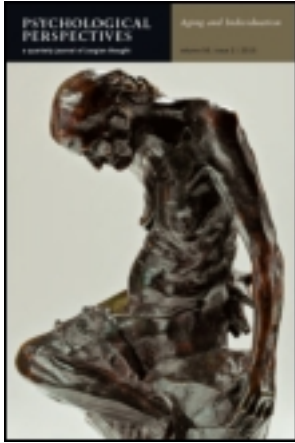


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Mary Magdalene: Lover of the Dying and Resurrecting God-Man

Laurel Howe

Like Isis, Ishtar, and Inanna, Mary Magdalene mourns the death of the god she loves, and when he resurrects, she celebrates his renewal. Through her intense feeling experience of personal and spiritual love, she represents the feminine side of the death and resurrection phenomenon that plays a realizing role in the humanization of the god-image and likewise of individuation.

Although the Judeo-Christian fathers excluded any sign in their orthodoxy that Yahweh and Christ may have had love partners, archeological evidence and Gnostic texts point to the possibility that they did. In our era, with the psychological perspective that C. G. Jung heralded, we can reconsider and integrate the role of the Eros principle that was split off from our god-image, concretized, and banned along with the “evil” of the flesh.

The emergence of Mary Magdalene in popular culture as the “Holy Grail” or vessel of Christ’s child reflects the intense yearning in the psyche for the feminine principle to participate in the continuing incarnation of the god-image, and for the divine feminine–masculine partnership to realize itself in personal, human experience.

I only know—and here I am expressing what countless other people know—that the present is a time of God’s death and disappearance. The myth says he was not to be found where his body was laid. ‘Body’ means the outward, visible form, the erstwhile but ephemeral setting for the highest value. The myth further says that the value rose again in a miraculous manner, transformed. . . . The fact that only a few people see the Risen



Alison Saar, *Blood/Sweat/Tears* (detail), 2005.
Wood, copper, bronze, paint and tar; 72 × 24 × 20 in.

One means that no small difficulties stand in the way of finding and recognizing the transformed value.

—Jung (1969, par. 149)

In Christian and Gnostic religious texts, Mary Magdalene plays a central role in recognizing the “transformed value” C. G. Jung mentions above. Her capacity to see and value the risen or renewed god-image reaches into our era and inspires the collective imagination because she represents a capacity that has become essential to the myth of our time, in which we each participate in the renewal of the god-image and hence the creation of consciousness. Mary Magdalene thus emerges in contemporary legend, in important scholarly works, and in the dreams and fantasies of individuals called to integrate her task in their own lives. She first appeared to me in a 2003 dream:

I open a hand-made greeting card and see, to my shock and amazement, that it is from my mother. I recognize her distinctive handwriting. She has been stranded for years somewhere, but the man who has kept her just died, and she can go free now. I wonder if she will know how to go on. *Will* she go on or will she commit suicide?

She asks, “Are they talking about me? Are they talking about me the way they talked about Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene?” On the right side of the card she has written the word *L-O-V-E*, printed vertically in all capitals. I know that this is mainly an expression of love for me. And it seems to indicate that she will not kill herself, but live in a new way.

My mother had died more than ten years before this dream appeared, but her dream presence was so intense that it bolted me into a lifelong research project. Why did the dream compare her to Mary Magdalene, of all people? Something about redeeming the stranded or kidnapped feminine. Something about living in a new way, something about love, and a lot about suffering.

My mother was an artist, extraverted feeling with sensation. She lived with down-to-earth enthusiasm for the details of life, and for people. Her friends treasured her ability to reflect their reality back to them with life-affirming optimism and salty humor. She was one of the most naturally intelligent people I have ever met, vibrantly curious, and alert to collective currents. She introduced me to Gertrude Stein when I was in sixth grade, and to C. G. Jung in the late 1960s, when she was writing her fine arts master’s degree thesis about visual metaphor. But my mother’s creative life was cut



Figure 1. Cylinder seal showing Assyrian influences from Beth-Shean, Israel, 700–600 B.C.E., picturing in the lower register an enthroned anthropomorphic god, probably El. Four figures to the left is a stylized palm tree that is a cultic image for Asherah and may represent the god's blessing. In other words, the god and tree represent El and "his asherah," according to Keel and Uehlinger (1998, p. 314–315, illus. 308). Asherah becomes associated with Yahweh as he becomes a nationalized deity and El disappears. Image used with the permission of Dr. Othmar Keel, BIBEL + Orient Museum, Freiburg, Switzerland.

short tragically. A series of cerebral hemorrhages when she was 36 years old and I was 15, and an ill-advised surgery, left her in a coma for nine months. She awoke a quadriplegic, mentally and emotionally incapacitated, and lived for 21 years without much interest or drive. Eventually I realized that her soul was living its own life mainly in the unconscious, doing what it needed to do. Although she stopped asking intellectual or creative questions, she retained her flair for relishing each person she met, and regularly effused gratitude for the meager dole of life she lived. She died in 1992, the year I was 36, and my daughter was 1.

