

# ***Imitatio Christi* in the Later Middle Ages and in Contemporary Film: Three Paradigms\***

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This essay considers three paradigms of *imitatio Christi* in the Later Middle Ages. According to each of these paradigms, Christ is regarded not only as God's unearned gift of salvation to a needy, sinful humanity, but also as a human being, a mortal man whose life both men and women are supposed to meditate upon and strive to imitate. This much all three paradigms have in common. Where they part company is in their differing conceptions of the proper focus for one's meditations on Christ, and also in their differing conceptions of the way in which Christ is to be imitated. Authoritative late medieval theologians, preachers, religious writers, and artists promoted each of the three paradigms. Yet it is only according to the first of the three paradigms that Christ's actual physical suffering is paramount. In the second paradigm, the suffering of Jesus — and that of his mother, Mary — is rendered in a manner that is implicitly psychological

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Thanks are due to Professor Noa Steimatsky of the University of Chicago and her husband, Dr Paolo Barlera of the Italian Cultural Institute in New York, for helping me obtain the frame enlargements from the three films, reproduced as Plates 1, 4, and 9. Details regarding the production of Ray's *King of Kings* (1961), Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) can be found online at [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). For more on these and six other film biographies of Jesus, see Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*.

more than physical. And in the third paradigm, though references to the Passion are frequent, neither his physical nor his psychological suffering is highlighted. Instead, this third paradigm seeks to promote a type of *imitatio Christi* that seems to be purposefully turning its back on the other two paradigms.

To highlight the distinctive features of each of these three medieval paradigms of *imitatio Christi*, and to illustrate their enduring cultural presence, I shall suggest a link between each paradigm and a thematically related American film version of the Life of Christ. In the order in which they will be discussed (but in reverse order of their release dates), the films are Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961). Correlating three medieval Christ-paradigms with three modern American film biographies of Christ is not intended as merely a friendly gesture to mass-media popular culture. Comparing three medieval Christ paradigms with three widely viewed and reviewed modern American film biographies of Christ will help clarify the main points of my argument about Christ in late medieval culture and beyond. The link with film will also highlight the fact that in a new medium, and many centuries after they were first conceived, these early paradigms of Christ have continued to speak to audiences in what are recognizably the same "medieval" emotive and explanatory voices in which they once spoke.<sup>1</sup>

### The Mel Gibson Paradigm

The debate surrounding Mel Gibson's Passion film is fresh enough in most people's minds not to require a detailed rehearsal. Two of the most pressing questions that the film has raised are "Is it gratuitously violent?" and "Is it anti-Semitic?" Along with many others (including numerous devout and learned Christians), I would answer "Yes, of

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1 A word of explanation is due regarding my choice of these three films from among many other Jesus film biographies. In a class by itself, and arguably the best of all the film biographies of Christ to date, is Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 black-and-white film, *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*). But Pasolini's masterpiece, with a screenplay that stays close to the Gospel of Matthew, provides less of a basis for comparison with the medieval Christ paradigms examined in this essay than the three lesser films I shall discuss. One among the many remarkable aspects of Pasolini's film is the fact that not a single drop of blood is shed on camera. That in itself would make any attempt to correlate Pasolini's film with medieval Christ paradigms problematic. For a detailed summary and critical account of Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, see Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 95-125.

course,” on both counts — the film is gratuitously violent and blatantly anti-Semitic.<sup>2</sup> Skipping Jesus’s infancy and Galilean ministry, the film begins its narrative late in the *Life of Christ*: the first scene shows Christ’s Agony in the Garden, complete with an extra-biblical mock-assault by an (illusory?) snake, and a taunting demonic apparition. From there on the film is one extended bloodbath, with Christ literally being beaten to a bloody pulp. To be sure, the film is entitled “The Passion of,” not “The Life of the Christ.” Yet Gibson’s film shows proportionally more beating, spitting on, and cursing of Christ, and more of Christ’s wounds, flayed skin, blood, and sweat than can be found in any or all of the New Testament Gospels combined — or in any other biblical or apocryphal sources (*Plate 1*). In addition, Gibson goes out of his way to vindicate Pilate and the Romans and to portray the Jews as the main culprits responsible for Jesus’s torture and death. And yet, as the British medieval historian R. N. Swanson has observed, it is precisely the film’s violence and anti-Semitism that make it an authentic, affectively

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2 Not untypical are the following remarks by Paula Fredriksen, one of a group of New Testament scholars who previewed the film: “the script, when we got it, shocked us.” She noted that the scholars “pinpointed its historical errors and — again, since Mr. Gibson has so trumpeted his own Catholicism — its deviations from magisterial principles of biblical interpretation.” Fredriksen went on to say,

“That script — and, on the evidence, the film — presents neither a true rendition of the gospel stories nor a historically accurate account of what could have happened in Jerusalem, on Passover, when Pilate was prefect and Caiaphas was high priest . . . . The true historical framing of Mr. Gibson’s script is neither early first century Judea (where Jesus of Nazareth died) nor the late first-century Mediterranean diaspora (where the evangelists composed their Gospels). It is post-medieval Roman Catholic Europe” (as quoted by Abraham H. Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League; see [http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/gibson\\_oped.asp](http://www.adl.org/Interfaith/gibson_oped.asp)).

On its website, The Anti-Defamation League also lists the following anti-Semitic emphases in Gibson’s film:

- The film portrays Jewish authorities and the Jewish “mob” as forcing the decision to torture and execute Jesus, thus assuming responsibility for the crucifixion.
- The film relies on sinister medieval stereotypes, portraying Jews as blood-thirsty, sadistic and money-hungry enemies of God who lack compassion and humanity.
- The film relies on historical errors, chief among them its depiction of the Jewish high priest controlling Pontius Pilate.
- The film uses an anti-Jewish account of a 19th century mystical anti-Semitic nun, distorts New Testament interpretation by selectively citing passages to weave a narrative that oversimplifies history, and is hostile to Jews and Judaism.
- The film portrays Jews who adhere to their Jewish faith as enemies of God and the locus of evil.

See [http://www.adl.org/PresRele/ASUS\\_12/4291\\_12.htm](http://www.adl.org/PresRele/ASUS_12/4291_12.htm); accessed 8 April 2007.

pious Christian work, perfectly in tune with certain features of the late medieval European religious sensibility.<sup>3</sup>

“Gothic pathos” and “affective piety” are related terms, now widely used to describe characteristic features of late medieval European Christian culture.<sup>4</sup> In a vast array of works in the gothic or affective mode, preachers, theologians, painters, and poets sought to bring home to each individual Christian the pain and suffering of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary. More than ever before, innovative writers and artists strove to render the physical suffering of Jesus by concentrating on the terrible sight of his bloody wounds. Furthermore, by focusing on her sighs and freely flowing tears, they also strove to convey the intense psychological and emotional suffering of his mother Mary.

The late Middle Ages was not the first era in which Christians used bodily pain, mutilation, and even voluntary death as tools in their devotional practice or their quest for spiritual perfection. As early as the second century CE, orthodox Christian theologians were invoking the Crucifixion and the example of Christ’s suffering and death in their defence of martyrdom as the proper response to Roman persecution. For example, Tertullian (c.190 CE) advised the truly devout follower of Christ that “You must take up your cross and bear it after your Master . . . The sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life’s blood.”<sup>5</sup> There are similar testimonies to a positive view of righteous and willing bleeding for Christ from the early Christian centuries, but it was only in the later Middle Ages, when actual Christian martyrdom was no longer a widespread phenomenon, that continuators of this tradition took the stress on suffering and blood to new heights.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Swanson’s observation on the medieval Christian sensibility of Gibson’s film was made to me in a personal communication. On late medieval anti-Semitism, see Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* and *Living Letters of the Law*; and Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*. On the situation of the Jews in medieval England, see Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*; and Richmond, ed. *The Jews in Medieval England*.

