

## **mary magdalene**

### **images and shadows in Portuguese literature and the Arts**

#### ***the construction of a character - symbolism and metamorphosis***

[see [gallery](#)]

Mary of Magdal, the sinner who followed Jesus to Simon's house, anoints Christ's feet and cleans them with her hair – later, the first witness of the Resurrection – is so fascinating that she frees herself from all the other actors in the evangelic drama. Tradition reveals her to be an amalgam of the feminine silhouettes that followed Christ, but she is also a shadow of other images, more obscure and less orthodox. Belonging to the areas of the sacred and the profane, she disturbs ecclesiastics and philosophers, and attracts the poets, painters and sculptors, who transformed her into an artistic theme. The anointing gesture nourished Magdalene's imaginary biography, and her legend continued to grow until our times. From *exemplum* she became a pictorial figure, a rhetorical *topos*, a symbol, a myth.

Starting with the Portuguese *Flos Sanctorum* (1513), this work moves back and forth, from Antiquity and Paganism to the 20<sup>th</sup>. century, trying to show how the character of Mary Magdalene is built up in literature (sacred and profane) as well as in the plastic arts.

The process of Magdalene's transformation into poetical material is long and sinuous, with moments of oblivion and revivals. She crystallises as sacred heroin during the fulcral period of Trent. This moment also marks the beginning of an attempt of destruction, or of re-conduction of the character to her first locale. There is an effort to correct her legendary attributions and characteristics, extending from her physical representations – textual or pictorial – to behaviour and «psychology». Consequently, the signs that consecrate the figure then offer a second interpretation. Magdalene is associated with the personification of Melancholy, suffering its evolutionary states (from philosophical contemplation *simile* to psychological pathology), ending up in the «femme fatale» perversion. In Portugal she keeps herself, to exhaustion, within bounds of the scholastic and tridentine interpretation. Inconvenient to the dogma, the initial relationship with

the divine is deflected; her sacred gesture emptied of significance; even the *Noli me Tangere* is taken away from her (being such a good son, Christ could have only visited his mother in the first place). The symbolic meaning erodes while Magdalene drags between penitence, the demand for Christ, and tears. But she resists even the parodies that transform her into a laundry-woman; survives the efforts to change her into an edifying heroine; ignores the total and sudden re-conduction to the rank of prostitute, as done by our symbolist poets.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the character returns in full with the marks and the biography given to her by the *Legenda Aurea*. She comes back via pop theatre – the opera-rock *Jesus Christ SuperStar* – and enters the cinema with Scorsese; found in the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, a gospel with her name gives her some dignity; she became a feminist banner; she inspires painters as unexpected as Francis Bacon.

In Portugal she comes back as an hippie in Barahona Possolo's painting; recovers her autonomy through Paula Rego's brush; shows herself as a new Diotima in José Saramago's *Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo*.

The conclusion proposed is that we are assisting to the formation of a myth, not only an amorous one, which only now is finding its *momentum*.

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