The 2003 dream arrived after 18 years of analysis, so by then I grasped enough about my own psychology to realize that the stranded, "paralyzed" feminine was not only a physical problem in my

Mary Magdalene . . . is thus a mediatrix for the transformation of the god-image, which today calls for the resurrection of the holy love union between masculine and feminine realms.

personal mother. The incapacitated feminine was also a psychological problem in myself, in generations of mothers on both sides of my family, and in my national, cultural, and religious heritage. Studying Mary Magdalene and her background, I began to see how she answers the problem of the incapacitated feminine principle in our age—indeed how she has been answering it for a long time. She appears in the Christian drama, in Gnosticism, in medieval and contemporary legend, and even in alchemy as Mary the Jewess or Mary Prophetissa. In all four realms, Mary Magdalene symbolizes the Eros factor at the deepest level, where love is a personal, instinctual, even cellular experience, but also a spiritual one. She holds the paradox of personal and transpersonal love together and shows us how individuation is soaked in their union, like wool in an effervescent dye. A woman who loved the man Jesus, personally, and the god Christ, spiritually, Mary Magdalene is God's realizing love partner, a motif from older Middle Eastern mythology that was snipped off in the Old Testament and barely allowed into the New.

In "heretical" Gnostic texts the love between Mary and Jesus overtly defines her role as the apostle who most accurately expresses Jesus Christ's teachings. Through her love, which is neither motherly nor sisterly as in the older religions, Mary Magdalene "sees" and understands Christ as his partner: in the Bible she sees him risen, and in the Gnostic Gospel of Mary she learns from him in a long vision. She is reunited, tinctured, with the new value that Christ as god-man represents. If she did not love Christ so personally and so spiritually, she would not suffer his death so deeply, and without that suffering, she would not realize so completely what his dismemberment and resurrection mean. She is thus a mediatrix for the transformation of the god-image, which today calls for the resurrection of the holy love union between masculine and feminine realms. Mary's presence as mediatrix continues in her legendary role as the "real" Holy Grail, the womb carrying Christ's child, their divine bloodline continuing to incarnate in French Merovingian royalty.¹

GOD'S LOVER: A HISTORY

Mary Magdalene appears in the New Testament gospels in two main roles. She mourns Jesus at his death, and she extols his resurrection—the same roles played by the lovers of dying and resurrecting gods in Egyptian, Ugaritic, and Mesopotamian mythology. As mourner, she pours over her love like Isis over Osiris or Inanna over Dumuzi. One version of Inanna's lament appears in this Sumerian hymn:

She can make the lament for you, my Dumuzi, the lament for you,
the lament, the lamentation, reach the desert—she can make it
reach the house Arali; she can make it reach Bad-tibira; she can

make it reach Dul-šuba; she can make it reach the shepherding country, the sheepfold of Dumuzi.

“O Dumuzi of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes,” she sobs tearfully, “O you of the fair-spoken mouth, of the ever kind eyes,” she sobs tearfully. “Lad, husband, lord, sweet as the date . . . O Dumuzi!” she sobs, she sobs tearfully. (Black, Cunningham, Robson, & Zolyomi, 2006)²

To make a lament known far away means, psychologically, that the mourning feminine principle can make her sorrow reach distant, unknown realms of the psyche. Her love-filled emotional reaction brings the reality of the death of the god to unconscious islands of the psyche, increasing the impact of the realization until enough of the psyche is awakened to respond with a new possibility. In the nature religions, the mourning and renewal bring a new season of fertility, and in the Christian religion they bring a newly risen Christ, a living symbol of the twice-born god-man that in alchemy is known as *Mercurius*. It is love that makes the lament so far-reaching. Inanna’s love in the above passage is more sensual than what Mary expresses for Christ, as we will see below. As Christians, even if only by inheritance, we can be tone-deaf to sensuous or sensual overtones in Mary’s relationship to Christ because (unless we believe the Gnostic texts that report Christ kissing Mary on the mouth² or the legend that they had a child together) we are steeped in the idea that the love between Mary and Christ was entirely spiritual, which means to the conventional Christian, not at all fleshly and having nothing to do with pleasure. The elimination of the flesh from the Eros principle informs all three religions that grow out of the Torah.