4 On gothic pathos and affective piety in late medieval religious sensibility, see Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (with special reference to affective piety in England); Aers and Staley, *Powers of the Holy*; and Bartlett and Bestul, eds., *Cultures of Piety*.

5 Tertullian, *De Anima*, 55; quoted in Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 106.

6 The late medieval European religious stress on suffering and blood was undoubtedly, at least in part, a response to the ravages of the Black Death; but this would explain the proliferation of tortured and bleeding images of Christ only after c.1350. The influence of the Franciscans and their highly emotive spirituality can account for an increasing stress on suffering in religious art and devotional writings from around 1250. Recently, Rachel Fulton (in her prize-winning study, *From Judgment to Passion*) has traced the origins of the quest for a more human Christ to the years 1000 and 1033, at which time it seems to have developed in response to a frustrated apocalypticism.

Evidence of the extremes to which this late medieval “gothic” sensibility could be taken is found in paintings and manuscript illustrations in which the blood that flows from Christ’s wounds is depicted as falling upon the saintly figures who stand beside the Cross — figures who are sometimes even shown drinking Christ’s blood. In an early fourteenth-century French copy of Robert de Boron’s *L’estoire del Graal*, a Crucifixion scene depicts Joseph of Arimathea seated below the crucified Christ and collecting the blood that flows down from Christ’s chest and leg wounds into a vessel (the “Holy Grail”), as blood also drips down from each of his nailed palms and falls on the heads of Mary and John, who are standing under the Cross. In addition, the scene shows blood flowing from the hands, knees, and ankles of the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus, creating a sense of colour harmony and visual balance, while at the same time providing a potential frisson of terror or disgust — or both (*Plate 2*).<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, however, the faces of all the figures are eerily calm and inexpressive: Jesus and the two thieves seem to be asleep, while Joseph of Arimathea, Mary, and John show only a slight hint of concern or sadness.<sup>8</sup> In an early fourteenth-century Book of Hours, an illustration of the stigmatization of St. Francis shows the saint kneeling before a crucified, winged seraphic Christ, from whose wounds blood spouts and flows to the saint’s hands, feet, and breast, where the stigmata have appeared (*Plate 3*).<sup>9</sup>

In several of the manuscript illustrations reproduced in Ellen Ross’s study of the suffering Jesus in late medieval England, scenes of the Crucifixion often imply, or sometimes actually depict, the drinking of Christ’s blood.<sup>10</sup> In the *Gorelston Psalter* (British Library MS Additional 49622, f. 7; c.1310), Mary Magdalene clings to the Cross and kneels

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7 The poem was written c.1190-1200. The manuscript in question, London, British Library, Royal 14 E. III, is dated c.1300-1315.

8 The moderate concern or sadness of Mary and John is partly conveyed by conventional hand gestures, especially Mary’s clasped hands and John’s raised right arm, and also by the way in which their eyes are angled upwards toward the figure of Christ; but there are no furrowed brows, no open or twisted mouths, and no tears.

9 In contrast, the standard renderings of the scene of the stigmatization represent the lines of contact between the wounds of Christ and the wounds of St. Francis as straight-line “rays” or lines of light, not streams of blood. Among numerous examples of this light-stream rather than blood-stream approach to the stigmatization of St. Francis are the painting of St. Francis at the entrance to Giotto’s Bardi Chapel (c.1325), which can be viewed at [http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/s\\_croce/2bardi/scenes\\_1/franci1.html](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/s_croce/2bardi/scenes_1/franci1.html); or Giovanni da Fiesole’s rendering of the scene (c.1395-1400?), which can be viewed at <http://www.mdc.hr/strossmayer/eng/galerija/fs5.html>; and the anonymously rendered illustration of the stigmatization of St. Francis in *Meditations*, trans. and ed. Ragusa and Green, illustr. 2 (p. 4).

10 See Ross, *The Grief of God*, 50-51.

in the path of the stream of blood that is flowing from the wound in Christ's side.<sup>11</sup> In the *Taymouth Hours* (British Library MS Yates Thompson 13, f. 122v; c.1325-1335), the biblical Adam's lips are red with the blood dropping from the bleeding Christ on the Cross above him. Similarly, in a Deposition scene in the *Gough Psalter* (Bodleian Library MS Gough liturg. 8, f. 61v; c.1300-1310), Joseph of Arimathea drinks the blood that flows from Christ's chest wound; and in another late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century Psalter (Trinity College Library MS O.4.16, f. 113v), Joseph (?) holds Jesus and kisses the wound in his chest.<sup>12</sup> As Ross explains, "By drinking Jesus' blood, the penitent feeds on Jesus' body and is nurtured and transformed during the sacred meal."<sup>13</sup>

"Nurtured and transformed?" — well, perhaps, in the end, but also, one must add, presumably filled with horror, or at least pity, or both of these and possibly other strong emotions along the way. Matthias Grünewald's well-known rendering of the Crucified Christ with twisted and dislocated arms and a bloody and scabrous green-tinted body — in the famous Isenheim Altarpiece, painted c.1512-1516 — is possibly even more horrifying or pity-inducing than these fourteenth-century images of a Crucified Christ bleeding on the saints who stand near the Cross. Whether or not it equals or exceeds the horror and the pity of these earlier paintings, Grünewald's Crucified Christ expresses a similar gothic sensibility.<sup>14</sup>

Among the many other cultural productions in this affective, "gothic-pathetic" mode, one that stands out above all the rest — because it pre-dates and seems to have inspired many of the rest — is a Latin prose work that until recently was known as the "Pseudo-Bonaventuran" *Meditationes vitae Christi* (Meditations on the Life of Christ; hereafter, *Meditations*).<sup>15</sup> Though still sometimes cited as "Ps.-Bonaventure," the work

11 For detailed descriptions and black-and-white reproductions of this image of Mary Magdalene and the following image of Adam, both drinking Christ's blood, see Ross, *The Grief of God*, 49-50, and figs. 2.15 and 2.13, respectively.

12 For black-and-white reproductions of these images of Joseph of Arimathea in the *Gough Psalter* and Trinity College Library MS O.4.16, see Ross, *The Grief of God*, 50, and figs. 2.16 and 2.17, respectively.

13 Ross, *The Grief of God*, 50.

14 For an online colour reproduction of Grünewald's frequently reproduced Isenheim Altarpiece, see <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/grunewal/2isenhei/index.html>.

15 See Ragusa and Green, trans. and ed., *Meditations*. The text on which Ragusa's translation is based is in Italian, but it follows the Latin original closely and is richly illustrated. Unfortunately, it is incomplete for the last quarter of the text, a lack for which the translator and editor compensate by supplying what is missing from the Latin text in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*. All subsequent quotations from the *Meditations* are taken from Ragusa and Green's edition, with page numbers provided parenthetically in the text above.

is now more or less confidently ascribed to Johannes de Caulibus, a Franciscan friar of San Gemignano, in Tuscany, who wrote at the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The *Meditations* has been called “a life of Christ, a biography of the Blessed Virgin, the fifth gospel, the last of the apocrypha, one of the masterpieces of Franciscan literature, a summary of medieval spirituality, a religious handbook of contemplation, a manual of christian [*sic*] iconography, one of the chief sources of the mystery plays.”<sup>17</sup> And the *Meditations* answers to all of these labels. There are over two hundred manuscripts, and if one includes the translations and adaptations in various medieval vernaculars, that number is multiplied many times over.<sup>18</sup>

Addressed by its anonymous Franciscan author to a Poor Clare nun, the *Meditations* soon found a much wider audience. What appealed to that wider audience (and what still engages readers) is what Green and Ragusa describe as a distinctive blend of “the weightiness of sermons, mainly borrowed from Bernard [of Clairvaux], with the gentleness of the author’s own treatment of the human side of the life of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> In the *Meditations*, learned traditions about the life of Christ merge with scenes described in down-to-earth images — scenes which are the product of the author’s invention. Events from the life of Christ are narrated “as they occurred or *as they might have occurred according to the devout belief of the imagination and the varying interpretation of the mind*” (5; emphasis added). Those phrases, “as they might have occurred,” “according to the devout belief of the imagination,” and “the varying interpretation of the mind,” should give pause. They sound uncannily like a pre-modern opening to skepticism regarding the absolutes of divine revelation associated with Durkheim, Weber, and those other modern thinkers who state or imply the non-divinity of religious institutions in general and who assume the fictional nature of the Gospel narratives of the life of Christ in particular.

