The *festa* of the Miracle of the Holy Ghost


Translation and paratextual material © 2011
The festa of the Miracle of the Holy Ghost

This is the Representation of the Miracle of the Holy Ghost

The Angel announces and says to the people:

O people, filled with longing to behold something that’s a foundation of your faith now you will have what you desire fulfilled, but listen well and concentrate your eye and we will show the miracle so fair of the most Holy Ghost, and you’ll rejoice, and you will find there calm ad rest and peace, and we’ll begin if it now pleases God.

When the Angel has left, St James comes down a hill and says to himself as he lifts his eyes to Heaven:

I think and feel and see and do consider it would be good to go and visit Mary. Her prayer to God is worthy, just like incense: with that she will fulfil all my desire. I’ll say that she should turn towards her Son who surely has it in his might and power. I’ll say it seems the time is truly past for us to see the Holy Ghost descend.

He meets St Peter who is going towards Jerusalem to see Mary, and Peter, seeing James stops and says to him:

Where are you going? You look all aflame!

St James replies, embracing him, and says, almost weeping:

O Peter, I am very pleased to see you!

St Peter says:

Well, tell me why!

St James:

Since I have found you here I’ll tell you, but you’ll have to help me out.
ST PETER says willingly:

Surely you know my duty is to serve you?

ST JAMES says:

Then listen now, and understand my words:  
I’d set out on this road to go to visit  
the Mother of our Lord, to ask her prayers  
to God, because the time has come to send  
the Holy Ghost to us on earth from Heaven.

ST PETER says tenderly:

You fill my heart with sweetness with these words  
and your zeal fills me with the flame of passion.  
Let’s go to her and ask her to commend  
us to her Son, and through him to the Father,  
to save us from the chill that strikes our hearts.  
Unless this mandate comes, our toil is vain.

THE ANGEL appears to them to reassure them and says:

Ardent Apostles, righteous and most holy,  
whose thoughts I share and also your desires,  
you’ve brought your rugged faces here together:  
to tell the truth, you seem a bunch of rogues.  
Apostles, I want you to savour faith  
in God, and set your hearts sincerely there.  
The grace you’re asking for will follow soon.  
Now stay in peace: and let these words suffice.

When the Angel disappears, the Apostles remain fired by the love of God. In this moment,  
MARY MAGDALENE says to the Virgin Mary, bowing devoutly before her:

Mary, because it so pleases you Son  
and is his wish that you should be alone,  
there is nobody like you, so I wish  
to take my leave from you with your permission.  
I am not worthy to be your companion  
but in obedience I will be your daughter.  
Give me your blessing, raise your arms on high,  
and find the company that you deserve.

THE VIRGIN MARY looks her in the face and says:
Is this the trust, and is this the great love
I always thought you bore me? Now you bring
a greater pain than ever to my heart.
I beg you, do not go against my will.

MARY MAGDALENE says:
I promise to obey you, greatest Mother,
if you will love me as you would a servant.

THE VIRGIN MARY takes her by the hand and says:
More like a sister.

THE MAGDALENE:
Ah, but that’s not right!

THE VIRGIN MARY:
Indeed it is!

THE MAGDALENE:
But that’s not what I ask.

I’m happy just to be here like a maid;
for any other way would not be proper.

THE VIRGIN MARY, disturbed by these words, says:

O Magdalene, agree to my request,
or else we will encounter greater woe.

MARY MAGDALENE says:
What kind of woe?

THE VIRGIN MARY:
The kind that’s brought about
by these harsh words.

THE MAGDALENE:
I could not let that be
and so I’m glad to do just as you wish.
The Virgin Mary says happily:

Then put into effect what I request.

The two Maries sit down again, and in this moment the Apostles St John and St Bartholomew and St Matthew and St Simon, coming down from a mountain, raising their eyes and hands fervently to heaven, they look at one another and they say together:

All together on the road we zealously set forth to go
to make our way towards the house
of God’s most holy mother, Mary, Mary.