The separation of flesh from spirit arises in the early Hebrew religion as an aspect of the collective movement out of nature religions and is a natural psychological development. Disdain for the flesh and a complete split from the body and nature are magnified to a tragic extent by religious orthodoxy, as evidenced in the Old Testament. Psychologically speaking, humanity in the thousand or so years before Judaism developed, is moving out of identification with nature and realizing the presence of an animating spirit that exists autonomously, that is, not necessarily in flesh nor the sex act per se. *Participation mystique* in concrete nature is losing its grip. The physical animal, sun, and moon lose their identification as gods, as a spiritual god develops out of their symbolic dimensions. In an individual, the receding magic of literal nature reflects a stage of psychological development in which one loses fascination in another person, religious attitude, or way of life, and begins to realize that fascination has something to do with the projection of aspects of the Self. As the Self becomes more conscious, the old idealization, identity,

or attitude may feel infantile or indulgent. People once worshipped suddenly appear all too human. The habitual projections begin to hold less sway over the personality, and ego-oriented desires associated with those projections lose their motivating power. Separation from the old “body” or old form of union with desirousness becomes imperative. In Edward Edinger’s (1986) words:

As the ego develops it begins to experience the energies of instinct and desire as its own responsibility. As an inner “spirit” figure crystallizes, a counterpole to mere “nature,” the ego begins to feel guilty for its unbridled desirousness. . . . As the ego sacrifices desirousness it is at the same time contributing to the transformation and humanization of God. (p. 60)

The Self as symbolized by Yahweh demands that the chosen people make certain sacrifices in the process of realizing him as an objective, animating spirit. Yahweh insists that they withdraw their projection of the spirit onto “mere ‘nature’” and end their *participation mystique* with old gods whose magic and mores have worn out. The heavenly *coniunctio* and the mourning and reuniting rituals need not be imitated concretely on earth to ensure the fertility of the land. It is necessary, in the first millennium B.C.E., to make this distinction as the spiritual dimension crystallizes in consciousness and is purified of its identification with instinct and concrete nature. Jung has shown us that today we are working toward a different stage of psychological development collectively, bringing spirit and nature (psyche and matter) back together on a symbolic level, where the tension between metaphysical and physical *coniunctio* is held by the individual. A person destined to participate in this stage of development must move through the first.

What Edinger calls the “humanization of God”—which is to say, psychologically, the “realization of the Self” as a spiritual phenomenon separate from the concrete sun, moon, gold, hero, sex object, body image, power position, or guru—happens bit by bit in the individual and is fraught with trial and error, setbacks and inflations, all part and parcel of the process along the way. We know how difficult it is to sacrifice egocentric attachment to objects, goals, or ideas that titillate desire, even pain. Likewise the eradication of the nature gods and their sacred rituals of death, separation, and reunion proves well nigh impossible among Yahweh’s people, whom he calls alternatively “chosen” and “stiff-necked.” In Ezekiel 8:14, Yahweh is horrified to find that even after the Assyrian takeover of Israel, his people still participate in Canaanite rituals in which the goddess mourns the death of her god. He tells Jeremiah of even “greater abominations,” rituals in which

whole families celebrate the fertility god's resurrection and joyful reunion with his consort: "The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven, and pour out drink offerings unto other gods, that they may provoke me to anger" (Jeremiah 7:17–18). In these texts Yahweh points out why he will allow Jerusalem to fall into the hands of Babylon: to punish the Hebrews for continuing to worship this "queen of heaven" and the "other gods." Biblical scholars note that like other texts in the Deuteronomist strain, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were written or revised *during* the Babylonian exile, to inculcate in Yahweh's people his keen interest in their behavior. Recent archeological research indicates that the Hebrew fathers may also have glossed over the history of Yahweh as it relates to this "queen of heaven" he so abhors.

In *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (1998), theological scholars Othmar Keel and Christof Uehlinger trace in detail the evolution of pre-Biblical god and goddess images in the ancient Levant (the eventual Holy Land) and their development into nationalized deities. They write that the "queen of heaven" from the Jeremiah passage may not be Ishtar, as many assume, but is more likely Asherah, the Ugaritic "creatress of the gods" who appears as early as the 14th century B.C.E. (p. 370) in Phoenicia. Archeological remains show that Asherah and versions of her Phoenician husband El and son Baal were worshipped in Israel and Judah by Hebrews prior to, and during, the development of the Yahweh religion we know in the Hebrew Bible (Day, 1986).

Gradually a national religion centered around Yahweh evolved into the religion we know from the Old Testament, and the other gods gradually disappeared from archeological remains. More astonishing to the orthodox view, Keel, Uehlinger, and other scholars agree that inscriptions discovered in areas of the Divided Monarchies during the Iron Age IIB (925–700 B.C.E.) referring to "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah" and "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah" indicate that Yahweh and some form of the goddess Asherah were worshipped together during this time (Hadley, 2000; Keel, 2007, p. 48; Keel & Schroer, 2004, pp. 186–187; Keel & Uehlinger, 1998, pp. 225–226). In these inscriptions Asherah could represent Yahweh's blessing or his mediating aspect, as she does in prevalent images of stylized trees, sometimes with the Phoenician god El (Figure 1).