By making room for his reader or his listener to exercise his or her imagination, Johannes de Caulibus certainly did not intend to declare his skepticism. Rather, as indicated by his midrashic elaborations of the Gospel accounts of the life of Christ and by his elaborations of Luke’s already artful and moving depiction of the Infancy of Jesus

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16 On the origins and manuscript history of the *Meditations*, see the discussion and references in Bestul, *Texts of the Passion*, 48-50 & *passim*.

17 Ó Maonaigh, ed., *Smaointe Beatha Chríost*, 325; quoted in Ragusa and Green, trans. and ed., *Meditations*, Introduction, xxii.

18 On the popularity of the *Meditations* in Latin and vernacular translations and adaptations, see Sargent, ed., *Nicholas Love: The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, xi-xiii.

19 Ragusa and Green, trans. and ed., *Meditations*, Introduction, xxvii.

in particular, Johannes was a writer who loved a good story — and the more vividly homely and familiar the story the better. He explains, for example, that at the circumcision of John the Baptist, Mary stood behind a curtain, apart from the men, and “listened intently to the hymn in which her Son was mentioned” (25); he adds that Jesus’s parents rented a small house in Egypt, where they stayed “for seven years as pilgrims and strangers, poor and needy” (68), and that in Egypt, when Jesus was five years old, he went door to door, asking if there was any sewing work for his mother, and that sometimes he was rudely rebuffed, by “some arrogant, quarrelsome, talkative, or scolding woman” when he returned the finished work and tried to collect payment (69). Jesus’s special closeness to his mother is further indicated later on, when the reader or listener learns that after the Temptation in the Desert, when angels offered to prepare food for him, Jesus refused, telling them that he liked his mother’s cooking better: “Go to my beloved mother. If she has something at hand, let her send it, for I eat no food as gladly as hers” (125). Domestic and commonplace details such as these are found throughout Johannes’s imaginative reconstruction of the life and death of Jesus; they make for a good, credible, and pleasing human story.

But the *Meditations* also offered its medieval readers or listeners a different source of pleasure — though perhaps “attraction” or “fascination” would be a better word here than “pleasure” — namely, the fascination or attraction afforded by a detailed rendering of the horrific scenes of Christ’s torture and Crucifixion. This is an area in which the *Meditations* excels, as it instructs and guides its readers or listeners in using visual imagery to meditate on the Passion.<sup>20</sup> In the following typical passage, Johannes repeatedly urges the members of his audience to imagine themselves witnessing Christ’s scourging:

The royal blood flows all about, from all parts of His body. Again and again, repeatedly, closer and closer, it is done, bruise upon bruise, and cut upon cut, until not only the torturers but also the spectators are tired. (328-29)

And again,

Look at Him in each of His actions and afflictions, for He does and endures all that they wish. He bears the purple; He wears the crown of thorns on His head; He carries the reed in His hand; and He holds his peace and most patiently remains silent before those who bow and salute Him as king. Look at Him now in bitterness of heart,

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20 On the cultivation of visual imagination for religious purposes throughout the Middle Ages, see Caruthers, *The Craft of Thought*; Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists* and *The Visual and the Visionary*; and Miles, *Image as Insight*.



especially at His head, full of thorns, often struck by the reed. And see how, with bent neck, He painfully receives the sharp and heavy blows. For those sharpest of thorns pierced His most sacred head until they made it run with blood. O wretches! (329-30)

And finally, Johannes guides his readers to imagine themselves present at the Crucifixion:

Here pay diligent attention to the manner of the Crucifixion. [...] he who is behind the cross takes His right hand and affixes it firmly to the cross. This done, he who is on the left side takes His left hand and pulls and extends it as far as possible, puts in another nail, drives it through, and hammers it in. After this, they descend from the ladders, and all the ladders are removed. The Lord hangs with the weight of His body pulling him down, supported only by the nails transfixing His hands. Nevertheless, another one comes and draws Him down by the feet as far as he can, and while He is thus extended, another most cruelly drives a nail through His feet. (333-34)

But surprisingly, the certitude and precision of this narration — first the right hand, then the left hand, then the removal of the ladders, then the drawing down by the feet etc. — is immediately undercut:

There are, however, those who believe that He was not crucified in this manner, but that the cross was laid on the ground and that they then raised it up and fixed it in the ground. If this suits you better, think how they take Him contemptuously, like the vilest wretch, and furiously cast Him onto the cross on the ground, taking His arms, violently extending them, and most cruelly fixing them to the cross. Similarly consider His feet, which they dragged down as violently as they could. (334)

If one were to ask Johannes, “Which of these two versions of the Crucifixion is factually true?” his answer would be, “Either, or possibly neither, but you are free to imagine (as one might say) whatever works for you!” — as “If this suits you better” implies. For Johannes, the historicity of this or that detail is moot: “There are, however, those who believe . . .” otherwise. The only thing that really matters is that whatever readers and listeners imagine should lead them to feel pity for the suffering of Christ and his mother, guiding them to contrition, confession, and satisfaction. That, in a sense, is what makes the imagined narrative retroactively true.

Thus far the Mel Gibson paradigm.

### **The Martin Scorsese Paradigm**

Less of a *succès de scandale* than Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* nevertheless also managed to scandalize quite a few

people. Based on Nikos Kazantzakis's intriguing novel of the same title, and with a well-crafted screenplay by Paul Schrader, the film starred William Dafoe as Jesus, Barbara Hershey as Mary Magdalene, and Harvey Keitel as Judas, who all gave brilliant performances. But outstanding acting was not enough to save *The Last Temptation of Christ* from loud and violent protests by mainstream Churches and fundamentalist Christian groups alike. The film even evoked death threats, apparently from fundamentalist extremists, whose anger was directed in particular at Lew Wasserman, the Jewish president of MCA/Universal, the studio which produced and distributed the film.<sup>21</sup> What especially upset or enraged many Christian viewers of the film was its depiction of Jesus as having been sexually attracted to Mary Magdalene. An early scene shows Jesus crouching by her bed "and watch[ing] with voyeuristic intensity as Mary Magdalene has sex with ten different men."<sup>22</sup> And in a closing dream sequence, as he is dying on the Cross, Jesus imagines that he himself is having sex with Mary Magdalene (*Plate 4*). In a later scene that some conservative critics also felt to be unacceptable, the Apostle Paul admits that he does not believe in the Resurrection: "I've created truth out of what people needed and believed."<sup>23</sup>

As shocking as all this seemed to many members of the film's modern audience, at least some of it resonates with my second late medieval paradigm of *imitatio Christi*. For as with Gibson's emphasis on the horrors of Christ's suffering and death, so with Scorsese's emphasis on Christ's sexuality: venerable ancient and medieval roots are not far to seek.