Let us walk and think good thoughts,
and make a bundle of our prayers,
because Jesus willingly will
love us always and will never
turn away from us or take his holy angels from our presence.
And now, O pilgrims, let us look for
for God’s most holy mother, Mary, Mary.

When they have gone a short distance they find St Peter and St James. They embrace one another and St Peter says to them:

Where are you going all so fervently?

St John says:

We’re going off to seek the Holy Ghost.

St Bartholomew says:

Since we have found you, pray for us as well.

St Matthew says:

Peter, please do! Give all of us this comfort.

St Simon says:

Don’t leave us here, abandoned without grace.

St Peter says:

All of you come with me a little while.
Let’s go together with delight and song.
Our Mother Mary will give us this sign.

*All together, in unison, they say as they go:*

O Mary, you’re the one to make us glad,
we only ask,
we seek *(nothing) more,*

than that you lead us, Empress, to your realm.

We think of you as we approach the end
of all our years.
In order that your prayers will be fulfilled
save us from woe
and from the toils

of the devil, the root of every sin.

Send down, Jesus, we pray, your Holy Ghost
upon our fervour
that we may boast of your glory
And deign to grant
to us who kneel

whatever each of us asks in his prayers.

**St Thomas at that moment says to himself:**

I’ve searched around in every place I know
to find the Holy Ghost, and still I can’t.
The time has come for it to show itself:
I have no more ideas for where to look.
Thomas, it seems to me you’re much too soft
to go out searching, as I must allow.
I think I’ll stop right here up on this road:

some new idea will come of where to go.

**When he has sat down St Philip finds him and says:**

God save you, dear companion full of faith!

**St Thomas says:**

And in like wise my God save you as well.
Tell me, O Philip, where you’re going now.

**St Philip says:**

To look for something I’ve long hungered for:
the Holy Ghost, on which I’ve set my heart.
ST THOMAS says:

That’s what I’m seeking too. I’m resting here. I put my faith in dreams and in fine words, uttered by one who wished to torture me.

ST PHILIP says sorrowfully:

Alas, O Thomas, don’t go on like that. Don’t you know, all that’s needed is true faith? Get yourself up and tarry here no more. He who trusts in the Lord will be rewarded. Don’t use such words as these, for is it not enough that you get what you ask the Lord? Come with me, let us go and find him now.

ST THOMAS sits down again and says:

I know I’ve had enough of all wretched trudging.

Seeing them overwhelmed, THE ANGEL appears to them and says:

May what you long for and desire be granted. Now go, and make your way now along this road. Don’t you know, Thomas, that the Lord is Just? Don’t you know that the sword cuts when it will? You must stop being so obstinate towards Him. Get up and walk, so that you move ahead. Just up ahead are several of your group: they’re off to Mary’s in Jerusalem.

ST THOMAS, standing up, says to himself sorrowfully:

Alas, my anger overwhelmed me there. so that I’ve spoken ill against my God. A shilling’s all that’s left from one whole pound, and I am without life the Lord’s grace. I’m sure today he’ll turn his wrath on me. O my soul, who will be your comfort now? Alas, your Lord has cut himself from you, and you are called below to Hell’s abyss.

ST PHILIP comforts him and says:

Take heart, for God will surely pardon you (didn’t you hear the words the angel spoke?) and wants to give to you the crown of Heaven. We need to find the others up ahead.
ST THOMAS replies:

I’ll follow you and take your lead forever.

ST PHILIP says:

Let’s go, because the sun is yet still high.
And if we find the others on the way
together we can go to visit Mary.

They meet up with the others and ST PETER embraces them and says:

Welcome, Philip and welcome my good Tomas.

ST THOMAS says:

And greetings to you all, dear friends indeed.

ST PETER turns to his companions and says:

My sons, this looks to me a blessed chances:
let us rejoice with song and melody.

ST JOHN says:

Flower of virtue, wisdom’s purest vessel,
you are welcome as well, beloved Philip.

ST PETER says:

We’ll make our way towards Jerusalem
where we will find the Mother of our God.

The Prophecy of MARY MAGDALENE¹

They all set out, singing in unison:

Jesus, when we have located
this most worthy deity,
ever heart will be consoled
for we’ll forsake the Hebrew law.

