

# A Comparative Phenomenology of Caravaggio's "Martha and Mary Magdalene": Knowing the Story and Not Knowing the Story

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## カラヴァッジョ作《マルタとマグダラのマリア》の 比較現象学：物語的解釈と図像的解釈をめぐって

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### Abstract

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) was an Italian painter who became an artistic pioneer for both his portrayal of the models he used and for the new lighting effects he helped to inaugurate. Many of his works were based on biblical narratives, and were produced at the behest of a cardinal or other Church dignitary during his long period of stay in Rome prior to his life ending in exile, a fugitive from charges of assault and even murder stemming from what was essentially a street brawl. Amongst these religiously themed paintings is the title "Martha and Mary Magdalene" (1597-1598), which will form our central concern in the below. We shall seek to examine this portraiture in a double-barreled phenomenological analysis: firstly through the lens of knowing the characters depicted and what they are meant to be doing, and then secondly via a perspective absent background knowledge (an attempted full bracketing). Through comparing the results of these two approaches it is hoped that the image will be allowed to speak its own voice, and in this we may also find ourselves asserting much that might otherwise have remained hidden.

Keywords: Caravaggio; image; Martha; Mary Magdalene; phenomenology

### 要 旨

ミケランジェロ・メリージ・ダ・カラヴァッジョ（1571-1610）は、人物描写と斬新な明暗法の両面において、革新者となったイタリアの画家である。作品は、枢機卿や教会関係者から依頼を受けて制作されたものが多く、聖書の物語が題材にとられている。それらの作品が描かれたのはローマに長期滞在していた時期にあたり、カラヴァッジョはのちに乱闘騒ぎの末、暴行・殺人容疑で逃亡生活を余儀なくされ、果てることになる。宗教をテーマにした一連の絵画に《マルタとマグダラのマリア》（1597-1598年）という作品がある。本稿では本作を中心に考察する。手法は、二重の意味での現象学的分析による。まず作中に描かれる人物および彼らの行動の意味を知っているという観点から、次になんら背景知識を持たないという視点から、考察を展開する。これら2種のアプローチから導き出された結果を比較することで、作品そのものが有する声に語らせることが可能になるのではないだろうか。さらには、作品が潜在的に有していた数多の事実が発見できるかもしれない。

キーワード：カラヴァッジョ、像、マルタ、マグダラのマリア、現象学

## 1. The Painter and the Painting

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born in Milan in September, 1571, and the name for which he is best known - Caravaggio - refers to the small town east of Milan where his father moved the family in 1576 in an attempt to avoid the ravages of a plague that was then decimating the city. Unfortunately, the disease caught up with them, and by the second half of the following year Caravaggio had lost both his father and grandfather. His mother's side of the family, however, had connections with some local aristocracy, and through their aid Caravaggio was able to survive and grow and eventually became a contracted apprentice to a Milanese painter at the age of twelve. Following his studies Caravaggio moved to Rome in the early 1590s, initially struggling as a member of the working poor before finding fortune in the sponsorship of Cardinal Del Monte, a powerful member of the Catholic Church's higher-ranking clergy, who provided the stability needed to begin a career and whose personal network would also come to be supportive of the young artist. He achieved something of a breakthrough when he was commissioned to decorate the Contarelli Chapel in the San Luigi dei Francesi (Saint Louis of the French) church in 1600, and enjoyed a period of being sought after for commissions both secular and religious, having wealth and fame thereafter. Caravaggio was not one to live quietly and contentedly though, and in 1606 he appears to have killed the brother of a gang leader "controlling" a section of the city (the Campo Marzio area), and thus to avoid a death sentence for that act fled first to Naples, then to Malta, Sicily, back to Naples, and finally, believing himself to have secured a pardon, died in a hospital in the coastal town of Porto Ercole in July of 1610, evidently en route back to Rome. He was a mere thirty-eight years old.<sup>1</sup>

The work which we will examine here precedes the peak of Caravaggio's popularity (that is, at least during his lifetime; Caravaggio is exceedingly well-liked today), being completed around 1598. The piece belonged to the niece of Pope Clement VII (ruler of the Papal States from 1523-1534), as a recording of her inventory from 1606 shows. Her daughter inherited it, but thenceforward the painting appears to have passed through the hands of a large number of collectors, ending up in Argentina in 1909 where it was bought by the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1974; the museum displays it still.<sup>2</sup> The Institute's website describes the artwork as picturing: "Martha, dressed modestly, reproaching her sister for her wayward conduct and enumerating on her fingers the miracles of Christ... The mirror, a traditional Image of vanity, now reflects the light of divine revelation."<sup>3</sup> These characters, symbols, and alleged meanings will, of course, require some explanation and expansion, and such shall be provided in the next section with fuller analyses to follow later. Prior to any of that though, let us first gaze on the work as it is:

