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The Maudlin impression : English literary images of Mary Magdalene, 1550/1700 / Patricia Badir.

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INTRODUCTION

Creeping After the Cart

Verely I say unto you, wheresoeuer this Gospel shall bee preached throughout all the worlde, there shall also this that shee hath done, be spoken of for a memorialis of her.

—Matthew 26:13 (Geneva edition)

John Marbeck was an unremarkable Tudor Protestant. In the 1530s he was an early supporter of John Calvin; in 1543 he was arrested and charged with contempt for the mass, and his papers, including an unfinished Bible concordance, were confiscated. Under Edward VI, Marbeck rose to minor prominence, publishing, in 1550, The booke of Common praier noted for the use of cathedrals and collegiate choirs. In 1574, despite his advanced age, he was still writing of his desire “to labour in the Lordes haruest” as vigorously as possible, good health permitting. And yet, despite his enthusiastic support for the English Church, Marbeck felt that some aspects of pre-Reformation religious culture had been left behind in the perhaps overly exuberant forward-reaching spirit of reform. As he would explain to his patron,
Lord Burghley, his purpose now was to “softly creepe after the Carte, picking vp such scattered corne, as is fallen out by the waye in the Lordes fielde.” It is difficult, however, to figure out precisely what Marbeck thought he was picking up. The work that follows the dedication to Burghley is just what it purports to be: the *Lyues of holy Saintes, Prophetes, Patriarches and others, contayned in holye Scripture . . . Collected and gathered into an Alphabetical order, to the greate commoditie of the Chrystian Reader*. But biblical figures were never cast from the cart of the Protestant reform; they didn’t suffer the dire fate of medieval saints whose *vitae* were derived from superstitious legends and outmoded apocrypha. In fact, one could even argue that the evangelical tendencies of the new theology assured the *dramatis personae* of the Old and New Testaments even greater prominence after the Reformation. And yet, in Marbeck’s mind, these lives, “to good to bee lost, or trodden under foote,” were endangered and in need of his “simple judgement to bee sorted into sheaues.” Moreover, the prefatory epistle to Marbeck’s *Lyues*, signed only “RN,” registers a slight tinge of uneasiness by insisting that the book “is of God, and his holy Saintes, and therefore to be reuerenced: collected out of Scripture, and therefore no vaine fable.” This budding anxiety can be explained only by shifting attention from the content of the book to its form. While it is the case that Marbeck’s decision to contemplate the Scriptures is entirely orthodox, the business of gathering the lives of biblical figures into an elaborate book is not. The compendium of saints’ lives is a distinctly medieval, distinctly Catholic genre. In choosing to emulate it, Marbeck makes his fondness for imaginative narration and compilation unmistakable and, in 1574, in need of some defending. It isn’t the corn that matters, in other words; it’s the gathering of it into sheaves.

Marbeck’s concern with the material and aesthetic pleasures of collecting and reformulating saints’ lives provides an important way of understanding the phenomenon I address in this book: the lively early modern history of Mary Magdalene. The Magdalene is a figure whose embeddings in the medieval imagination help us to think across the rupture between old and new forms of writing that made Marbeck,
and his anonymous commentator, uncomfortable. Over the course of the English Reformation, the cult of the saints came under siege. Church dedications were curtailed, images and icons were destroyed, and the medieval legends were debunked. Things changed in Catholic circles as well: in response to the inroads made by Protestants, the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent (1563) called for the eradication of all superstition, “all filthy quest for gain,” and “all lasciviousness” associated with the medieval cult of the saints. And yet Mary Magdalene, because of her scriptural vitality, retained her centrality as a model saint for a modern world. In England, literary reproduction of the Magdalene story never ceased; in fact, it may have intensified. More than one hundred poems, biographies, homilies, sermons, and one play on the subject of the “blessed sinner” were published in English between 1550 and 1700. Many more texts were circulating in manuscript form, and this count does not even begin to consider the prolific references to the saint in works that were not wholly dedicated to the Magdalene story.

