination for their relatively authoritative roles. The consistently strong and free-willed Thaïs of the first version now becomes in the later Greek redaction the “virtuous-whore” who must “surrender her free will” to the monk in order to be saved.<sup>427</sup> Thaïs now repents as part of a command by the monk rather than through an act of self-realization. Nor is she responsible for deciding her penance – the legend now expresses the “absolute power and authority...of the male-dominated Church”.<sup>428</sup> Similarly, in the sixth century version of Mary Magdalene by Gregory the Great, Mary is described as avidly seeking out Christ, but not as an act of independent will but because “he [Jesus] drew her to himself”.<sup>429</sup> As with the revised legend of Thaïs, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as lacking the ability to realize the way to salvation on her own. Furthermore, in the late twelfth century Cistercian account of her legend, Mary Magdalene places herself under the protections of Saint Maximinus despite her more elevated spiritual status.<sup>430</sup> The fact that such a spiritually powerful woman must still be subjected to the authority of a man, emphasizes the apparent necessity of men to the spiritual deliverance of

<sup>423</sup> Mycoff, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*, 33.

<sup>424</sup> Massenet, *Thaïs*, 9.

<sup>425</sup> Beresford, *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature*, 3.

<sup>426</sup> Pamela Schaeffer, “Groups Promote Mary of Magdala, women's roles,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 7 April 2000, 1; Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20 (NRSV).

<sup>427</sup> France, *Thaïs*, 5; Beresford, *The Legends of the Holy Harlots Thaïs and Pelagia in Medieval Spanish Literature*, 6.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>429</sup> Samantha Herrick, lecture for “Mary Magdalene: History of a Legend,” Syracuse University, 29 Sept. 2010; Gregory the Great, *40 Gospel Homilies*, 269.

<sup>430</sup> Samantha Herrick, lecture for “Mary Magdalene: History of a Legend,” Syracuse University, 6 October 2010; Mycoff, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*, 90.

women and therefore reflects an increased domination of men over women. Yet despite this alteration of each saint's character from more authoritative to more passive, Thaïs still remains in control of the decision to burn her possessions and destroy her past sinful life. Mary Magdalene retains some power through her position as "apostle to the apostles" and through her control over her fall into sin.

Moving forward to the late Victorian period, the women in both legends transform after their repentance into totally passive creatures – their proper role in society – a position in direct opposition to their beginning wayward roles as prostitutes – behavior that flew in the face of social norms. Wilkie Collins' 1873 novel, *The New Magdalen* presents an image of women, especially his "Magdalene" character, as totally powerless.<sup>431</sup> This characterization is highlighted by Mercy's account of her fall into sin, a downward spiral in which she plays a pitifully passive role. The climactic moment in her fall basically amounts to rape, the ultimate loss of control – "I fainted in the street...when I partially recovered my senses I was conscious...of having a wine-glass containing some cordial drink held to my lips by a man...the stimulant had a very strange effect on me...I lost my senses once more".<sup>432</sup> This surrender to sin is totally different than previous versions such as the Cistercian account or even the popular medieval "Digby Mary Magdalene" play where Mary Magdalene succumbs to temptation brought about by her beauty and curiosity.<sup>433</sup> In one of the most famous Victorian accounts of the legend of Thaïs, the 1894 opera by Jules Massenet, there is an evolution towards passivity in the character of Thaïs similar to what occurs with the Victorian version of Mary Magdalene's legend.<sup>434</sup> In this Victorian account, Thaïs no longer makes the decision to burn all her possessions; instead. The monk Anthanaël forces her against her will.<sup>435</sup> Additionally, Anthanaël constantly exclaims to the audience his plans and desire to "conquer" Thaïs, "I realized how glorious it would be for me to conquer you [Thaïs]!".<sup>436</sup> This language of the righteous man triumphing over the un-virtuous woman only serves to emphasize the inferior, role of women explored by Wilkie Collins. Furthermore, at her moment of conversion, the opera's stage directions instruct Thaïs to throw herself "weeping and moaning...at Anthanaël's feet".<sup>437</sup> In contrast to her time as the famous courtesan in the beginning of the opera, when all men were at her feet, this role reversal, with Thaïs at a man's feet, demonstrates the Victorian idea that women could only attain salvation by adhering to their proper gender roles in society. It is interesting to note that it is Thaïs' de-empowerment that allows her to realize her role as the heroine, in contrast to the male hero who goes through the opposite process.<sup>438</sup> While this necessary reversal is not as explicitly seen in the Victorian version of Mary Magdalene, both these adaptations of the legends do emphasize the passive subservient woman as the ideal and, therefore, as the most virtuous.