Each of us will leave the torture
that has so tormented him,

¹ A Confessione di Santa Maria Maddalena circulated in verse from at least 1472 (see, for example, MS Ambrosiano C 35 sup., ff. 51v-53v), but I have identified no prophecy of Mary Magdalene.
and within your holy service
he will find your warming fire.
O Lord Jesus, send us now
this grace that we so desire.
Every heart will be consoled
for we’ll forsake the Hebrew law.

_They come before the Virgin Mary, and when they have done reverence to her, St Peter says:_

May he, Madonna, who lay in your womb
now save you and preserve us for his love
always in peace: for that was what he wished
and so he wishes for the future too.
By that holy mystery born of you
pray for us that our sorrow now will end.

_The Virgin Mary says:_

It is my bounden duty here to serve you:
you and all your company are welcome.

Therefore let each man freely speak his mind
it takes no time to ask a grace of me.

_St Peter says:_

O Mother of the Almighty, listen now
to what I’m holding here within my breast:
just one desire, which plagues me far beyond
all other things that bring unhappiness.
When your most holy Son went up to Heaven,
he said he’d send to us the Holy Ghost.

That is my prayer, although it is impossible
that what he promised should not come to pass:
that would indeed be something truly terrible
to leave his followers abandoned here,
forsaken in this world and all too fallible.

_Mary says:_

I’ll pray to him, now cast all doubt aside.

_St Peter says:_

Yes, Mary! I commend myself to you.
MARY says:

And everything you wish will be fulfilled.

ST JOHN says:

Madonna, as you know, we are bereft, abandoned, and you’re all that we have left; have mercy on your poor and humble servants, who have no other virtue but desire. See how they pray to you like little organs, now that your prayer goes winging up to Heaven. You are the one who guides and lights our way and your will governs over earth and sky.

ST BARTHOLOMEW says:

Mary, you are the rudder of this ship: give us consolation, guide it to port. Grant us your sweet and gentle breeze to guide us so that each one of us comes safely home.

ST MATTHEW says:

Lighten this load that weighs so heavy on us, bring back to life, we pray, our thoughts of death, and set back on their path those who are lost. We pray you, Mary, comfort every one.

ST SIMON says:

You are the dwelling place of lowliness, you are the Mother of our might Lord, and in you reigns such pity for us all. Extinguish now, we pray, this fiery pain.

ST PHILIP says:

And I beseech you that in your charity you exercise your prayers of mighty worth.

ST JAMES says:

Grant the request of everyone who prays:

MAGDALENA says:
Mary, I ask that it may please you now to heed the pleas of those who pray before you. You are their strength and you are the great treasure, you’re the banner that leads them on their way. I pray you, Mary, hesitate no more, and grant the holy requests they long for so. Remember that they were your Son’s companions, Leave them no more to bathe themselves in tears.

ST THOMAS says:

We beg you, Mary, rescue from distress the travailed and afflicted men before you. You see that every one of them has come to ask of you your grace so powerful.

MARY:

I’ll not stand in the way of what you ask because your voice has been heard up in Heaven. And in holy obedience as required I now will pray with all that I know how.

She kneels down and continues:

My Son, if ever you accepted any prayer of mine, be gracious to your servants here. They were the once who went with you in life, and now they’re waiting for you to keep your promise. You prophesied the Holy Ghost would come so now lift up their hearts and give them warmth. You see how full of yearning here they wait, so grant them what they ask, and rescue them.

I pray to you for love of that most holy conception, by which you came to my womb (after you sent that perfect angel, Gabriel, to bring the tidings that you would be coming), for love of all the milk sucked at my breast, and all the times I had to swaddle you, for love of all the steps the donkey took so we could flee from Herod, dearest love.

For all joy and all the suffering I had for you, dear Son, bear this in mind. Your Apostles are here with tenderness: see how each seems to struggle to survive. Grant to each one of them your holy grace,
from their affliction bring them now to joy.
Now everyone, with me and with one voice,
let us all pray and raise our light to heaven.