In these texts Mary Magdalene is not, as some late modern proponents of her cult would contend, a vessel for a Christian lineage—a living Holy Grail—nor is she an uncomplicated metonymic sign for competing definitions of Ecclesia. She is, rather, a complex and evolving attempt to give aesthetic shape to religious experience in an age in which the form and function of religious art are uncertain. Her relationship to the medieval past is also complicated. She is not a hermetic vessel used to store forever the iconic and sacramental practices and experiences of a banished culture that might otherwise be forgotten. While she does preserve many treasured images and valued conceits, she is always available to be refashioned in new terms, under new historical conditions. In this sense, she is what Pierre Nora describes as a lieu de mémoire, or a site of memory, which protects the past while also reimagining it, giving it new life in the present. In the following chapters, I argue that English writers “gathered” (to return to Marbeck’s terminology) the bits and pieces of the medieval Magdalene and used them, within the unfolding drama of the Reformation, as sanctioned resources for thinking about the commemorative form and mnemonic
function of religious art. Here the Magdalene stood in the middle of controversies over likeness and presence—that is, amidst a precarious and uncertain polemic on the nature and power of illustration and image—and in this tentative location she served, precisely as Nora suggests, “to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections.”

This book traces these meanings from the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century. I show how the figure of Mary Magdalene serves, initially, as a constellation of imagistic memory reconceived to formulate the look and feel of English Protestantism. The Magdalene is used, in this formulation, to express a shared concern for the Christian future brought about by the loss—for better or for worse—of embodied ways of encountering Christ’s invisible presence. Here, she helps to articulate representational practices that mitigate the agony of that loss and that assuage uncertain circumstances by giving the Scriptures appreciable aesthetic form. In this new context, the Magdalene becomes the model for a new generation of poetic portraits commemorating English Christians in terms that accentuate not only their extraordinary piety but also the haunted “look” of genuine love.

As this poetics takes shape over time, Magdalene writing becomes more erudite and more mannered, and eventually its potency is understood as lying less in its ability to illustrate the emotional affect of the Word than in its capacity to render some sense of the ineffable magnificence of the Christian experience. And yet at the same time the image becomes ubiquitous, circulating through bookshops and print stalls in poetry, sermons, and printed pictures. As if in anticipation of her decadence and eventual demise at the hand of history, some writers begin to position the Magdalene against this unbridled proliferation; however, by the end of the seventeenth century examples of the image make evident the enormous gap that separates the Middle Ages from the Restoration. Only in rare instances does Mary Magdalene serve, once again, as a site of memory—connecting the present to the past and to a time when the woman with the alabaster jar was inseparable from the beauty of holiness.
The Magdalene found between “Mary, mother of John” and “Mardocheus” in Marbeck’s *Lyues* is just what the author promises: a life delivered out of the Scriptures. Mary Magdalene is a “sinfull woman” from Bethany who, in token of her great repentance, brings costly oils to Jesus at the Pharisee’s house. There, she falls to her knees, washes Christ’s feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with oils. Christ forgives her sins and she devotes her life to him. Martha, Mary’s sister, disapproves of Mary’s silent devotion, but Mary proves her fidelity by listening tirelessly to Jesus’ preaching. She attends the crucifixion and the sepulcher, and she mourns the disappearance of Christ’s body. She is the first to see Jesus standing in the garden, but she does not recognize him until he addresses her. She reaches toward him, once again to kiss his feet, but he rebukes her and tells her that she must inform his brethren that he is to ascend to his father. Marbeck’s Mary is the Magdalene of the Renaissance, rooted in Scriptures and stripped of the legendary apparatus associated with her medieval cult. However, Marbeck’s practice—the stitching together of scriptural fragments to form one compelling story—introduces the topic of the Magdalene’s medieval legacy.

The Magdalenes of the Middle Ages were generally conflations of Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10 and John 11); Mary Magdalene, from whom Christ expels seven devils (Luke 8) and who attends the sepulcher (Matt. 27; Mark 15–16; Luke 23–24; John 19–20); “the woman” who anoints Christ’s head (Matt. 26; Mark 14; John 12); and Luke’s “sinner,” who bathes Christ’s feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7). The composite figure was first conceptualized by Gregory the Great. The story was further embellished by a collection of attendant legends that were rendered popular by the *Legenda aurea*. The Magdalene became known as a courtesan of noble descent, one who relinquishes a past tainted by luxury in favor of a contemplative life of ascetic devotion to Christ. This latter portion of the *vita* seems to have been derived from scattered scriptural references linking Mary with the wealthy town of el Mejdel (Magdalini...
in Greek); with precious oils; and possibly with other New Testament women, including the woman taken in adultery and the Virgin Mary. Other legends were also woven into the biblical tissue: the eleventh-century story of the sea journey that brought Mary Magdalene (along with Lazarus and Maximus) to Vézelay; and the earlier legend (probably Italian) about the penitential life of Mary of Egypt who lived out her days in a cave in the desert, covered only in hair and ascending to heaven seven times a day (at the seven canonical hours). This saint’s relics (including a skull marked with the print of Christ’s finger) were found in a cave at Sainte-Baume near Marseilles where they continue to be venerated today.