Indeed, as early as in the apocryphal Gospel of Philip (c.150-200 CE?), Mary Magdalene's role implicitly anticipates the one she plays in Scorsese's film:

the companion of the [Saviour is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples, and used to kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] . . . They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Savior answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you as (I love) her?"<sup>24</sup>

As Leo Steinberg has convincingly shown, in the later Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, the theme of Christ's male sexuality was introduced — or at the very least unavoidably implied — in pictures of the infant Christ with his penis exposed, as in the paintings of the Virgin and Child by van Hemessen and Bonsignori, and many,

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21 The controversy caused by *The Last Temptation of Christ* is discussed in Riley, *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict*.

22 Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 267, quoting Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, 207.

23 Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 267.

24 Quoted in Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xiv.

many others.<sup>25</sup> In some paintings, the penis of the Christ child is not only exposed but the Virgin or St. Anne appear to be pointing at it or manipulating it; and in other pictures — such as the Flemish *Virgin and Child in an Interior* in London’s National Gallery — the Christ child (symbolically rendered as, simultaneously, the divine Infant Spouse and a fully human baby) appears to be chucking the chin of his mother-bride with his left hand and manipulating his own penis with his right hand, “as baby boys will” (*Plate 5*).<sup>26</sup> A striking mid- to late-fourteenth-century English variant of the theme is found in an alabaster carving that combines the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, at Long Melford Church, Suffolk. Standing in Mary’s lap, the Christ child is supported by Mary’s mostly hidden left hand, which circles his lower body from behind, emerging to show her fingers edging against the Child’s exposed erect penis, which peeks out from between the folds of his cloak (*Plates 6a and 6b*).<sup>27</sup>

In addition, as Steinberg further argues, Christ’s virile, male sexuality was even more unavoidably implied in late medieval and Renaissance images suggesting the presence of Christ’s adult penis beneath a towel or loincloth — as in the famous paintings of the Dead Christ by Andrea Mantegna and Hans Holbein, the Younger.<sup>28</sup> And most intriguing of all are those paintings of the Crucifixion in which there is a suggestion of Christ’s erection as he hangs on the Cross, as in works by Hans Schäufelein and Lucas Cranach (*Plate 7*).<sup>29</sup> According to Steinberg, there is a ready theological explanation why religious artists would want to show Christ with an erection under an “ebullient loincloth.”<sup>30</sup>

25 On the penis of the Christ child, see Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 3-79 & *passim*. The van Hemessen and Bonsignori paintings are reproduced as Steinberg’s figs. 49 and 57, respectively.

26 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 259. The Campin(?) *Virgin and Child in an Interior* is reproduced by Steinberg as fig. 263, and the symbolic significance of the two gestures is explained on pp. 257-59.

27 Reproduced in Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, figs. 261 and 262, and discussed on pp. 255-56.

28 On representations of Christ’s outlined penis beneath his loincloth, see Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 81-106, 298-325, & *passim*; Kristeva, “Holbein’s Dead Christ”; and Leupin, *Phallophanies*. The Mantegna painting is reproduced as Steinberg’s fig. 58. For an online, colour reproduction of Holbein’s *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521), see [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Hans\\_Holbein\\_The\\_Body\\_of\\_the\\_Dead\\_Christ\\_in\\_the\\_Tomb.JPG](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Hans_Holbein_The_Body_of_the_Dead_Christ_in_the_Tomb.JPG). For an online, colour reproduction of Mantegna’s *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c.1490), see <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/art/index.html> (and search s.v. “Mantegna,” paintings after 1470, and title *Lamentation*).

29 Hans Schäufelein’s *Crucifixion* (1515) and Lucas Cranach’s *Holy Trinity in a Glory of Angels* (c.1515-1518) are reproduced in Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, figs. 284 and 285. (They were not included in the first edition of Steinberg’s study.)

30 “Ebullient,” “exuberant,” “soaring,” “enhanced,” “banner,” and “stupendous” are among the terms Steinberg uses to refer to the motif of Christ’s implied erection as seen in various depictions of his loincloth; see Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 81-106 and 298-305 & *passim*.

Simply put, there was a radical shift in European artistic sensibility during the central and late Middle Ages, motivated by a new theological conception of the significance of the body of Christ displayed in the Crucifixion.<sup>31</sup>

Though his theory has been challenged, Steinberg has convincingly answered the objections of his various critics.<sup>32</sup> As he explains, because Jesus was fully human and fully male, when he experienced death on the Cross he died painfully and humiliatingly, with an involuntary erection (an implied erection that artists always decorously keep under the cover of a loin cloth-towel-diaper). Increasingly popular, these sexually suggestive images of the covered *ostentatio genitalium* of Christ gain added significance when they are considered alongside late medieval and Renaissance images of the bare-breasted, lactating Madonna. The Madonna's exposed breast is a motif in Byzantine art that predates images of the "virile Christ" by several centuries.<sup>33</sup> The exposed breast of the Madonna begins to appear regularly in Western art in the central and later Middle Ages and becomes increasingly popular — sometimes combined with the Child's exposed penis — in the Renaissance, as in Masolino's *Madonna and Child* (Plate 8).<sup>34</sup>

Returning to the *Meditations*, one finds that, in addition to foregrounding Christ's physical suffering, Johannes de Caulibus also displays a generally overlooked interest in Christ's sexuality, explaining the Incarnation with a simile that subtly evokes the theme of human sexuality: "the exalted labor of the Incarnation belonged to the whole Trinity, though only the person of the Son was incarnated, as when one person is dressing with the aid of two others who stand at his sides holding the sleeves of the gown" (16). This remarkable simile uses as its vehicle a scene of "dressing," rather than undressing, to convey its radical tenor: that Christ was incarnated through supernatural impregnation and conception. Yet tactful and subtle as it may be, the domestic simile of dressing obliquely

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31 For the theological background, see Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 109-212; and the supportive "excursus" by John W. O'Malley, S.J., in Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 213-16.

32 To explain the significance of the exposed or implied penis of Christ, Steinberg introduces the phrase *ostentatio genitalium*, modelled on the *ostentatio vulnerum*; Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 3. The debate as to whether or not Christ's male sexuality is implied in paintings and sculpture in which the penis motif occurs is presented fully, with nine critics' opposing views reprinted or summarized in detail and then rebutted, in the second, revised edition of Steinberg's *Sexuality of Christ*.

33 On the Virgin's breast, see Miles, "The Virgin's One Bare Breast"; and, more generally, Miles, *Carnal Knowing*.

34 For additional examples of the exposed breast and penis combination in Renaissance paintings, see Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, figs. 289 and 299. On the social significance of the breasts and other body parts of female saints (with special reference to the saints in Osborn Bokenham's *Legendary*, but with wider relevance, too), see Delany, *Impolitic Bodies*.

recalls to mind the fact that worldly conception usually takes place in the bedroom, where ordinary people undress and make love. By having two servants in attendance on an aristocratic Christ, Johannes reminds his audience that Jesus was, after all, no merely “ordinary” man, but one aspect of a three-fold godhead.<sup>35</sup>

In various late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century medieval English poems and devotional treatises, writers drew on the medieval Latin *Meditations* not only to evoke Christ’s male sexuality, but also to acknowledge — delicately but unmistakably — a sexually charged relationship between Christ and his mother Mary. For his mother, of course, was also, paradoxically, his bride. Urging the reader to meditate on scenes from the Passion, the author of the *Meditations* singles out three moments in which Jesus was stripped naked. The first occurred when Jesus was stripped before Pilate and scourged; the second, when he was stripped of the purple robe in which the soldiers mockingly clothed him; and the third, when he was stripped before he was nailed to the Cross. In describing each of these scenes, Johannes invents an additional, non-canonical torment experienced by Jesus, and by Mary, when the fully human, perfectly righteous and therefore perfectly humble and modest Son of God was exposed naked before his evil tormentors and righteous followers alike.