But Keel and others deduce from the inscriptions that Yahweh had a wife or a consort that at one time was pictured as a woman (Keel & Schroer, 2004, p. 187; see Figure 2). Keel and Uehlinger (1998) are encouraged in this opinion by the fact that later, between 600 and 720 B.C.E., nearly every Judahite household and grave contained the so-called "pillar" forms of a goddess that they identify as an anthropomorphized version of Asherah



Figure 2. This terra-cotta sculpture of an enthroned couple, possibly a disposed cult object from Late Iron Age Judah (750–620 B.C.E.), could represent an anthropomorphized Yahweh and “his Asherah,” in this case a personal name referring to Yahweh’s partner, according to Keel and Uehlinger. The image evokes for the authors the words from the Wisdom of Solomon: “Give me wisdom, that sitteth by thy throne,” Wisdom being a hidden face of the feminine side of god. Image used with the permission of Dr. Othmar Keel, BIBEL + Orient Museum, Freiburg, Switzerland (color figure available online).

(p. 333, see also Keel & Schroer, 2004, pp. 188–191; see Figure 3). These small, robed figurines mysteriously proliferate throughout Judah and Israel after the aniconic mandate, beginning at the end of the eighth century B.C.E., possibly related to growing Assyrian influence (p. 328). Keel and Uehlinger (1998) consider these figures to represent “personal blessing and protection” and “motherly closeness even when the deceased was lying in the grave” (p. 333). They say that these figures could be among the objects that Josiah removes from the Temple of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 23, before Josiah’s death in 609 B.C.E. (pp. 327–330, 336, 360). Whether in the form of a tree or a woman, Asherah had been by the side of Yahweh for at least two hundred years.



Figure 3. These pillar figurines, which Keel and Uehlinger regard as forms of Asherah, mysteriously appear in Israel and Judah homes and tombs beginning about 750 B.C.E., and are probably the same figures thrown out of the Temple of Jerusalem before Josiah's death in 609 B.C.E. From Keel and Schroer, 2004, p. 191. Image used with the permission of Dr. Othmar Keel, BIBEL + Orient Museum, Freiburg, Switzerland (color figure available online).

Compared to naked goddess images of the preceding Bronze and Copper Periods that emphasize erotic features, the Asherah pillars are clothed and have faces that are personable and related to the viewer. Keel and Uehlinger (1998) suggest that the images may even signal the “idealization of the goddess as mother which, during the Persian and Hellenistic periods, received greater emphasis in . . . the *‘Isis Lactans’*” (p. 377)—Isis nursing Horus, a prefiguration of the Madonna and Child. In short, the feminine side of the godhead, just before she is completely banished from the Yahweh

religion, evolves to represent personal love, mothering, and blessing, rather than the general nature of erotic arousal as in previous periods. Male and female gods are both becoming more spiritual—the male side representing spirituality as a development in Logos, and the female side representing spirituality as a development in Eros. In this evolution we can see how the Virgin Mary as the mother of god may have grown out of the motherly aspects of Asherah and Isis (see Jung, 1968, par. 624), and how Mary Magdalene retained the aspect of lover.

Between 500 and 450 B.C.E., in post-exilic Iron Age III, Yahweh becomes predominant in the Hebrew religion (Keel & Uehlinger, 1998, p. 372). The Asherah, Baal, and El names disappear. The Torah is compiled after Jerusalem falls to Babylon in 586 B.C.E. and is edited in Judah, about 450 B.C.E. Yahweh in this time becomes completely spiritual, invisible, and solitary. As a celibate, Yahweh brings an end to the divine imperative in nature gods to engage in rampant sexual escapades, including incest and the rape of human beings, and thus introduces what was then a much needed sense of morality to sexual life. Condemning Israel to exile, Yahweh lists among Israel's sins what may be newly defined as crimes: "And one hath committed abomination with his neighbor's wife; and another hath lewdly defiled his daughter in law; and another in thee hath humbled his sister, his father's daughter" (Ezekiel 22:11).³

But in the broadest psychological terms, as Jung took such pains to point out, libido is not only sexual; it is more generally life energy, creative drive. When claimed by the ego for its own aims, transpersonal creative energy can become power-oriented craving, inspiring greed, rage, jealousy, and other versions of inflation.⁴ These manifestations of desire also call for a sacrifice of egocentrism and a concomitant development of Logos and Eros if they are to be realized as arising from a center that is beyond the ego's scope. Yahweh wants his children to *feel* him, to love *him* as the source of their motivation and striving, and thus asks them to be circumcised in the heart as well as the genitals (Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6; Leviticus 26:41; Jeremiah 4:4). But if love with a sacrificial attitude is the antidote to sexual and power-oriented promiscuity in the realization of Yahweh, then what happened to Asherah, the personification of an increasingly spiritual love?