Medieval English Christians dedicated 1 college, 63 hospitals, and 172 parish churches to St. Mary Magdalene. They painted her tending Christ’s feet, weeping at the cross and the sepulcher, preaching to the masses, and meditating (or reading) in the desert. Her image graced church windows and illuminated manuscripts and prayer books. She was the subject of plays, miracle accounts, biographies, sermons and homilies, hymns, and poems. She was, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, the most important figure in the English cult of the saints. We know a lot more now about the medieval Magdalene than we did a decade ago largely due to the recent efforts of Victor Saxer, Susan Haskins, Katherine Jansen, and Theresa Coletti. Each of these scholars has worked to define what Debora Shuger calls Mary’s “sacred eroticism” by illustrating how centuries of popular devotion and exegetical debate articulated the saint’s nearness to Jesus’ body, both during his life and after his death. The Magdalene’s tender ministries model a penitential practice premised upon physical understanding. Her profound and lugubrious mourning at the cross and at the sepulcher, coupled with her extraordinary encounter with Christ after his death, constitute an original experience of sacramental presence. Finally, her most privileged status as preacher of the resurrection makes her a mesmeric and politically charged icon for the authority of women within institutional religion. Coletti’s groundbreaking assertion that medieval literature dedicated to the saint conducts sustained cultural dialogue about the contributions of “feminine spiritual experience, authority and corporeality to late medieval theology and reli-
“religious practice” is now assumed wisdom. For those of us who study these fields, Mary is an “organizing symbol” who presides over our dialogue, “exposing its assumptions and risks, bearing witness, through her own semiotic multivalence, to the contested, overdetermined symbolic systems of late medieval religions.”

Marbeck was obviously trying to leave this potentially explosive figure on the other side of the Reformation where she clearly belonged, instead favoring a figure derived exclusively from scriptural sources. And yet, even the much reduced Magdalene that Marbeck preserves in his *Lyues* had come under attack as early as 1518 when Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, in a treatise entitled *De Marie Magdalena*, revived the opinions of some church fathers by arguing for the presence of three distinct women in the Gospels: Mary Magdalene, from whom Christ expelled seven devils and who attended the sepulcher; Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus; and the woman, a nameless sinner, who anointed Christ with oil upon several occasions. Of the composite Magdalene, Lefèvre wrote:

> Strong, I admit, are the authors, and their number is great, but the gospel is stronger than any number of authors. Strong too is an ancient custom, even a false one, and it often claims for itself, although erroneously, the Church’s authority. Yet the truth is stronger still.

The tremors resulting from Lefèvre’s proposal were registered in England in three conservative tracts written in 1519 by John Fisher, bishop of Rochester and chancellor of Cambridge University. Fisher’s response to Lefèvre would prove to be what Anselm Hufstader calls “the training ground” for his controversy with Luther and for his opposition to Henry VIII’s divorce. For Fisher, the stakes were very high indeed:

> I immediately thought of how many difficulties would confront the whole Church if Lefèvre’s opinion were ever to be accepted. How many authors would have to be rejected, how many books would have to be changed, how many sermons formerly preached
to the people would now have to be revoked! And then, how much uneasiness would arise among the faithful, how many occasions of loss of faith. They will soon doubt other books and narratives, and finally the mother of us all, the Church, who for so many centuries has sung and taught the same thing.¹⁸

Coletti has argued that the saint’s infamous sexuality was at the heart of early humanist critiques of the single Magdalene. Lefèvre and his followers were, accordingly, motivated by the belief “that perfection in holiness is consonant with ethical perfection.” They did not dispute Jesus’ justification of the sinner in Luke 7 but rather maintained that superior holiness, “the realized image of God’ in humankind, was not something that could emerge, as the vita of a single Magdalene would have it, in one sudden transformative act.”¹⁹ While this assessment is certainly accurate, Fisher’s response to Lefèvre also suggests that the issues congregating around Mary Magdalene take one to the very core of Christian representational practice. Lefèvre thought that the church needed to be liberated from the fictions generated not by God, but by theologians, artists, writers, and historians—and Fisher knew what effecting such liberation would mean.²⁰

Crucial to my own argument is the fact that Lefèvre and Fisher locate the figure of the Magdalene at the center of a debate that sought to articulate the possibilities and limitations of religious art. The critical question for both writers was just how much one could supplement the truth of the Gospels with story or with illustration. While Lefèvre was denounced by the church for his views, the events of the next two decades would reveal that his principles were the same as those guiding Protestant reform and that the habits he sought to denounce constituted the practices—the “ancient customs”—that latter-day historians would identify as the imaginative (the fictive, the affective, the emotional, the image-making) qualities of medieval art and literature.