Johannes instructs his audience to see Jesus naked and to imagine and to empathize with his intense feelings of shame at being thus exposed: “The Lord is therefore stripped and bound to a column and scourged in various ways. He stands naked before them all, in youthful grace and shamefacedness, beautiful in form above the sons of men, and sustains the harsh and grievous scourges on His innocent, tender, pure, and lovely flesh” (328). The narrator remonstrates, “O Lord Jesus! Who was so audacious and so bold as he who stripped you?” (329). And yet, notwithstanding the wicked “audacity” and “boldness” of those who stripped Jesus three times, Johannes insists on keeping Jesus’s nakedness imaginably in view. As he goes on to recount, after the scourging, “they led Him thus naked and beaten through the house, seeking His clothes, which had been cast aside in the house by those who had despoiled Him” — but when Jesus tries to put his clothes back on, “some most impious men contended with Him, saying to Pilate, ‘Lord, here He made Himself king. Let us clothe Him and crown Him with kingly honor.’ And taking a sort of robe of dirty red silk, they clothed Him; and they crowned Him with thorns” (329). This gives the author yet another opportunity for stripping Jesus, as he

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35 This aristocratic detail is a noteworthy exception to the plebeian character and range of Christ’s experience, foregrounded almost everywhere else in the *Meditations*.

“is led back inside, stripped of the purple, and stands before them nude, not given leave to reclothe Himself” (330).

What immediately follows is the writer’s advice to his audience to meditate precisely on the blushing Jesus’s cruelly exposed naked body, slowly covered up as Jesus puts his “garments” back on:

Pay diligent attention to this and consider His stature in every part. And to make yourself more deeply compassionate and nourish yourself at the same time, turn your eyes away from His divinity for a little while and consider Him purely as a man. You will see a fine youth, most noble and most innocent and most lovable, cruelly beaten and covered with blood and wounds, gathering His garments from the ground where they were strewn and dressing Himself before them with shame, reverence, and blushes however much they jeer, as though He were the meanest of all, abandoned by God, and destitute of all help. Look at Him diligently, therefore, and be moved to pity and compassion: now He picks up one thing, now another, and dresses Himself before them.

(330-31)

Modern day readers will decide for themselves whether or not the combination of obliquity and persistence in Johannes’s stressing the nakedness of Jesus is an instance of what D. H. Lawrence defensively defined as a truly pornographic sensibility, for which human sexuality is a “dirty little secret” to be “rubbed and scratched more and more, till it becomes more and more secretly inflamed, and the nervous and psychic health of the individual is more and more impaired.”<sup>36</sup> For Lawrence, being naked has nothing shameful about it. Though a modern, post-Laurentian reader might find Johannes’s repeated mentioning of Jesus’s nakedness to be erotically charged, a more likely *overt* response to his nakedness by the medieval reader whom the text addresses would be pity, shame, and empathy. Most of these medieval readers are presumed to have been women; but whether male or female, they knew that their “natural” feeling of shame before a naked body was a result of original sin.<sup>37</sup>

In the third and final scene in which Johannes encourages his reader or listener to see the naked body of Jesus “with your mind’s eye” (333), something quite unexpected happens. The Virgin Mary acts to end the shame of her son’s naked exposure on the Cross:

36 See D. H. Lawrence, “Pornography and Obscenity” [1929], in *Phoenix*, 170-87, at 177.

37 Evidence of the presumed female audience of the *Meditations* is found in a number of passages, including the beginning of the work, where the author, a Franciscan priest, addresses a Poor Clare nun; noted in Ragusa and Green, eds., *Meditations*, xxvii-xxix.



Plate 1. Frame enlargement from Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004): a flayed and bloodied Jesus.



Plate 2. Crucifixion, *L'estoire del Graal*, c.1300-1315. London, British Library MS Royal 14 E. III, f. 7. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.



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collocari. *Et* Utera me. *In laud. A.*

**E**cultrabunt. *psalmus*

**M**iserere mei deus: secundum  
 magnam misericordiam tuam.

**E**t secundum multitudinem  
 miserationum tuarum dele in-  
 quitatem meam.

**I**mplius laua me ab iniqui-  
 tate mea: et a peccato meo munda me.

**Q**uia iniquitatem meam ego  
 cognosco: et peccatum meum contra me est  
 semper.

**T**ibi soli peccaui et malum  
 coram te feci: ut iustificeris in



*Et cetera. cetera. cetera. cetera.*

*ey cona nre seigneur alant fraucey's signe et reme subuce*

Plate 3. St. Francis receiving the Stigmata, Taymouth Hours, c.1325-1335. London, British Library MS Yates Thompson 13, f. 182. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.





*Plate 4.* Frame enlargement from Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988): Jesus and Mary Magdalene in an intimate embrace.



*Plate 5.* *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, Workshop of Robert Campin (Jacques Daret?), before 1432. London, National Gallery. © The National Gallery, London.



*Plate 6a. Adoration of the Magi*, alabaster carving, c.1350-1380. Holy Trinity Church, Long Melford, Suffolk. The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, Crown Copyright.



*Plate 6b. Adoration of the Magi (detail)*, alabaster carving, c.1350-1380. Holy Trinity Church, Long Melford, Suffolk. The Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, Crown Copyright.



Plate 7. Lucas Cranach, *Holy Trinity in a Glory of Angels*, c.1515-1518. Kunsthalle, Bremen. By permission of the Kunsthalle Bremen – Der Kunstverein in Bremen.





Plate 8. Masolino, *Madonna and Child*, c.1423-1424.  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich.  
By permission of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.



Plate 9. Frame enlargement from Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961): Christ teaching the Apostles.



Plate 10. Christ Teaching in the Temple, c.1340-1355. London, British Library, MS Egerton 2781 f. 15. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.





Plate 11. Christ Teaching the Pater Noster, c.1300. London, British Library, Yates Thompson 11 f. 52v.  
© British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

Again He is stripped, and is now nude before all the multitude for the third time, His wounds reopened by the adhesion of His garments to His flesh. Now for the first time the Mother beholds her Son thus taken and prepared for the anguish of death. She is saddened and shamed beyond measure when she sees Him entirely nude: they did not leave Him even His loincloth. *Therefore she hurries and approaches the Son, embraces Him, and girds Him with the veil from her head.* Oh, what bitterness her soul is in now! I do not believe that she could say a word to Him: if she could have done more, she would have, but she could not help Him further. The Son was torn furiously from her hands at the foot of the cross. (333; emphasis added)

In a fourteenth-century Middle English verse translation of the *Meditations*, entitled *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord*, this scene is faithfully rendered into flowing octosyllabic couplets:

Some dyspoyle hym oute dyspetusly,	
Hys clopys cleuyn on hys swete body;	
Þey rente hem of as þey were wode:	[insane]
Hys body a3en ran alle on blode.	
A! with what sorow hys modyr was fedde,	
Whan she say hym so naked and alle bled!	
Fyrþer more, þ an gan she to seche,	[seek]
And say þat þey had left hym no breche.	[see; breeches, covering]
She ran þan þurgh hem, and hastyly hyde,	
And with here kercheues hys hepys she wryde.	[she covered his hips]
She wulde do more, but she ne my3t,	
For fersly here swete sone ys from her ply3t. <sup>38</sup>	[fiercely; taken]

Though the Middle English poet takes notice of Jesus's suffering, bleeding body, it is the fact of his shameful nakedness and Mary's attempt to cover it that become the centre of attention.