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<sup>1</sup> Some details of Caravaggio's life remain unknown and/or disputed, the brief sketch here however appears to be widely supported; see "Introduction" in Rossella Vodret, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2010); Francine Prose, *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); and Andrew Graham-Dixon, "Caravaggio: Italian Painter", *Britannica*, last updated July 14, 2021. < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caravaggio> >. Accessed on August 24, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Vodret, *ibid.*; "Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Martha and Mary Magdalene, ca. 1598", *Detroit Institute of Arts*. < <https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/martha-and-mary-magdalene-36204> >. Accessed on August 24, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> "Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Martha and Mary Magdalene, ca. 1598", *ibid.*



"Martha and Mary Magdalene" (1597-1598)<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Background: "Martha"s and "Mary"s in the New Testament

Confusingly, these characters mentioned by the Detroit Institute of Arts – Martha and Mary Magdalene (i.e. the "her sister" in the above quotation) – are not the only Marthas and Marys in the Christian Bible, nor indeed is the depicted scene a unified whole (rather it is a combination of a scriptural story in which Martha scolds her sister Mary, and a non-biblical tradition about Mary Magdalene's conversion<sup>5</sup>). Thus in the below we will try to reflect some additional "light" on the people involved and their relationship before exploring the narratives and significations that viewers would have had (and often still do) associated with these two women. There is some controversy in the identities being asserted, and the source texts are neither clear nor invariant themselves; additionally the interpretations of these documents has led to one particular judgment becoming so deeply ingrained that it blocks out even the possibility of alternative readings. This presents us with a difficult task; let us nevertheless try to fairly ascertain what has been written and what has been said of Martha and Mary.

In the New Testament portion of the Christian Bible, the Gospel of Luke gives us a pair of sisters named Martha and Mary (Chapter 10), and the same book also gives us Mary Magdalene as a financial donor to Jesus (Chapter 8), plus an unnamed woman who cleans and anoints Jesus' feet (Chapter 7); the Gospel of John expands this somewhat by also listing Martha and Mary of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus (Chapter 11), and Mary wife of Clopas (Chapter 19); the Gospel of Matthew has Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (Chapters 27 and 28); with Mark likewise listing Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joses (Chapters 15 and 16); each of these Marys are naturally in addition to the Mary who is

<sup>4</sup> Image in the Public Domain and copyright free; this file was retrieved from the museum's website, *ibid.* Accessed on November 01, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Vodret, *op. cit.*

claimed to be Jesus' own mother. The preponderance of Marys as opposed to Marthas is perhaps one reason why a simplifying solution has frequently been sought, and since in each naming of Martha she is Mary's family (with or without also adding Lazarus) it might appear logical enough to combine Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, both of whom are after all called Martha's sister: except that "Magdalene" *is also a place name exactly as is Bethany*: "Mary of Magdala" is shifted to Mary Magdalene, as Taro of Osaka becomes Osakan Taro. Could one person hail from two different hometowns? It is possible, and some have suggested strategies for aligning the Gospel stories along an understanding such as this,<sup>6</sup> but the primary reason for the conflation of these figures appears to have come from elsewhere. That source was none other than the pope himself, and one who lived in late antiquity prior to both the Church's split into Catholic and Orthodox and then the further division between Catholic and Protestant, and whom therefore at the time spoke for all of Christendom.<sup>7</sup> His words have been preserved, and hence we will list them below following the primary Scriptural referents from the Gospel of Luke.