In his incisive discussion of the postmedieval construction of the Middle Ages, James Simpson argues that the imagination was fingered, by iconoclastic church reformers, as precisely the thing that threatened to “block access to abstract reason and to invest the mate-
rial with idolatrous desire.” It was thus also “the boundary line between the popular and the learned, between image and the word,” and it ultimately served to “divide historical eras,” positing superstition on one side of a paradigm shift and rationalizing faith on the other. The Magdalene’s resilience to the history-making energies of reform thus becomes an index of the enduring importance of the imagination to early modern religious culture. When the Magdalene appears in Marbeck’s *Lyues*, for instance, she may be a stripped-down version of her former self, but her life remains a tissue woven from the very threads that humanist scholars tried to pick apart. Her appeal continues to reside in the composite, or rather composed, nature of her story, proving, as Simpson suggests, that despite the attempt to consign the imagination to the realm of history, it would continue to inform present reason “by feeling its way back into the body of the past, across massive historical ruptures.”

The Magdalene that resurfaces in the chapters that follow is the place to which writers like Marbeck return, gathering up, along the way, the inspired narratives that might have disappeared had anyone actually adhered to Lefèvre’s sense of the Gospels’ certainty. Moreover, the composite Magdalene recuperated from the vault of idolatrous icons is more than illustrative of a tenacious attachment to culturally significant stories; she actually speaks to the necessity of making such stories and provides an anthology of aesthetic strategies and creative possibilities to do so. The key passage from the Gospels, in this respect, is Matthew 26:6–13:

> And when Iesus was in Bethania, in the house of Simon the leper, There came vnto him a woman, which had a boxe of very costly oyntment, and powred it on his head, as he sate at the table. And when his disciples sawe it, they had indignation, saying, What needed this waste? For this oyntment might haue bene solde for much, and bene giuen to the poore. And Iesus knowing it, sayde unte them, Why trouble yee the woman? for shee hath wrought a good woorke vpon me. For yee haue the poore alwayes with you, but me shall yee not haue alwaies. For in that shee powrd this oyntment on my bodie, shee did it to burie me. Verely I say vnto
you, wheresoeuer this Gospel shall bee preached throughout all
the worlde, there shall also this that shee hath done, be spoken
of for a memoriall of her.22

This passage is often at the core of theological debate on the subject
of Christ’s vanishing presence—from discussion on the form and sub-
stance of the Eucharist to learned engagements with pneumatology.23
These complex issues are beyond the scope of this book; however,
some attempt to articulate the Magdalene’s centrality to the subject
of Christ’s presence is indeed called for.

Matthew 26 was used, first by the church fathers and later by the
defenders of Catholicism, to argue that the admittedly extravagant
gestures of Mary Magdalene were the iconic equivalent of costly ges-
tures bestowed upon Christ through the vehicle of the church. The
medieval compendium of patristic glosses, the Glossa Ordinaria, turns
Christ’s statement (“me shall yee not haue alwaies”) into confirmation
of his enduring corporeal presence (“Ecce ego vobiscum sum omni-
bus diebus usque ad consummationem saeculi”) as anticipated by the
sacramental sensuality of Mary’s act. Mary’s oil is the physical supple-
ment, the very “odour of faith” (fidei odorem) for which Christ sheds
his blood (pro qua mox fusurus sum sanguinem) and which remedies
the annihilation of his death (Officium est sepultureae quod vos perdi-
tionem esse putatis).24

This traditional reading of Matthew 26 would survive the Refor-
mation in the Catholic annotations of the Rheims-Douay Bible pub-
lished in 1586 “for the better understanding of the text, and specially
for the discouerie of the Corrvptions of diuers late translations, and
for cleering the Controversies in religion, of these daies.” The note
accompanying verses 6–13 describes Protestant readings of the pas-
sage as “simple lost, or lesse meritorious” and compares them to the
disciples who found the cost of the oils bestowed upon Christ’s body
to be “fruitless.” Here the proximity of Mary’s act to the account
of the Last Supper allows it to be linked to the doctrine of transubstan-
tiation, and though the reading acknowledges that “we haue him not
in visible maner as he conuersed on the earth with his disciples,” it
makes a claim for the real presence made possible by Communion.
“We haue him after an other sort,” claims the gloss, “in the B. Sacra-
ment, and yet haue him truly and really the self same body.”