In the Hebrew Bible we can see that Israel wants to be known, finally, as a nation, and an aspect of that pursuit includes its once local god becoming *the* One True God. The violent nature of this endeavor is laid out in the texts. Nationalism and religious zealotry, couched in the Book of Law reform, justify the destruction of nature images and the murder of Canaanite priests in 2 Kings, for example, where pulverization, burning, and murder are undertaken as expressions of Yahweh's frustration over continuing nature worship

(perhaps the frustrating return of Asherah in the pillar forms). Nationalized religion, in its zeal to establish a strictly spiritual, all-good, all-powerful god, becomes adamant in its focus on the “evil” of sex per se, as well as image, flesh, nature, and woman, perhaps goaded further into one-sidedness and even misogyny by the fact that Asherah is the most stubborn of the Canaanite

The church appropriated the role of Christ’s bride and could thereby broker his love. Divine Eros remained strictly masculine . . .

gods to recede (see Keel & Uehlinger, 1998, IX.4). As sex and love split, so do matter and spirit. Eros, as a divine feminine principle, and the *hieros gamos* go underground as the feminine and nature become identified with the “evil” staying power of the goddess. The feminine side of god is thrown out with the bathwater of sexual morality; we all know by now the brutal hypocrisy and cruelty that ensue as a result of this impossible rending.

As the New Testament was written and canonized, the regulation of sexual morality and God’s love became principle tokens of the church’s power. Elaine Pagels (1979) points out in *The Gnostic Gospels* that the church orthodoxy put priests and bishops between God and the layperson, stultifying a direct, personal relationship. The church appropriated the role of Christ’s bride and could thereby broker his love. Divine Eros remained strictly masculine until the Virgin Mary was assumed into heaven, but even then Eros had more to do with purity and perfection than a holy partnership, spiritual affection, or the sanctification of a personal relationship to the divine.

Jung points out that, to some extent, there is a natural, psychological dynamic behind the intense separation between masculine and feminine aspects of the psyche during certain hallmarks in the development of consciousness. Such a split reflects the need for Logos to make a radical differentiation from its unconscious, archetypally feminine source. Jung (1959) says:

There is no consciousness without discrimination of opposites. This is the paternal principle, the Logos, which eternally struggles to extricate itself from the primal warmth and primal darkness of the maternal womb; in a word, from unconsciousness. Divine curiosity yearns to be born and does not shrink from conflict, suffering, or sin. Unconsciousness is the primal sin, evil itself, for the Logos. Therefore its first creative act of liberation is matricide. (par. 178)

The emphasis on sexual morality in both Old and New Testaments, hand in hand with patriarchal leanings in the fathers of both religions, may easily lead to the eradication of any hint that Yahweh and Christ had partners, much less lovers, but if we add to those leanings the incredible psychological imperative of new Logos to completely purify itself of unconsciousness, we see how those fathers may also be in the grip of an archetypal force. The power complex we see in the Jewish and Christian orthodoxy as they eradicate all traces of the “maternal womb” out of which they arise shows us how the negative side of the archetype takes over will, judgment, and “morality” when basic relatedness is missing and fundamentalism holds sway. Perhaps too the Deuteronomists remain unconsciously stuck in the maternal aspect of the feminine, unable to hear the true voice of a spiritual *anima*.

The role of the feminine and the divine love relationship goes underground in various forms, including in the Kabbala, the “Song of Songs,” the apocryphal “Wisdom of Solomon” (see also Proverbs 8:22), Gnosticism, alchemy, and eventually, the legend of Mary Magdalene as the Holy Grail, vessel of Christ’s child. In her exhaustive study, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor*, Susan Haskins (1993) proposes that the Valentinian Gnostics carry Old Testament co-eternal wisdom forward into the figure of the *Pistis Sophia* (“faith wisdom”), a coptic text featuring Mary Magdalene as the “most beloved” of Christ’s disciples and best able to understand Sophia’s misadventures (Mead, 2009). In the Judeo-Christian religions the holy marriage goes blank, leaving us without a heavenly love relationship to model. Tragically, we lost the feeling quality of the divine in the experience of personal love. Mary Magdalene has become so popular in recent decades because she represents a newfound legitimacy in the divine love relationship, based on a collective, grassroots feeling for its rightness. Jung (1959) predicts the return of the feminine in religious life, in the second half of the paragraph quoted above, as sure as Prometheus is chained to a rock after stealing the gods’ fire:

... and the spirit that dared all heights and all depths must, as Synesius says, suffer the divine punishment, enchainment on the rocks of the Caucasus. Nothing can exist without its opposite; the two were one in the beginning and will be one again in the end. Consciousness can only exist through continual recognition of the unconscious, just as everything that lives must pass through many deaths. (par. 178)

Offering her own form to the psychological evolution through which Jung predicts the opposites will reunite, Mary Magdalene is very much alive in the collective psyche. She is less stranded in orthodoxy today than she was

when the church fathers delineated her role. She is going through her own resurrection.