As mentioned, to mainstream Christian believers Mary Magdalene is imagined as a conglomerate of the so-named financial supporter (and person whom Jesus had previously miraculously healed); Mary the sister of Martha, who together host Jesus for a meal in their home; and a woman who is not identified but is described as cleaning and then anointing the feet of Jesus in a display of deep reverence and repentance. Since the source material for these three can conveniently be found in a single Gospel we will quote such here, with further footnoted references given where necessary. We begin with the last of this trio – the unnamed – whose entire tale can be found in Luke 7:36-50; for our purposes we need only cite the initial portion:

Luke 7:36-38:<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus [There is a footnote here which reads: "Gk *him*"] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table.<sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.<sup>38</sup> She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Grenville J. Kent argues that the earlier Gospel writers (Luke, Mark, and Matthew, whom he takes to have been the actual writers of the books bearing their names (critical scholars dispute this simplistic view of authorship)) could have wished to cover up Mary's disreputable background by not explicitly connecting the story of the sinful woman anointing Jesus with the Mary of Bethany (where she lived post-conversion) and the Mary of Magdala (where she was from and where she had been a prostitute) despite their being the same person, whereas the later writing John felt freer to expose more of the story; see especially pp. 21-22 and 24 in Grenville J. Kent, "Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the Sinful Woman of Luke 7: The Same Person?", *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary*, 13:1 (2010), 13-28.

<sup>7</sup> This of course carried far, as for instance the editors of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, in their entry for Luke 7, note that the unnamed woman mentioned is later associated by tradition with Mary Magdalene; see p. 129 in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version*, 2nd edn, ed. by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

Next is the most directly associative portion, from Chapter 8:

Luke 8:1-3:<sup>1</sup> Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,<sup>2</sup> as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,<sup>3</sup> and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them [Footnote: "Other ancient authorities read *him*"] out of their resources.<sup>9</sup>

The story of the sisters, from which the reprimanding (some might call it nagging) posture of Martha in Caravaggio's portrait comes, is this:

Luke 10:38-42:<sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.<sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.<sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."<sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;<sup>42</sup> there is need of only one thing. [Footnote: "Other ancient authorities read *few things are necessary, or only one*"] Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."<sup>10</sup>

Finally now are Pope Gregory I's (ca. 540–604 CE) exclamations, taken from a series of sermons he delivered in Rome in 591 CE; here the merging of what otherwise might be considered disparate personages is quite forcefully drawn, and since these were the pronouncements of the pope – the Holy See himself, and although not considered a deity as the Roman Emperors were, was still believed to infallibly carry the direct messages of the divine for humankind – they contained far more weight than any mere hermeneutics could:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman [Chapter 7], whom John calls Mary [this is the sister of Martha and Lazarus: Mary of Bethany from John 11:1–45, and especially the first two verses<sup>11</sup>], we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark [i.e. Mark 16:9;<sup>12</sup> Luke 8:2 mentions this as well]. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? [This is likely a reference to the so-called "seven deadly sins":

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> John 11:1-2: "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.<sup>2</sup> Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill."; *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mark 16:9: "Now after he [Jesus] rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons."; *ibid.*



pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.<sup>13</sup> It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance.<sup>14</sup>

Thus not only does Pope Gregory combine these three referents into a single one, he does so in a way that highlights not the apparently economically independent Mary who generously provided necessary sustenance for Jesus' ministry, nor even the attentive and diligent student Mary who was a living demonstration of the potency of Jesus' teachings, but rather the sex worker who forsook her previous occupation and changed her life: yet this is the only "Mary" who is not even called by that – nor any other – name. James Carroll, in commenting on the figure of the Magdalene in the Christian heritage, asserts that "the most consequential note – that she was a repentant prostitute – is almost certainly untrue."<sup>15</sup>

What are we to make of this? Whomever Mary Magdalene and Martha may have been (and it is possible that either or both of them are entirely fictitious) the image we have received of this pairing became ensconced to the point that it not only fed into how Caravaggio composed his artwork but it equally (or more) influences how we view the same; in that inherent and default interpretation necessarily lie any number of biases and prejudices (probably unrecognized) which in turn affect not only our present comprehensions of the painting but so too our intellectual and emotional responses to it. In other words, we are trapped by the ideas we have been given. It is upon this realization that the need for bold phenomenological analyses becomes apparent, and it is towards such that we now venture: firstly to confront this gift of Caravaggio's with the stories and linkages in mind that he must have had as well, and then secondly to attempt to do so minus the entirety, to make an effort to see with truly fresh eyes.