For Protestant exegetes, the passage provides an opportunity to
counter the inevitable loss of Christ’s humanity—the central theo-
logical problem facing post-Reformation English Christians. Cal-
vil insists that the prescription for ritual, found in the Catholic gloss
of Matthew 26, fails to recognize the specificity of the original event:
“Though Christ desired not the vse of oyntment . . . yet in respect
of the circumstance, this anointing pleased him.” Calvin’s commentary
argues that Mary’s exceptional qualities—her special grace as made
apparent by “a secreat motion of the spirite”—are the key elements
on display. Thoughtless repetition of an original gesture does not in-
dicate like grace in others, for Mary’s singular act is memorable only
because it makes her predestination evident. Thus, “there was no com-
mandement which enioyned Mary to this annoynting, neither was it
needeful that there should haue beene a law set downe for one worke.”
Calvin continues:

Christ doth not simply defend the anoynting, that we shuld fol-

low the same: but declareth that there was a cause wherfore it was
acceptable to god. It is conuenient [that] this should be wisely
observed, least, that together with the papists, we should prepos-
terously devise sumptuous rites for the worshipping of God: for
when they heard that Christ would that Mary should anoynt him,
they imagined that he was delited with incense, waxe candles,
magnificall ornaments, and such like pomps. For this cause they
had at their glorious ceremonies, & they thought that they could
not worship God aright, if they should not lash out into great
charges.26

Calvin concurs with Lefèvre and Lefèvre’s supporters when he lo-
cates the image of Mary Magdalene at the heart of theological debate
over the integrity of sacramental culture. And he would not be the last
to weigh in on a passage whose meaning would continue to be debated
for several more generations. Even as late as 1646, amidst the turmoil
of the Civil War, preachers like Richard Ward were using Matthew 26
as proof of Christ’s bodily departure to heaven where he remains “till his comming againe.” The passage is frequently linked to Mary’s presence at Christ’s grave (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20), suggesting that, even before the crucifixion, she anticipates that Christ will not always be available in human form. From this perspective, the Magdalene’s anointing becomes important to a developing Protestant poetics because it prefigures Christ’s physical departure and recognizes that his memory will need to be constituted in imaginative work.

Protestant commentators also acknowledge that Christian memory is an affective experience. Despite Calvin’s stalwartly rational mandate, for instance, the odoriferous sensuality of the Glossa Ordinaria reverberates through his reading of Matthew 26:

For Christ sayth that he shal not be alwaies with vs, to be worshipped with outward pomps. We know assuredly & by experience of faith we fele that he is present with vs by spiritual power & grace: but he is not visibly conuersant amongst vs to receiue earthly honors at our hands. So they are outragious obstinat, which doe thrust vpon him fantastical charges against his will. . . . Therefore Iohn praiseth Mary, because that she had reserued that oyntment for the day of his burial. But after that the perfecte truth of his figure appeared, & Christ come out of the graue, he did not only perfume one house but all the worlde with the comfortable quickening sauour of his death.

The key phrase comes at the end of the passage as Calvin broaches the subject of what Mary sees after the resurrection. Calvin stops sounding like Calvin as he grapples with “the perfecte truth” of a figure. What is this presence? Is it a lifelike specter, an image, or a figura? The only way Calvin can explain the moment is to describe its affect—what it looks like, how it feels, how it smells, and even how it tastes. The presence seems to be a spiritual triumph, knowable through the “experience of faith” and accountable only through the iteration and commemoration of Mary’s profoundly physical act. While knowledge of Christ does not lie in the empty mimicry of scriptural events, Calvin
comes very close to admitting that the reading of the Gospel alone is insufficient without an “idea” of Mary Magdalene to show us just how real the spiritual encounter can be.

Calvin’s reading of the Magdalene as a passionate register of the experience of the Holy Spirit echoes through other early modern glosses on Matthew. For instance, while maintaining that Mary’s gesture was “sweetly ordered by Almighty God in his secret counsel, and by his fatherly providence, to excellent ends,” John Trapp remarks that she will be remembered because “Maries name now smels as sweet in all Gods house, as ever her oyntment did.” Wherever one finds the Bible, it seems, one also finds Mary, who makes it known that reading Scripture should be an emotional exercise deeply invested in an epistemology of the senses.