THE “REAL” RESURRECTION

Depending on which Gospel is read, Mary Magdalene is the first, or among the first, to see that three days after his entombment, Jesus Christ has risen. In John 20, she goes to Jesus’s tomb early to anoint his body and discovers that he is missing. She runs to tell Peter and John, the beloved disciple, who, finding their lord’s burial clothes but not his body, seem to deduce that Jesus has risen. The two men simply see the evidence and “believe,” and then they return home. But Mary does not accept circumstantial evidence and is not content with abstract reckoning. Rather than go home, she stays at the tomb, and weeps:

But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had

Mary is thus the first to experience, personally and empirically, the *spiritual image* of God, a paradoxical union of opposites: life and death, man and god, spirit and matter.

seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.
(John 20:11–18, King James Version)

In contrast with Peter and the other disciples' abstract understanding, Mary has a full emotional experience of Jesus's death and then his resurrection as Christ. She is compelled to feel the reality of these events in her soul and body. In fact, her continued personal concern, her love, and her suffering make demands on Jesus in his death state, and these emotional demands seem to persuade him to reveal himself to her as the living Christ, first through his angel mediators, and then in his own image. Mary is thus the first to experience, personally and empirically, the *spiritual image* of God, a paradoxical union of opposites: life and death, man and god, spirit and matter. Thanks to Mary we have not only an intuited understanding of the resurrection, but her persistent love reaction. Her own dissolution into mourning and weeping gives rise to the all-important image of the resurrected godman, and in this way she demonstrates the crux of the individuation process. She holds the tension of the opposites—is God dead or alive, flesh or spirit?—and provokes the third, symbolic solution that integrates the poles. She thus meets the power of what Jung calls the *transcendent function*, the experience of a psychic image moving us from one state of being to another. Anyone who, through a dream or active imagination, receives an answering image born out of emotional endurance knows how much the empirical experience of that image means. Without the healing image, we have only an idea about what our suffering means. With the image, we have full-bodied saturation of meaning that is profoundly personal and yet also transpersonal. The image brings us a new way of being in the world by incarnating in the earth of our personality, a *coniunctio* in and of itself.

Mary Magdalene's insistence on finding Jesus's body is not what some would consider doggedly literal or concrete. Rather, she demonstrates the paradox of the ego's delicate position: to trust our personal love experiences and, at the same time, to relinquish the ego's center of gravity. In this heartfelt balance, the transformative image enters the conscious dimension and shows her that what she had projected onto Jesus is meaningful when realized on a symbolic level. Mary Magdalene sees and loves Jesus as a holy man, and after he dies, her love brings him to her as a symbolic reality. Mary demonstrates how she and the living reality of the Self are renewed.

Christ's request, "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my father," fraught with paradox, invokes the very spirit-matter split that divides fundamentalist and symbolic thinking, and that likewise splits the Christian fathers from the Gnostics. Tertullian insists that not only Christ's spirit, but his flesh rose: "I mean this flesh, suffused with blood, built up with bones,

interwoven with nerves . . .,” for if Christ were not flesh in birth and then in death, “all that we hope for from Christ will be a phantom” (Eerdmans, 1980, p. 525; see also Chapter 1 of Pagels, 1979). He means, if Christ did not resurrect in the flesh, then neither will we, and then how can we believe in our immortality? Or worse, if Christ is not “real” flesh, how can we believe in his reality? Tragically, and ironically, Tertullian falls prey to the one-sidedness that splits spirit and matter and fails to understand that Christ’s body need not be concrete to be real. In a more literal translation of this passage Christ tells Mary Magdalene not to “hold onto” him, which would seem to mean he doesn’t want her to hold onto him as an outer phenomenon, but to realize his inner, symbolic value. To do so, she must also let go of egocentric expectations and realize that Christ is not there just to meet her needs but also for her to realize him as a spiritual reality; her role as apostle means that she carries this realization with her, everywhere she goes.

We need not argue for or against the fleshly resurrection if we understand the symbolic meaning of the resurrection as a renewal in the psyche—a real renewal. Real, because it is felt and real because it demonstrably transforms consciousness, and the god-image, spiritualizing the human and humanizing the spirit. Mary Magdalene reveals the psychic fact of the twice-born Christ as a living symbol, thus rejoining spirit and matter in what the alchemists call the “second body”—the symbolic body that renews consciousness. Now, with the psychological perspective we have in our time, we can recognize Mary Magdalene as the feminine factor at the inner “site” of the dying and resurrecting experience, truly superior in her realization of its reality and its value.

REVISITING SIN

Pope Gregory, in 591 C.E., cast doubt on the “purity” of Mary Magdalene’s love for Christ when he promulgated his opinion that one of the seven demons that Christ cast out from Mary Magdalene must have been the sin of adultery.⁵ He also conflated Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the “sinner” who washed Christ’s feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, causing Peter to wonder how Christ could allow such an appalling display of erotic attention. Other church officials disagreed with Gregory publicly, but the idea that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute caught the collective imagination and spread like wildfire in legend and art. As psychologists we take this contagious fantasy into account as meaningful; Mary Magdalene’s relationship to sin has a life of its own for psychological reasons.