### 3. Analysis One: Knowing the Story

Primary phenomenological methodology, as enunciated by the philosophical movement's founder Edmund Husserl, is concerned with the "conscious of" within an act (as broadly taken: thoughts too are "acts" in this comprehending). What this means in practice is that in seeking to analyze an object or

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, these sins (and their associated seven virtues) were first specified by this same pope; see The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Seven Deadly Sins: Theology", *Britannica*, last update August 5, 2021. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/seven-deadly-sins>>. Accessed on August 24, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in James Carroll, "Who Was Mary Magdalene? From the writing of the New Testament to the filming of *The Da Vinci Code*, her image has been repeatedly conscripted, contorted and contradicted", *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 2006. <<https://smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-mary-magdalene-119565482/>> Accessed on August 09, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*; Carroll does not argue this point, nor give his reasons for thinking so, it is simply declared.

phenomenon one takes the thing (or "thing") and isolates it mentally; and this not in regards to the whole but rather to the specific angle from which it is being viewed or considered, acknowledging that the "this now" facet is all one may actually attain to: the fullness will always remain out of reach since it cannot be taken in all at once (there will always remain an "unseen" portion). Having achieved that, it is described in steps with particular attention paid to how one's consciousness interacts with what is currently being examined. The "natural attitude" is suspended as one's focus is narrowed and narrowed and narrowed: by this process a richer understanding of the experience is sought, and with that as well, it is hoped, coming to know more of "experience itself" and (the) "experiencer oneself".<sup>16</sup> Let us therefore attempt this with our chosen work from Caravaggio, beginning with another look at the painting itself:



"Martha and Mary Magdalene" (1597-1598)<sup>17</sup>

I find my attention drawn immediately to Mary's face and upper body, bathed in light as they are, and then from there – following her own line of sight in the picture – over to Martha, moving almost immediately to her hands which enjoy the same radiance as Mary's face. In this I recall what I have read, that the light is used to signify a realization of salvation, and that Martha's hands are in the midst of a gestured counting as she is meant to be giving a relating of the many miracles of Christ here, apparently with such persuasion that Mary is thereby caused to convert: the moment which we are witnessing.<sup>18</sup> Thinking on that, I wonder why the claim has been made that this also represents Martha's reprimanding

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, intro. and ed. by Donn Welton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999); Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2014); David Woodruff Smith, Husserl, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Retrieved from: "Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Martha and Mary Magdalene, ca. 1598", *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> "Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Martha and Mary Magdalene, ca. 1598", *op. cit.*; Vodret, *op. cit.*

of her sister for not helping more with the hosting duties, as implied by the Luke 10 passage above,<sup>19</sup> could not this simply be an earnest proselytization? That indeed seems more likely, because if Mary were being scolded as well as spiritually counseled one would expect a quite mixed emotional reaction from her, but the visage presented appears uniform.

Next I find my thoughts in turn shifting to the topic of conversion generally, of it as an allegiance to a set of ideas/beliefs (essentially: faith as a taken, or grasped, intellectual “package”; the active sense of “accepted”), and then wonder further on the stories told of both women. Mary is by far the more famous of the pair, but what might have caused Martha’s decision to become a Jesus follower? In the Gospels we do not read much of her (the most significant portions were given in the preceding<sup>20</sup>), and she is typically used in the narratives as something of a darkened reflection of Mary (Caravaggio has done a remarkable job in that regard with his shadowing here): the overly practical one who misses the bigger spiritual picture; in this too one can almost hear the stereotypical Christian critique of Judaism. “Reflecting” now occupies my attention: I consider the large mirror portrayed with the window on its surface that provides the source of the “spotlight” effect falling on Mary, and my concentration on this object takes my eyes to the other items presented: the comb, the jar for ointments, the flower held between Mary’s fingers: these are each intended to indicate the back story of the repentant prostitute from Luke 7,<sup>21</sup> the character whom Church orthodoxy would merge into the Magdalene. I am returned again to the narratives and take in these two anew with that perspective resting just beneath my awareness: I see Mary as static, almost indecipherable, seemingly struck dumb yet elegant in composure, exquisitely dressed and with wonderfully curled hair carefully and becomingly arranged; Martha is evocative, a study in movement itself, more modest and plain but not unattractive, and yet in that she is here almost the opposite of the reputation bequeathed by the Gospels: Caravaggio has depicted a Martha who is the spiritually inclined one, eagerly trying to win Mary over, while Mary – with her worldly paraphernalia and air of wealthy materialism – appears the disreputable one not to be followed. Perhaps this is the more to highlight her radical transformation, which we who know the