Like so much else in the Latin *Meditations*, reproduced in the latter Middle English passage, Mary's act of covering up her son's naked loins has no basis in any of the Gospel accounts of the Passion. The effect of this scene on its audience is arguably ambiguous. Its scopophilic potential — no fewer than three occasions to imagine how Jesus looked naked — seems obvious. Furthermore, though Mary's apocryphally inserted modest

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38 *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord*, ll. 615-26; on the manuscripts of the poem, misattribution to Robert Manning of Brunne, and affiliation to Nicholas Love's *Mirror*, see Lagorio and Sargent, "English Mystical Writings," 3057 and 3106.

action of covering his loins is intended to spare her son from the shame of being exposed naked, it entails Mary's less-grave but also "immodest" self-exposure. When she removes her veil (or kerchief), she exposes her hair and face. Mary's action of covering Christ's loins with her veil draws attention once again to his naked body, and it also indirectly calls to mind the implicit and problematic sexual intimacy that exists between a mother who is also her son's bride, and a son who is also his mother's husband and father.

When Jesus is finally lowered from the Cross by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, Mary behaves more like a grieving lover than a mother with her dead son, as she "reverently receives the hanging right hand and places it against her cheek, gazes upon it and kisses it with heavy tears and sorrowful sighs" (342). Then, when Christ's body has been lowered from the Cross and placed on the ground, Mary and Mary Magdalene hold on to the body together, as "The Lady supports the head and shoulders in her lap, the Magdalene the feet at which she had formerly found so much grace" (342).

Much has been written recently about the gaze in medieval literature.<sup>39</sup> The freedom of the female gaze in the *Meditations* and its many literary and artistic descendants is indeed remarkable. As the female meditator imagines that she is seeing Jesus's naked loins — a euphemism for the unmentionable divine-human adult phallus — she is supposed to be feeling compassion, but at the unmentionable risk of being tempted to scopophilic sexual arousal. In the following extension of the Passion narrative, imagining the alternating intimate contact with his body by both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene once again offers the female meditator the same opportunity for simultaneously chaste and sexually charged interior experience. Johannes imagines the Virgin Mary gazing upon Jesus's naked body and resisting a request by Joseph of Arimathea "to permit them to shroud [Jesus] in linen cloths and bury Him":

She strove against this, saying, "My friends, do not wish to take my Son so soon; or else bury me with Him." She wept uncontrollable tears; she looked at the wounds in His hands and side, now one, now the other; she gazed at His face and head and saw the marks of the thorns, the tearing of His beard, His face filthy with spit and blood, His shorn head; and she could not cease from weeping and looking at Him. [. . .] The mother gazed faithfully at all this and wished to look still longer. (342)

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39 See discussion and bibliography in Stanbury, "The Virgin's Gaze"; and Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur*, 26-50 & *passim*.



As “John and Nicodemus and the others” shroud the body in linen cloths “according to Jewish custom,” the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene continue to hold his head and feet, and Mary Magdalene is permitted to prepare the feet for burial:

She gazed at the feet, so wounded, pierced, dried out, and bloody: she wept with great bitterness. [...] she wept much, and most of all in this last service to her Lord and Master, so afflicted, scourged, wounded, dead, and reduced to nothing. [...] She wished to wash, anoint, and prepare His whole body well; but there was neither time nor place. [...] At least she could wash His feet with tears, and at length devotedly wipe, embrace, kiss, wrap, and faithfully prepare them as best she knew and could. The body thus prepared, they looked for the Lady [the Virgin Mary] to make an end. (343)

In taking leave of Jesus’s body, the Virgin Mary performs a series of physically intimate acts:

she placed her cheek against the face of her most beloved Son and said, “My Son, I hold you in my lap dead. Separation by your death is exceedingly hard, for the intercourse between us was joyful and delightful and we lived among others without quarreling or offence. In spite of this, you, my sweetest Son, have been killed as though a criminal.”  
(344)

Mary continues to lament, saying that she would like to die and be buried with her son. Then, with a slight hint of competition with Mary Magdalene that will re-emerge more tellingly later, the Virgin resumes her intimate physical attention to her son’s body: “again, out of the abundance of her tears, she washed the face of her Son much more than the Magdalene did His feet. Then she wiped His face and, kissing His mouth and eyes, wrapped His head in a napkin, and diligently made Him ready. At last she blessed Him again” (344). In a final gesture of modesty and decorum, Johannes imagines that the two Marys helped to carry her son’s body to the tomb. The Virgin Mary “held His head and shoulders, the Magdalene His feet; the others [John and Nicodemus] *were in between*” (344; emphasis added). If modesty was his purpose, the gesture is partly compromised, if not undone, by the oblique reminder of Jesus’s embodied manhood, “in between.”

The *Meditations* tells of yet another physically intimate encounter between Jesus and the Virgin Mary, taking place after the Resurrection. The scene begins with Mary praying and “gently shedding tears” when, “behold,”

suddenly the Lord Jesus came, in the whitest garments, with serene face, beautiful, glorious, and rejoicing, and said to her, as if beside her, “Hail, saintly parent.” She immediately

turned around. “Are you,” she said, “my son Jesus?” And she knelt, adoring Him. Her Son said, “My sweetest mother, it is I. I have risen and am with you.” *Then, rising, she embraced Him with tears of joy and, placing her cheek to His, drew Him close, resting wholly against Him; and He supported her willingly.* Afterwards, when they were sitting down together, she looked intently and earnestly at His face and at the scars on His hands and asked whether all the pain had gone. (359-60; emphasis added)

Filling in the gaps of Scripture is one thing, but inventing new and sexually charged scenes out of whole cloth — scenes that contradict all of the Gospels on potentially significant doctrinal questions — is quite another. Johannes will later anxiously explain that the present scene and other non-canonical scenes depicting post-Resurrection meetings between the Virgin Mary and Jesus are all nevertheless based on authoritative Church tradition (359-74); and as noted earlier, Johannes had already defended himself from criticism for departing from tradition when he said at the outset that he would recount events from the life of Christ “as they occurred *or as they might have occurred*” (5; emphasis added). But none of the Gospels mentions a post-Resurrection appearance to Mary. And no Church tradition, and certainly no Gospel, ever shows Mary “resting wholly against” Jesus and being in turn “supported” by Jesus “willingly.”

Admittedly, all this is still a far cry from Scorsese’s on-screen depiction of Christ’s acting out sexual fantasies involving Mary Magdalene; but the not-so-subtle eroticism of scenes like the ones in which the Virgin Mary repeatedly sees her adult son naked and then is shown “resting wholly against” him must surely have presented a psychologically challenging, if not deeply troubling, reading or listening experience for a religious medieval audience. “Be there, imagine yourself in the scene,” Johannes says again and again — in order to experience what? Compassion, of course, but what other feelings do such scenes arouse? What other feelings must be mastered if compassion leading to repentance is the purpose of meditating on such scenes?

Following the scene in which Jesus and Mary are shown “sitting down together,” the focus shifts to Mary Magdalene, who continues to weep for Jesus at his empty tomb, despite the consoling words of her would-be angelic comforters. The Magdalene’s incon-solability motivates an abrupt, mid-sentence return to Jesus and the Virgin Mary:

When she [Magdalene] cried and paid no attention to the angels, her Master for love could not hold back any longer. Therefore the Lord Jesus turned to His mother and said that He wished to go to console her. She approved very much and said, “My blessed Son, go in peace and console her, for she loves you very much and grieves very much at your death; and remember to come back to me,” and, embracing Him, she let Him go. (362)

The implied jealousy in Mary's instruction to Jesus to "remember to come back to me," aligns with an odd element of the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene that follows. As Magdalene tries at first to kiss his feet, he stops her (the narrator quotes the Gospel's "noli me tangere" [John 20:17]). Later on, however, the narrator boldly reverses himself: "Although it seemed at first that the Lord held back from her, I can hardly believe that she did not touch Him familiarly before He departed, kissing His feet and His hands" (363). Not only does Mary Magdalene touch Jesus, but she does so "familiarly." Magdalene's non-canonical, "familiar" touching of Jesus, and her kissing of his hands and feet, make the Virgin Mary's "remember to come back to me" echo in the audience's ears all the more suggestively.