Compared to Jesus's mother, the pure and perpetual virgin impregnated through the ear, Mary Magdalene's earthly and more sensual nature is to the Christian believer a bit suspect, on the one hand, but on the other hand, her personal regard for Jesus and the possibility of sensual love make her more accessible to those who know they too are sinners against that church prohibition. The Virgin Mary's absolute purity makes her the Christian standard-bearer for spiritual love, but her pagan shadow is quite powerful, a topic Marie-Louise von Franz explores in several of her writings. I especially like her commentary in *The Cat* (1999), her book about the Romanian fairy tale of the same name. In *The Cat*, the Mother of God curses the unborn child of a woman who dares to eat one of Mary's golden apples, turning her into a cat at age 17. Von Franz explains that the Mother of God is angry at the individual impulse in the woman to have her own child—that is, on a psychological level, to individuate, to give birth to a new generation of herself that is less conventional. The shadow of the Virgin Mary, von Franz explains, is not necessarily evil, but rather that part of feminine nature that is individual, independent, and likely to buck the collective ideal in favor of an inner mandate:

The tension is not so much the tension between good and evil, but between the impersonal, collective sublime and what is personal, individual, vital and natural. It's another polarity which is typical of the feminine realm. And Mary therefore curses the unborn girl and says she has to become a cat. . . . The individual feminine element is banished from the official forms of human life and goes underground. (von Franz, 1999, p. 61)

The collective squelching of the “personal, individual, vital and natural . . . from the official forms of human life” pushes instinctual reactions underground; hence the heroine becomes a cat to redeem her personal, instinctual vitality. In my dream, the standstill of natural life is indicated by my mother's being “stranded” with a man—meaning, in one sense, stranded by a collective standard, one that must be tantamount to a religious creed for it to be so imprisoning. Ideal, overly spiritual values permeate the psychological water in which we swim and sneak into our lives even when we try to adopt new religious or psychological views. I see the impulse for perfection steal its way into Buddhist and Jungian practitioners alike, reeling them back into impossible expectations. Being stranded in a conventional or idealistic attitude that is so subtle and so difficult to get conscious about, almost always translates into a paralysis in the individual creative life, and certainly genuine love suffers in men and women. In fairy tales this problem results in a heroine's being cursed as a cat, or imprisoned in a tower, or told she must marry

her father. The solution almost always involves a very long process in which the heroine (the ability to genuinely relate as an individual to an individual) goes through a torturous curse or degrading situation followed by a gradual resurrecting experience, often symbolized by her wearing of a series of progressively more refined dresses. In the end she can finally be recognized by her prince, which is her own masculine side, her understanding, which also has become more refined. The animus thought-system is no longer imprisoning her in a collective ideal but can allow her to develop as an individual.⁶ A natural feeling life can “go on,” as my dream indicates; the sinner is allowed to participate in her own development and can be real again.

Through a feeling reaction that she never doubts, Mary Magdalene, the loving sinner, accompanies Jesus Christ as a partner in his dissolution and return. Her lament compels Christ to appear; her “personal, individual, vital and natural” feeling thus evokes a response from the psyche. The church

stripped Mary Magdalene of her credibility by declaring her imperfect and thus unworthy. She was thereby prevented from demonstrating to men and women the legitimate value of their own natural feeling reactions. Our culture lost the personal relationship to the psyche and to the god-image that Mary Magdalene so beautifully models (even though here the model is much less overt than in Gnostic texts). Nevertheless, and perhaps more strongly as a result of this prohibition, Mary Magdalene is emerging in the collective as a symbolic reality herself, representing for many of us the personal love reaction that sees God in the most unlikely places, defying collective expectations for what a proper religious experience “should” be.

Mary Magdalene’s negative side comes up in any tendency to be overwhelmed by a strong spiritual attraction. According to her nature, Mary is deeply impressed and falls in love with the new, living spirit of truth bundled in what must have been an incredibly charismatic personality. When we are in a spiritual trance, we can become “stranded,” awed by a cause, a guru, a course of study, a system of ideas—even Jungian psychology—and end up right back on the slippery slope of perfectionism. Maybe, for example, we want Jungian practitioners to be free of power struggles, or Jungian psychology to be only about finding bliss. Our love for Jung then becomes more about identification with an ideal than about individuation. We have to watch our dream and fantasy life very carefully to track the twists and turns

The knowledge that one’s own life is meaningful because it is one’s own, sin and all, is the realization of the Eros factor . . .

of desire so we don't end up worshipping idols. Accepting our shadow in the first place, and knowing it has redemptive aims in the second—that is, *relating* to the inflation or the power shadow rather than trying to eliminate it—helps us value our own experience. The knowledge that one's own life is meaningful *because* it is one's own, sin and all, is the realization of the Eros factor, the feminine side of the godhead that we miss, the side that releases us from the split between perfection and worthlessness. Accepting imperfection in our lives helps us realize that our love is sanctified just because it is, just because it exists, and “perfection” *is* thus based on what is, rather than on what should be.