It is Erasmus’s paraphrase of Matthew 26, however, that provides the most provocative reading of the Magdalene’s special know-how:

And because he should reuyue and ryse agayne, before that his frendes should do hym this honoure, he suffered this pompe of buryall to be bestowed vpon him before his death: to the intent he mighte imprint by manye meanes in his disciples myndes the mencion of his death, and by honoure, to mitigate the horryble-ness thereof.

Apparently mediating between tradition and revision, Erasmus writes that Christ tolerates Mary’s act to pre-emptively impress the memory of his death upon the minds of his followers and in so doing ease their horror. Mary’s function is to supplement or “mitigate” the ghastly truth told in the Gospels with a memory that Christ understands, at least in Erasmus’s paraphrase, as preventing the emptiness that death creates:

Therefore depraue not her godlynes, whiche is so acceptable vnto God, that whereas the gospell of my death shall be preached through out all the worlde, this woman also shall be mencioned, whiche with a godly and holy duety, hath preuented my sepul-
cure.
Erasmus’s point is that Mary Magdalene’s commemorative function is different from that of the Gospels, which undertake the scriptural mission of recording Christ’s Word: she draws the Word into the world, making the connections between it and the lived lives of those who follow it. If Erasmus’s gospel of death serves as what Christopher Collins has argued is typical of scriptural writing in general, if it is “a writing down” that strives to “preserve contact with the authorial voice of God despite the passage of time and the vicissitudes of history,” then the Magdalene’s gesture is a kind of “poiesis,” or a “making-up” that brings scriptural writing forward and allows it to begin to take appreciable shape.31

The chapters that follow will show that Erasmus was not alone in his allusion to a supplementary symbolic act, intimately associated with the Magdalene, which softens the sadness of the Christ’s death and departure and even prevents him from vanishing entirely. However, before turning to the imaginative work the Magdalene enables, I want to return briefly to Lefèvre, who, in one of his final volleys in the debates of 1519, recalls a pilgrimage to Sainte-Baume. Lefèvre asks his traveling companion, who has just finished saying his prayers to the Magdalene’s relics, what he thinks his devotions will accomplish. The friend replies:

I do not put my faith in the (relics) which are presented. I take little interest in them, but I do not scorn them, for Christ does not require that I put my faith in these things. I rather keep my faith in the events, which are narrated, to me, most of all in those, which I know the Church to celebrate. Then I raise my mind to heaven, to the exemplars of those visible things, lying open to the eyes of the mind, not to those of the body—this, or something like it, is what I turn over in my mind.32

Lefèvre’s friend, likely expressing the views of Lefèvre himself, seems to be saying that his faith is supplemented by the contemplation of the Magdalene—an exemplar of visible things able to give imaginative form to the events central to Christian culture. I want to suggest that early modern theologians, despite their differences of opinion, do not
seem to be at odds on the subject of Mary Magdalene. While their writing bears witness to the idealism, the fanaticism, and the spiritual disillusionment that is inevitable at moments of cultural transformation, it also reminds us, as Marbeck does, that at the center of religious history there is “also this”—the Magdalene—a site of memory that works to “inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial,” lending familiar, appreciable shape to the experience of faith.33

*A Memorial of Her*

Shuger has trenchantly argued that, in Renaissance practice, biblical narratives retained “a certain (if limited) flexibility: not necessarily a theological flexibility but a sort of extradogmatic surplus of undetermined meaning—or rather meaning capable of being determined in various ways.” These “determinations,” she continues, “should not be reduced to theological positioning (although they have theological implications); they take shape at the intersection between the biblical text and other cultural materials.”34 This book takes a deeper look at one of these points of intersection. I consider how literary glosses of the Gospel-based Magdalene stretch backward into the medieval past in order to recuperate and protect a range of image-making practices; I also consider how these practices, in turn, lend material, tangible form to the Bible of the Reformation. I argue that, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the Magdalene story did not tumble disregarded to the wayside. Rather, it was gathered up by English writers and retold in a bewildering array of literary genres. At a very basic level, the purpose of this book is to test the Magdalene’s flexibility, to register her range of possible meanings as her rich medieval legacy comes into contact with the push and pull of religious reform. But more importantly, this book shows how devotional writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used the Magdalene to articulate the possibility of describing religious experience in a literature that could elide the controversial, embodied character of art while it continued to explore the potency and appeal of beautiful things. This