Thanks in large part to Johannes de Caulibus's *Meditations*, its numerous vernacular redactions, and the hundreds and probably thousands of visual images inspired by it, Christ's physical suffering at the Crucifixion, and the suffering of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene as they helplessly watched Jesus suffer, were primary topics for late medieval lay and clerical meditation. But this is not the whole picture. The *Meditations* also appealed to other feelings, arousing identification with Christ and Mary and the Magdalene by other, more carnal means. For religious authors and artists who followed Johannes (and especially for the more imaginative among them), the erotic charge of the scenes of Jesus's nakedness and of physical intimacy between Jesus and the two Marys would be hard to overlook. To be sure, Johannes asserts that the desired effect of meditating on these scenes is emotional identification with Jesus's sense of shame at his nakedness, and a feeling of empathy with the two Marys' empathetic responses to the suffering of their beloved son and master. But the extent to which religious writers and painters followed Johannes's instructions is an open question. Critics have long been aware that medieval secular love poets used language and imagery derived from the Song of Songs.<sup>40</sup> How the erotically charged language and imagery of the *Meditations* and its derivatives may have influenced medieval secular love poetry is a subject that still remains to be explored.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Nicholas Ray Paradigm**

Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) is a remake of a Cecile B. DeMille's black-and-white 1927 film, *The King of Kings*. Filmed "in full living color," Ray's *King of Kings* is a relatively

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40 On the Song of Songs as a principal influence on medieval Latin and vernacular love poetry, see Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*; and Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved*.

41 For discussion of the Passion as an influence on medieval secular love poetry, see Menocal, *Shards of Love*, 60-68.

tame biography of Christ, based on incidents selected from among the canonical Gospels and paying little attention to the physical and psychological suffering of either Jesus or Mary. The film is lavishly produced and strives for what might be called “epic historical sweep” (there are seven thousand extras present at the Sermon on the Mount).<sup>42</sup> Radically revising the thematic thrust of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s life, director Ray, working from a screenplay by Philip Yordan, creates a nearly co-starring role for the character Barabbas, who becomes a foil for Jesus. In his first appearance at the beginning of the film, Barabbas leads a band of Jewish rebels in an attack on a column of Roman soldiers. As one of his followers points out, “Jesus Barabbas” has the same first name as Jesus!

The film goes out of its way to emphasize that Jesus rejected violence and, in particular, the policy of violent resistance to Rome advocated by the revolutionary guerilla leader Barabbas. As Orson Welles (who provides voice-over narration throughout the film) explains, now that Jesus had come, people had to choose whether to “Walk with Jesus, the new Messiah of Peace” or “Run with Barabbas, the Messiah of War.” Or as Barabbas says, “I am fire, he [Jesus] is water; how can we ever meet?”

Visually dominating in the film are the piercing blue eyes of a handsome, solemn, and sincere but uncharismatic and purposefully asexual Jesus, played by Jeffrey Hunter. Both Jesus and Mary (played by the then little-known Siobhan McKenna) emit no sparks. Jesus is a wisdom teacher rather than an apocalyptic prophet; and Mary, atypically, seems always to know and calmly, even impassively, to accept everything that is happening to her son, before it happens. To liven things up, there are three sexually provocative women — Herodias, Salome, and the Woman Taken in Adultery — who are played as Hollywood-style vamps. After Jesus forgives the Woman Taken in Adultery (who turns out to be Mary Magdalene), she is coached by the Virgin Mary, who teaches her how to transform from being a caricature of sexual promiscuity to becoming a modest, asexual disciple of Jesus.

Violence in the treatment of Jesus is relatively sparse. There is only a brief shot of the welts on his back, caused by an implied rather than rendered biblical scene of the Flagellation. Christ is seen nailed to the Cross, but the viewer is spared the banging in of the nails. Blood runs down Jesus’s face from the Crown of Thorns, and blood also flows from the wound on his foot, but that is all over in a minute or two: the sky darkens, thunder rumbles, and Pilate’s wife and the centurion Lucius bow and acknowledge what they have been coming to believe all along: that Jesus is the Messiah. There is only a single mention of the

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42 On the “big” picture style and film vocabulary of *King of Kings*, see Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, 75-80.

Pharisees' desire to kill Jesus. The film makes Pilate responsible for beating and crucifying Jesus, thereby largely vindicating the Jews, against the testimony of all four canonical Gospels and, in particular, the Gospel of John. A further non-canonical element is the implied vindication of Judas, for whom a past association with the revolutionary Barabbas is invented. Here (but nowhere in the Gospels) Judas's motive for betraying Jesus is his desire to force Jesus to lead a revolt against Rome and thereby to bring on the messianic age.

The Jesus of *King of Kings* has almost no physical contact with women. The only exception occurs when Jesus takes the hand of the Woman Taken in Adultery (Mary Magdalene in the film, but unnamed in the Gospel of John) to help her stand up after he has rescued her from stoning, though near the end of the film, when Mary Magdalene approaches him after the Resurrection, she is told not to touch him (the famous *noli me tangere*, as in the Gospel of John). Before its brief depiction of the Crucifixion, *King of Kings* shows Jesus teaching and preaching, miraculously feeding the multitude, healing the sick, and exorcising demons (as Orson Welles quotes and paraphrases extensively from the Gospels). The Sermon on the Mount comes late in the film and has the climactic effect of summing up Christ's ethical message (*Plate 9*).<sup>43</sup> His last words are "Feed my sheep!" and "Preach the Gospel!"

The Jesus figure portrayed in *King of Kings* has features that align him with the Jesus figure who flourished in England in the last quarter of the fourteenth-century — the England of the mystic Walter Hilton (d. 1396) and the radical reformer John Wyclif (d. 1384). This late medieval English Christ, emerging in a series of mystical, devotional, and theological texts mainly from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, flaunts neither the pathos of his victimization nor the mysterious allure of his virginal but potent divine-human sexuality. In this paradigm, what seems all important is the lesson of Christ's life, that is, the paradigmatic witness of his righteous humanity. Wyclif's radical Biblicism is familiar; it asserts that everything one needs to know and do is contained in the Gospels and exemplified in Christ:<sup>44</sup> do what Jesus did and obey what he

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43 How this Jesus was or was not in tune with the spirit of America in 1961 — sixteen years after the scale of the murder of the Jews in the Holocaust had first become known, with the Vietnam War just around the corner, and with the Cold War fully under way — is a fascinating question, but outside the scope of the present essay. It is interesting to note, however, that following the opening scene of the film, which portrays Pompey's capture of Jerusalem, his murder of the priests who try to block his entrance into the Temple, and his desecration of the Temple, the viewer is jolted by an unmistakable reference to the Holocaust in Orson Welles's voice-over text: "Like sheep from their own green fields, the Jews went to the slaughter."

44 For an authoritative account of Wyclif's religious views (on which the following summary is based), see Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 174-313.

commanded and you will be saved (and don't ask the Pope to interpret what Jesus did and said); confession to a priest (as opposed to confession directly to God) is unnecessary, as are pilgrimages, crusading, elaborate liturgies, belief in transubstantiation — these and many other orthodox religious beliefs and practices are contrary to Christ's teaching and exemplary actions, Wyclif said.