It seems that Mary Magdalene has been way ahead of us for a long time, waiting for us get out of paralytic arguments over whether Christ rose in the flesh or whether the symbolic image is real. She has been showing us all along how to relate to the symbol as a renewing phenomenon, and now we seem to be ready for her. She sparks our imaginations as one who can realize (as Jung says in the introductory quote) the rising of a transformed value in this age of God's death and disappearance. She shows us how to *be* Christ—which is to live our own lives and die our own psychological deaths, and to recognize our own experience as the carrier of individuation—rather than to *imitate* Christ, which leaves us stranded in theory.

The meaning of the word *love* written vertically in my dream seems connected to the ability of the Eros factor in Mary Magdalene, in her relationship to Christ, to hold those personal–transpersonal, spirit–matter poles together. In its vertical dimension, love connects above and below, the divine and the earthly, and through this *coniunctio* shows us the Self in our personal fates. The critical question in my dream is how the stranded feminine principle can go on, rather than completely self-destruct. The good news seems to be that the divine feminine is not so deeply buried anymore, thanks to C. G. Jung and his ability to see that we live in an age when individual feeling relationship to the objective psyche is critical to the survival of the human race and likewise to the continuing evolution of the god-image. We regularly remind our analysands that their lives, emotional experiences, and dream images—the *substance* and details of those images—have shining value. The new *hieros gamos* needs the perfectly imperfect, individual human soul to be the site of its resurrection. Thus the renewing feminine principle can become an active, conscious, and developing factor in the individuation process.

The feminine principle may, by the same token, help us take a broad perspective of Mary Magdalene's suffering at the hands of orthodoxy. Do we blame nature, or do we blame power complexes for the centuries-long incapacitation of the feminine in Western culture? Addressing these two possibilities in the context of a fairy tale, von Franz says that we need not exclude either:

Why does Briar Rose come under such a terrible curse [to sleep for 100 years]? One version says it is a just-so story, and the other version, that the goddess was angry because she had been ignored. . . . It is like the modern theory of light. One theory has it that light is made up of particles, the other that it is in waves. It would seem that if one is true, the other could not be. Similarly, either neurosis is caused through some transgression and cured by an ethical change of attitude or it is bad luck caused by nature and changed by good luck. Each view excludes the other, yet apparently both are true. One should see the double aspect and treat the neurosis from both sides, even though the aspects radically contradict one another. (1972, p. 26)

Whether or not her absence is a “just-so” phenomenon or the result of a perfectionistic power drive in religious orthodoxy, we miss the divine feminine principle as intensely, in body and soul, as we miss anyone we love who is taken away from us, even though we may not remember the details of their presence. We are gradually becoming aware of how devastating the degradation of the feminine has been to our lives, our culture, and our planet. We see the return of the feminine cropping up in such realms as eco-psychology, civil rights movements, the healing of obscene body-image standards, ecological movements, and individually in dreams and collectively in ongoing legend. The story of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene having a daughter whose bloodline, mixed with royalty, secretly endures is one of the most telling ways the feminine principle is making its way back into our lives as a divine factor. The idea that ongoing generations living on earth have sprung from a divine love relationship reaches back into antiquity, and at the same time feels new to us. For Christ and Mary Magdalene to have shared a profound love that endures in their progeny expresses the yearning in the psyche for the feminine principle and the divine *hieros gamos* to be realized, anew, on earth, in individuals, far down in our personal, spiritual flesh.

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NOTES

1. As described in Picknett and Prince (1997) and popularized in the novel and movie, *The Da Vinci Code*. See also Kramer (1979).

2. As described in “Wisdom, Mother of the Angels” in *The Gospel of Philip*, Nag Hammadi Library (Robinson, 1978).
3. The Gilgamesh myth from about 2750 B.C.E. very early anticipates the development of sexual morality in the godhead as Gilgamesh goes through a profoundly humbling transformation from a mostly divine king who arrogantly takes any woman he wants, including new brides, into a king who humbly faces the meaning of life and mortality, his feminine, related side thus more developed. See Schärf-Kluger (1991).
4. In the 20th century Freud made the same mistake, equating drive energy strictly with sexual energy. Jung’s break from Freud came in part because Jung saw drive energy as transpersonal and deriving from the unconscious, the feminine counterpart to consciousness. It is therefore horribly disappointing to see proponents of Mary Magdalene as Holy Grail also fall prey to literal interpretation of the *coniunctio*, even in alchemical texts, even while quoting Jung (Picknett & Prince, 1997). They thus become as fundamental as the creed they defy.
5. Pope Gregory the Great’s homily on Luke’s Gospel, dated 14 September 591, first suggested that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute: “She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? . . . It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts” (1844–1864, Homily XXXIII, col. 1238–1246).
6. Though critical, the role of the animus must be left for another time. I recommend Barbara Hannah’s (2010) *The Animus: The Spirit of Inner Truth in Women*. In Volume 1, “Animus and Eros,” Mary Magdalene appears as a Self symbol in the healing of a nun possessed by animus demons.

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