More fascinating, however, is the evolution of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs' legends regarding the subtly changing idea of virtue, especially in relation to each woman's role in society. The idea of virtue in these legends transform from medieval times to the Victorian era, with virtue shifting from being reliant only on a

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<sup>431</sup> Samantha Herrick, lecture for "Mary Magdalene: History of a Legend," Syracuse University, 17 Nov. 2010.

<sup>432</sup> Collins, *The New Magdalen*, 251-252.

<sup>433</sup> Mycoff, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of Her Sister Saint Martha*, 30; David Bevington, ed., *The Digby Mary Magdalene* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 705-706

<sup>434</sup> Massenet, *Thaïs*, iii.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>438</sup> Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint*, 44.

true repentance to being dependent on past reputations *despite* an honest and passionate repentance. In Gregory the Great's medieval version of the biblical Mary Magdalene, once she has repented weeping at the feet of Christ all her past sins are wiped away as if they never existed. Gregory explicitly stated that "when he has nullified what he has done by his repentance, our neighbor is no longer a sinner", further emphasizing that once a true repentance has been made, the sinful past is no longer relevant to a person's present or future.<sup>439</sup> An early version of the legend of Thaïs, translated for French laity in 1250, strongly reflects this same theological principle discussed by Gregory and even uses his same language and imagery.<sup>440</sup> Just as Gregory explained penitence as the medicine that will remove the rust of sin from a golden soul, the legend of Thaïs instructs that "So as not to lose the brightness/Of Heaven...get rid of the stain/Of the sins that encumber you".<sup>441</sup> Therefore like Gregory's legend of Magdalene, this medieval version of Thaïs also implies that once penitence has removed the "stain of sins", those past sins are gone forever. Furthermore, this legend of Thaïs actually references Mary Magdalene as the precedent that proves all sins can be washed away completely: "[God] can forgive all sins/As He did with Mary Magdalene...When she begged Him...God forgave her at once...So that she changed her life".<sup>442</sup> So clearly, both these early legends of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs accentuate the independence of the future from past sins and sinful reputation once acts of penitence have been performed.

Moving forward to the late Victorian era, Wilkie Collins' *The New Magdalen* is rife with social commentary on the idea of virtue being a quality that once tarnished is unrecoverable. No matter her present conduct as a virtuous woman, Mercy cannot escape her past reputation, introducing the idea that a person is forever contaminated morally by a disreputable past: "Who I *am* can never alter who I *was*".<sup>443</sup> In the Victorian era, this idea of irrevocable moral contamination replaces the previous medieval belief in the power of penitence to erase the burden of a past sinful life. The hopelessness of repenting sinners in Victorian society is clearly evident when Mercy states that "...all that a sincerely penitent woman can do I have done. It doesn't matter! Once let my past story be known, and the shadow of it covers me; the kindest people shrink".<sup>444</sup> While this excerpt illustrates the completely passive role this woman holds, it also demonstrates this altered idea of virtue being a delicate matter that profoundly affects a person's reputation and therefore their status in society.

The same idea of permanent contamination and the relationship between virtue and societal status is clearly illustrated in the Victorian legend of Thaïs by both Anatole France and Jules Massenet. In the novel *Thaïs*, the monk Paphnutius is visited by an apparition of Thaïs and takes it as a sign that he must convert her, and consequently cleanse the city of Alexandria from her influence. However when he first mentions his plans, a fellow monk exclaims, "God help me if I suspect the intentions of my brother!", suggesting that Paphnutius' true intentions are only masked by spirituality, implying that just the mere vision of Thaïs has already begun to corrupt this holy man.<sup>445</sup> Furthermore, as Paphnutius starts out on his journey to Alexandria, a city whose very air he claims is corrupted, France introduces a foreshadowing metaphor of a plover freeing his trapped mate from a nest, ending

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<sup>439</sup> Gregory the Great, *40 Gospel Homilies*, 271.

<sup>440</sup> Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint*, 290.

<sup>441</sup> Gregory the Great, *40 Gospel Homilies*, 271; Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint*, 291.

<sup>442</sup> Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint*, 294.

<sup>443</sup> Collins, *The New Magdalen*, 22.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> France, *Thaïs*, 35.

with “the plover becom[ing] entangled in the trap that he had earlier torn”.<sup>446</sup> This signals to the reader that in saving Thaïs, in exposing himself to her presence and moral contamination, Paphnutius is himself doomed to fall into the trap of moral corruption. This idea of contagious immorality through proximity with sinners is further solidified in the banquet scene when Thaïs herself asks a man who kisses her, “But aren’t you afraid of tarnishing your soul in the arms of a woman?”.<sup>447</sup> While this could refer to becoming sinful through future illicit sexual behavior, it also could be interpreted as the moral danger inherent in the simple physical contact with the un-virtuous.