<sup>19</sup> Vodret, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> The only other probably really important part is in the story of Jesus’ raising her brother Lazarus from the dead, in which (again) her reaction is contrasted with her sister Mary’s (who, let us remember, is not called “Magdalene” in the passage); from John 11:21-24 and 32-33: “<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus [this is after her brother has passed away], ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’<sup>22</sup> But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.’ [Please allow me to interject to comment here on both the disappointing tit-for-tat view of the divine being expressed, and on the assumption of a default masculinity to God/“God”; the Greek has “whatever you might ask God”.]<sup>23</sup> Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’<sup>24</sup> Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ [This is quite interesting, by the way, and hints at a belief of “staying dead” until a finalized divine reckoning in which—apparently—the good are re-corporealized; an analysis of 2 Maccabees 7 leads us close to this conclusion, I think (certainly for martyrs, at least), but such is beyond our topic here; see my forthcoming *The Christ is Dead, Long Live the Christ: A Philotheologic Prayer, a Hermeneutics of Healing*.]<sup>32</sup> When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’<sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.” [Final comments: Notice the markedly more pronounced way Jesus reacts to Mary, despite her using the exact words of her sister in address, the only differences being her posture – kneeling – and emotional display – weeping – surely this indicates a favoring on Jesus’ part, as the story in Luke 10 does as well. This makes me wonder. As an aside, I also take umbrage with the text’s usage of “the Jews” given that every single participant in this story is Jewish and I therefore find no need to extend the label in the divisive manner employed.]; *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*, *op. cit.*; *The New Greek/English Interlinear New Testament*: UBS 5<sup>th</sup> edition/Nestle-Aland 28<sup>th</sup> edition, with a literal English rendering and the New Revised Standard Version, trans. by Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, ed. by J.D. Douglas and Jonathan W. Bryant (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Vodret, *op. cit.*



story realize.

Therein lies the whole of it: We know the story. We recognize the contents, we are aware of “what is supposed to happen”, and in that we are closed off and cloistered in: reduced; interpretation (reaction, interaction) pre-determined. All our assumptions and biases on these characters from tales long told come to bear, and we cannot help but respond from such. In that we probably mentally center ourselves on Mary, as indeed the painting itself does; and she – as a familiar character – might call forth retaliatory or reconciliatory replies. An example of the former would be Carroll's, who writes in conspiratorial terms of how the Church has taken this exemplary early supporter of Jesus and, by combining her with the Luke 7 woman, “served to evoke an ideal of virtue that drew its heat from being a celibate's vision, conjured for celibates. ... But what most drove the anti-sexual sexualizing [he claims sexual restlessness is affixed to the Magdalene through the combination of prostitute = erotic urges plus repentant convert = anti-physical emphases] of Mary Magdalene was the male need to dominate women.”<sup>22</sup> (This asserted “need to dominate” is presumed by Carroll, and it appears to be applied to all men by him; although one naturally asks then whether – and if so to what extent – he might also include himself.) This is an angry hermeneutic, and if held it would no doubt lead to an interplay with Caravaggio's artwork that might reduce or mar an appreciation of its inherent beauty and craftsmanship, intellectually stumbling upon Mary-as-has-been-taught rather than image/figure-as-given. The conceptual baggage being carried is heavy and burdensome, ruining in its unavoidability.

Equally inescapable, but from the other side (reconciliatory), is the urging towards awe and/or gratitude at this penitent, this person who might remind one of oneself if one is a believer or holds to a notion of sin/offense that goes beyond mere wrongdoing (should not have done) or insufficiency (could have done better) and into divine affront. Here we find Grenville J. Kent, who presents a textual apology for the very aggregation that Carroll objects to, noting that the Gospel of Luke “connects these two scenes [7:36–50 and 8:1–3] with καθεξῆς [*kathexes*; my dictionary lists: “in order or sequence (from place to place); afterward”<sup>23</sup>], suggesting that this is the logical result of what went before”, and therefore “We could almost translate, ‘And so the next thing was...’ Wenham writes, ‘Luke's introduction of Mary Magdalene at the beginning of chapter 8 would be explained if chapter 7 is the story of her conversion.’”<sup>24</sup> Kent further argues that the merging which tradition has left us is also justified from the Gospel of Matthew's twice employing “the other Mary” (in 27:61 and 28:1), so that logically – given the New Testament's “primary Mary” (as it were) of the supposed mother of Jesus – there could be only *one* alternative Mary, otherwise which “other” was meant would be confusing (i.e. Mary of Bethany or Mary Magdalene? If they are the same person then there is no problem.). Through these two moves Kent wishes to firstly connect the unnamed “sinner” of

<sup>22</sup> Carroll, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> *Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, rev. edn, prepared by Barclay M. Newman (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010), p. 91.