Though Walter Hilton (1343-1396) criticized the negative views held by Wyclif and the Wycliffites on orthodox matters such as confession, the Eucharist, and the other sacraments, Hilton's Christocentric teachings are surprisingly consistent with aspects of Wyclif's proto-Reformation Christology.<sup>45</sup> According to Hilton, meditation may best be focused on Scriptural scenes, and the Passion is a particularly effective theme for imaginal reflection. And yet, though Hilton maintains that the reader may profit from imagining Christ's Passion, he pays relatively little attention to the physical suffering of Christ or to the vicarious suffering of those at the foot of the Cross that feature so prominently in the *Meditations* and related works. Instead, Hilton rapidly reviews the terrible facts of the Passion ("beten and dispisid, scourgid and demed to the deeth"), as he encourages the reader to imagine "Lord Jhesu Crist in bodili liknesse"

as He was in erthe, how He was taken of the Jewes and bounden as a thief, beten and dispisid, scourgid and demed to the deeth; hou mekeli He baar the Cros upon his bak, and hou crueli He was nailed therupon; also of the crowne of thornes upon His heed, and upon the scharp spere that stonge Him to the herte.<sup>46</sup>

But when Hilton's ideal meditator reaches a higher rung on the ladder of contemplation, Christ's bodily presence becomes irrelevant. This, Hilton explains, is the lesson about contemplation that Christ taught Mary Magdalene

whanne He seide to hire thus: *Noli me tangere, nondum enim ascendi ad patrem meum* (John 20:17). Touche me not, I am not yit stied [risen] up to my Fader. That is for to seie, Marie Magdelene lovede brennandeli oure Lord Jhesu bifore the tyme of His passioun, but here love was moche bodili and litil goostli [spiritual]. Sche trowed wel that He was God, but sche lovyd Him litil as God, for sche coude not thanne, and therefore

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45 On Hilton's anti-Wycliffite stance and his affinities to and differences from other late medieval English mystics, see Milosh, "*The Scale of Perfection*" and *the English Mystical Tradition*, 117-20, 130-39, & *passim*; and Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, 117-27, 146-51, & *passim*. On manuscripts and editions of Hilton's works, and for bibliography, see Lagorio and Sargent, "English Mystical Writings," 3074-82 and 3430-38.

46 Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, 1.35.903-907. Quotations are taken from Bestul's online edition, with parenthetical references referring to book, chapter, and lines.

sche suffride al hire affeccioun and hire thought fallen in Him as He was in forme of man. And oure Lord blamede here not thanne, but praiside it moche. But aftir whanne He was risen from deeth and He apperde to hire, sche wolde have worschipe Him with sich maner of love as sche dide bifore; and thanne oure Lord forbede hire and seide thus, "Touche me not." That is, sette not the restynge ne the love of thyn herte in that forme of man that thou seest with thi fleschli iye oonli, for to resten therinne; for in that forme I am not stied up to My Fadir. That is, I am not evene [equal] to the Fadir, for in forme of man I am lasse than He. Touche me not so, but sette thi thought and thi love into that forme in the whiche I am evene to the Fader (that is, the forme of the Godheede), and love Me, and knowe Me, and worschipe Me as a God and man godli, not as man manli. (2.30.2042-57)

Hilton notes that after his Resurrection, Jesus is no longer to be worshipped "as man manli." And with an enormously consequential shift of emphasis away from the tradition of affective piety that the *Meditations* had fostered, Hilton further explains how the Passion ("this precious deeth," 2.2.84) is not only a key to eternal life, but also the ground of human perfection in this life:

This passioun of oure Lord and this precious deeth is the ground of al the reformynge of mannes soule, withouten whiche myght nevere mannys soule have be reformed to the liknes of Him, ne come to the blisse of hevene. But blissid mot He be in al His wirkyng. Now is it so, that thorough vertu of His passioun the brennyng suerd of cherubyn that droof Adam ought of paradise is now put awei, and the eendeles gates of hevene aren opened to ilk man that wole entre in therto. For the persone of Jhesu is bothe God and kynge, evene in blisse to the Fadir, and as man He is portour at the gate redi to receyve ilke a soule that wole be reformed heere in this lyf to His liknesse. For now mai ilke a soule, yif that he wole, be reformed to the liknesse of God, sith that the trespaas is forgiven and the amendis bee maad thorough Jhesu for the first gilt. Neveretheles, though this be sooth, alle soules have not the profite ne the fruit of His precious passioun, ne aren reformed to the liknes of Hym. (2.2.84-95)

It is only after the souls of the faithful have been "reformed," through contemplation of Jesus "as a God and man godli," that they can enter Paradise.

But how does one achieve this state? By modelling oneself on Christ, through the practice of humility and charity (the antidotes to pride and the six other deadly sins):

But doo as I have seid, and betere yif thou may, and I hope bi grace of Jhesu thou schal make the devel aschamed, and alle sich wickid stirynges thou schalt breke adoune, that thei schal not moche dere thee [i.e., harm you]. And upon this maner wise mai this image of synne be broken doun and destroyed in thee, bi the whiche thou art forschapen

[disfigured] fro the kyndeli [proper, natural] schap of the ymage of Crist. And thanne schalt thou be schapin agen to the ymage of Jhesu bi mekenesse and charité; and thanne schalt thou be ful schapen to the image of God, heere lvyngge bi a schadewe in contemplacion, and in the blis of hevене be ful sothfastnesse. (1.91.2584-91)

The procedures for attaining this state of being “schapin” or (re-)created in the image of God are, in fact, those familiar from the homiletic literature of the central and later Middle Ages. To avoid sin, one must examine one’s conscience, properly direct one’s will, and confess one’s sins:

Yif thou wolt witen thanne yif thi soule be reformed to the image of God or noo, bi that that I have seid thou maist have an entre. Ransake thyn owen conscience and loke what thi wille is, for thereinne stondest al. Yif it be turned from al deedli synne, that thou woldest for nothyngge wityngeli and wilfulli breke the comaundement of God, and for that thou hast mysdoon here bifore agens his biddynge, thou haste beschreven [confessed] mekeli, with ful herte to leve it and with sorwe that thou dedest it, I seie thanne sikirli that thi soule is reformed in feith to the likenesse of God. (2.9.382-88)<sup>47</sup>

By practising humility and charity Hilton’s reader can shape herself in the image of the paradigmatic human Christ and achieve a foretaste of heaven; and when she dies, she can expect to attain the actual bliss of heaven. All this, Hilton says, can be accomplished without any meditating on torture and blood, nakedness, shame, or humiliation.

Considering what Hilton’s contemporaries were saying about the benefits of meditating on Christ’s suffering or his male sexuality, Hilton’s avoidance of violence and implied or open sexuality is especially remarkable. Similarly, one must not forget that alongside the numerous late medieval and Renaissance pictures of Christ which show gory wounds and blood or employ blatant male sexual symbolism, there are also many images depicting a fully clothed, unmarked, and healthy-looking young Christ teaching the Doctors in the Temple, or an older but similarly clothed, unmarked, and healthy-looking Christ teaching the Apostles the Lord’s Prayer (*Plates 10 and 11*).

A final note: with blood, torture, rape, and sexual predation having become such regular features of today’s landscape, would it seem too prudish of me to suggest that manuscript images of an unbloodied and fully clothed Christ-as-Teacher, along with John Wyclif’s, Walter Hilton’s, and Nicholas Ray’s also mostly unbloodied and asexual representations of Christ-as-Model-and-Teacher, all beckon to a more loving and safer

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47 Note the absence here of Hilton’s usually explicit mention of the need for the mediation of a priest (as in, for example, *Scale* 1.6.199-22; 2.7.268-75 and 538-52; and 2.37.2573-87).



world? Nevertheless — whether or not one prefers an idea of Christ more in line with the ideas of Wyclif, Hilton, and Ray — as medieval and later developments have shown, the Johannes de Caulibus, Mel Gibson, and Martin Scorsese paradigms of *imitatio Christi* have thus far had many more eager takers.

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