Also during the banquet scene, the “heretic” philosophers introduce the idea that even a saint could be contaminated by past indiscretions. Their pagan saint Eunoia was a similar holy harlot, who they refer to as “the courtesan of atonement, the scarred Host, the wafer soaked in the wine of our shames”.<sup>448</sup> This curious verbal treatment of their saint implies that despite her achieved holiness, her virtue is continuously counterbalanced by her past sins. This duality is highlighted by the use of three pairs of descriptors, each with a sinful aspect and a holy aspect, courtesan versus atonement, scarred versus Host, wine of shames versus wafer. The idea that even one so divinely favored as a saint cannot escape a past reputation truly drives home the same point made by Wilkie Collins about virtue never receiving second chances from society.

In the 1894 opera “Thaïs,” Jules Massenet continues these same themes of contaminated virtue and its tangible effect on society.<sup>449</sup> Effectively expressing this idea that Thaïs’ mere presence gives the city an air of corruption, the monk Anthanaël states “The city is given over to sin! A woman... Thaïs...fills it with scandal! And through her hell rules men there!”<sup>450</sup> This further reinforces France’s theme of virtue being an active force that when corrupted affects all of society through proximity. The idea that hell rules the city through Thaïs elevates her role as a courtesan to something greater than herself and into an influence that threatens all of society – a threat that actually is Anthanaël’s initial motivation for converting Thaïs. Looking at this theme on a more personal level in the opera, Anthanaël’s moral fate is once more doomed by his efforts that bring him near the corruptive un-virtuous influence of Thaïs. Later, when his unquenchable lust for Thaïs torments him, he exclaims “I reconquered the soul of her who was the impure Thaïs...well, in me, peace is dead!...A demon possess me! The woman’s beauty haunts my vision!”.<sup>451</sup> So despite his firm moral background as an intensely spiritual and ascetic monk, Anthanaël’s exposure to Thaïs’ immorality condemns his own virtue, implying that even the most virtuous in society are still subject to the danger of the un-virtuous. In the climactic scene, Anthanaël falls at the feet of the dying Thaïs, pledging his sinful love to her while the vision of her ascension to heaven blinds her.<sup>452</sup> The fact that this now holy woman still exerts such an immoral pull on Anthanaël serves to demonstrate once again how Thaïs has not truly left her past sins and therefore sinful influence behind her. Anatole France’s “Thaïs” - as well as Wilkie Collins’ “The New Magdalen” - thoroughly explore this altered idea of virtue; that one can never escape from past sinful acts regardless of any penitence, that immorality is seen in the late 1800’s as a definite threat to society, and that

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid, 45, 36.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>449</sup> Massenet, *Thaïs*, iii.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid, 19.

immorality can spread like a disease to infect all who come in contact with the un-virtuous.

Because these legends of holy harlots, particularly of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs, evolved so similarly throughout time, it follows that they evolved as a result of the same force – the changing social and religious climate of each time period. As *The Lady as Saint* states, holy harlot legends are reflective of male enforced feminine ideals and virtue, or of the dominant socially acceptable ideals.<sup>453</sup> Consequently, a study of the progression of these saintly legends throughout time can reveal insight into the development of gender roles and the implications of virtue in the societies that produced the legends. As the roles of both Mary Magdalene and Thaïs in their legends became progressively more passive and less authoritative, it makes sense to conclude that society's view on proper feminine roles generally followed the same trend. Drawing on the same legends and logic, one could say that society changed its view on virtue – from being reliant on penitence to being a delicate, easily corruptible status marker, as seen in *The New Magdalen*. Therefore even this focused analysis of specific saintly legends demonstrates that changing cultural views in works of literature are heavily influenced by the changing social and religious climate that produces them.

On an ideological level, the legends of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs parallel each other closely in the evolution of themes of gender and virtue from the pre-medieval to the Victorian era. While Mary Magdalene differs from the legend of Thaïs in literal events and circumstances, the ideology behind the two legends is analogous – especially concerning nobility of character, the danger of physical beauty, and the application of attributes previously used to sin now towards holy ends. Regarding the evolution of the treatment of gender roles in the two legends, both the characters of Mary Magdalene and Thaïs are clearly given less and less authority and control over their own life, and retreat in an increasingly passive position. Finally, over time, virtue becomes independent from future penitence or holy works and immorality takes on a darker nature as a corruptive force endangering all of society. As these legends reflect the evolving social stance on both gender and virtue in their themes and messages, it will be interesting to see how our constantly shifting society will continue to affect future permutations of the legend of the holy harlot.

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<sup>453</sup> Cazelles, *The Lady as Saint*, 43.