<sup>24</sup> Kent, *op. cit.*, p. 24; John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), p. 28. The reference here is to what the New Revised Standard Version, which we have cited, translates in Luke 8:1 as “afterwards”; in the Greek: “Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ καθεξῆς [*kai egeneto en to kathexes*]”, which can be translated as “And it came about afterward”, or perhaps more literally, “And became in the afterwards”; *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*, *op. cit.*; *The New Greek/English Interlinear New Testament*, *op. cit.*

Luke 7 with Mary Magdalene, and then Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany; whether he is successful or not is entirely irrelevant to us because what matters most for our concerns is that once more we find ourselves jolted out of the portrait itself and into an experience not with the art but with the concepts and their associated word-signifiers. We know but likely wish we did not know; let us, then, now consider just such a not-knowing.

#### 4. Analysis Two: Not Knowing the Story

There is another aspect to Husserl's method of intellectual isolation and precise analytical penetration, and that is the "historical reduction". This involves a further bracketing (or a setting aside, a "tabling") of one's knowledge along with the focused observations and attendant "conscious of" referred to in the preceding. Olga Louchakova-Schwartz has explained the procedure as an attempt to "suspend traditional interpretations provided by the historical narrative. This by no means is meant to uncover some ahistorical, universal essence, but simply removes the claim 'valid only for a particular historical time and circumstances,' shifting attention away from ossified historical narrative and the empirical entities of tradition to deep layers of consciousness."<sup>25</sup> It will be evident how potentially useful a technique such as this will be for our endeavor as we seek to see only what may be seen, and in that to truly "see!" what it is that Caravaggio has created (perhaps despite even himself). Of assistance as well will be two additional theoretical constructs: the first is Hans Belting's elucidation that after around 1400 CE art in Europe ceased to be purely (or anyway primarily) iconography-oriented and religiously-directed and instead started to be produced and appreciated as art for art's sake: beauty itself, the image itself, the thing as thing and nothing more;<sup>26</sup> the second is from W.J.T. Mitchell, who flips the frame on us and suggests that an image is not only viewed but also views, and thus in and through its presence it too has "desires", and a part of our task is to decipher what these might be.<sup>27</sup> We therefore now push tradition to the side, purposefully forgetting whatever we may have learned of the individuals inhabiting this setting, paying no attention to the religious theme that no doubt was desired by Caravaggio's patron (while the artist himself likely thought more in aesthetic terms<sup>28</sup>), and try to ascertain what this composition may be demanding of those who would approach it (greet it), those who would interact (converse) with it. What does this painting call forth? With no more stakes in the game of "shoulds" and "musts", forsaking even the title given to it in this effort to wipe clean our mental slates, we again direct our sight to the canvas:

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<sup>25</sup> Olga Louchakova-Schwartz, "The Way into Transcendental Philosophy from the Argument in Suhrawardi's Philosophy of Illumination", *Open Theology*, 5 (2019), 278-298 (p. 283); the inner quote is taken from David Carr, *Phenomenology and the Problem of History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 248.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Prose, *op. cit.*, highlights this aspect of his working personality.



"A painting" (done in a year past)<sup>29</sup>

Once more I am immediately drawn to the brightly lit woman occupying the center of the frame, taking in her two hands as well as her face and noting the delicate—but almost authoritative—manner in which she grasps the flower in her right; then too how she has placed her left on top of the mirror, as if to assert ownership of the device, or to keep it away from the other woman depicted. These were traditionally items of great expense, and so to strike a claim of the form 'This is mine!' would be nearly akin to an act of domination of the sort: wealth equals status. Thinking on that, I follow her gaze to this other, who—being positioned lower and mostly in shadow—appears to me entirely submissive, perhaps in the midst of making a plea or a request. This person's hands, for their part, seem to be counting, possibly emphasizing that it is merely this one X of which she asks, and if her listener would only be so kind as to Y.

Her features as well are plaintive, and when my mind marks that detail it returns again to that central figure in whose expression I now see an aloofness which borders on callousness, nearly on disdain: Here is a leader far above the scrabble below her; a Caesar gazing at a legionary who has had the audacity to speak out of turn. (Not quite how one might expect Caesar to respond to an auxiliary of course, but then our character in this picture is clearly deigning to actually hear the other, while an auxiliary before Caesar would be lucky to even catch an eye.)

The asymmetrical dress and style of the two seems to cement this impression yet deeper, and now I find that the objects placed on the table cause me great curiosity: Have they been given by this lower one to the higher; are they offerings, or possibly payments of some kind? If so, will they be accepted? Are they *good enough*?<sup>2</sup> What do they mean, and what strife might have been gone through by the subservient to attain them? My viewing does not tell me, but I think probably they will be received: this is a haughty but

<sup>29</sup> Ignore this footnote! For here we dive deeply into our "not knowing". (Retrieved from: "Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio: Martha and Mary Magdalene, ca. 1598", *op. cit.*)

munificent superior, a master of sufficient grace to take the (somewhat pathetic) “best efforts” of her servant. Unless – wondering on the opposite pole yet again – the comb and the jar with its brush (its sponge? cloth?) have been, like the mirror, placed out by the greater for the lesser as a further signification of her majesty vis-à-vis the commonness of her interlocutor: ‘Look at all that I have, you who would approach.’ If the message had not already been understood by the subordinate, one wonders how much more it would need.

It will readily be observed how startlingly different from our first analysis all of this is, forcefully pushing the question we had already planned to ask: What might the picture want? It is no conversion, it does not – evidently, for us at least – wish to elicit either the retaliatory or reconciliatory responses usually prodded by the figure of Mary Magdalene and which we sampled above. Those are ideational, they are background conceptual, and in their absence we find entirely varying “desires” set forth. It follows, then, that neither does the piece seem intended to provoke a repentance and a refusal of fleshly concerns on our part as the viewer: what we meet is no call for any “salvation” that would demand renunciation. By all appearances, rather, this is an image that illustrates the preeminence of one individual over another; and this as evidenced via the possession of material abundance, wealth, vestments, coiffure, posture, and the accordingly fitted attitudinal bearing. Is this a “Christian” painting or a “Pagan” one? Do those terms even apply? In the purely *human* – the earthly, the “real” – of a pair of she and her, you and me, do those notional labels retain satisfactory import? Does this artwork teach a set of behaviors, a posture for one’s days? Does it render a saint’s focus on the “afterlife”, or a sinner’s enjoyment of this life? Can we find anything other than “here and now” in what the artist has given us? Is there any reason why we might wish to? What is *enough*? This (unexpected) arrival is a very long way indeed from the Martha and Mary we were taught to know.

## 5. A Picture’s Voice

We have sought to compare two phenomenological viewings of Caravaggio’s imagined portraiture “Martha and Mary Magdalene”. Amongst the painters of his time and place, Caravaggio was one of a small number of artists who mostly eschewed the more professional models and instead used common people – “street folk” – for his inspirations and renderings, and he furthermore dressed them in the style of his own era rather than that of the epoch being displayed.<sup>30</sup> (One cannot imagine much of this in first century Palestine!) When we confronted his work we initially found the assumed meanings of the background narratives compelling themselves onto us, which led quite naturally far away from the piece beheld and into the identities of the figures presented, and with them the aligned controversies and the affective purposes to which these characters have been put in religious usages. Such eventualities might be “wants”, but they are not, we think, what the picture itself “wants”.

Towards that we attempted another approach through an historical reduction and discovered – perhaps surprisingly – that this is neither “Mary” being scolded by “Martha”, nor is it “Mary” being convinced to convert by “Martha”: rather it is a superior and achieved woman (“Mary”?) patiently

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<sup>30</sup> Prose, *op. cit.*



associating with another ("Martha"?), one whom probably cannot even be considered a peer except under the most democratic of ethos. It is quite possibly a celebration of prestige and power; and if this painting desires anything, it is to enunciate a naturally occurring human hierarchy and how some of the accoutrements of such manifest themselves on this Earth of ours. Or it might do so, at any rate; who could state such definitively?

This, then, is where we are, where we have been brought: Nowhere and everywhere. That the image is and remains open – this image, any image, every image – is a part of what makes phenomenology an ongoing and endlessly productive program. There are no answers beyond the now, the for-me, the contents of each "conscious of". What might be uncovered by further investigations? What might the results herein speak to our own selves, to our comprehensions and positions, at this moment, tomorrow, in ten years? These are questions that are worthy of attention – repeated, returned to – but any responses cannot (and certainly should not) be universally claimed. They are instead problems for the analyst, for the observer, for every observer at every instance: to be queried in individualized and experiential reflection, again and again, exploration after exploration.

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