_The Apostles begin, and all of them together with our Lady sing the following
lauda to the tune of the “Canto de’ Balestrieri”:_

O Lord Jesus, you have brought us
here together with Maria.

Put an end to all our sorrow
and our weeping full of woe.
Make our weary spirits bolder
and bring comfort to the troubled
men who kneel before you here.
O Lord Jesus, keep your promise:
you have given us your word,
so bring comfort to our weeping.

_After these words, the Holy Ghost descends from Heaven, and then Mary says:_

Now that what you have wished has been fulfilled,
go and warm yourselves at this holy fire.
Your most deserving prayers were heard in Heaven
and Jesus will forever be with you.

_St Peter says:_

Each one of us must shortly go away.
O Mother Mary, don’t abandon us.

_Mary says:_

Go, all of you, and take with you God’s blessing:
keeping forever in your hearts His passion.

_The Apostles leave, and the Angel bids farewell to the audience and says:_

He who would find repose in Heaven’s song
must first ask mercy from Lord Jesus Christ,
and then he will receive the Holy Ghost
sent by my Lord almighty Jesus Christ.
He gave himself for you without reserve,

---

2 Canto di Balestrier, inc. “Balestrier sian sagg, e dotti, | Ma per guerra stati rotti”; in _Tutti i trionfi, carri, maschere_ [sic] à canti _Carnascialeschi_ andati per Firenze, _Dal tempo del Magnifico Lorenzo vecchio_ de Medici; quando egli ebbero prima cominciamento, per infino a questo anno presente 1559. In Fiorenza MDLVII; available on line at www.archive.org/stream/tvttiitrionficar00graz#page/82/mode/2up. See also _Canti carnascialeschi del Rinascimento_, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Bari: Laterza, 1936), pp. 190–191.
and he redeemed you with his very heart.
Now on behalf of him I give you leave,
and keep him constantly within your hearts.

The end of the play of the Miracle of the Holy Ghost

Note to the text

The Italian text, edited from *La festa del miracolo dello spirito santo* [Florence: Bartolomeo de’ Libri, c. 1490], is in Nerida Newbigin, *Feste d’Oltrarno: Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Florence: Olschki, 1996), 2: 256–258. I argue there (1: 206–208) that the text was prepared for Pentecost 1489 when, at the behest Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici, the *Festa di Santo Spirito* was performed by the Sant’Agnese Company in Santa Maria del Carmine, using their Ascension *festa* equipment. Tribaldo de’ Rossi records that nobody liked it.3

The Italian text is distinctly lacking in literary merit, and the printer often struggles to make sense of his copy.

I am now aware of five copies of this edition: two in Florence (Riccardiana), and one each in Oxford (Bodley), Milan (Trivulziana), and Chantilly (Musée Condé). The Chantilly copy is particularly interesting: it is part of a bound set of twenty-five *rappresentazioni* all in apparently mint condition – or else washed and repaired with the magic of mid-nineteenth-century French bookbinders. The volume, acquired and rebound by the Duke d’Aumale for £52, can be traced back through the collections of the Reverend Dr Henry Wellesley, principal of New Hall Oxford (sold 1866), William Roscoe (sold 1816), Mr Edwards, bookseller in Pall Mall, and Maffeo Pinelli (sold 1787).

The woodcut on the title page of this edition shows a Whitsuntide scene: a dove in the apse sends its rays down on Mary (in the centre), eleven apostles (Matthias has not yet been chosen), and Mary Magdalene. The scene, which Kristeller classifies as “early finer style,”4 does not appear in any other contemporary print, and the play was not republished until the Giunti anthology of 1554, it was with a different woodcut of the scene. The four woodblocks that make up the frame are interesting. In the centre of each side panel stands a tonsured friar; at the bottom a bearded friar sits between two younger friars, reading a book. At the top, two angels kneel in adoration of the cross, with the lance and the sponge, and a skull at the foot of the cross. The same frame is used in the two other plays published by Libri in the same period: *La rappresentatione della distruttione di Saul & del pianto di Davit*, which Elissa Weaver has recently attributed to Antonia Pulci;5 and the play of *Festa di sancta Agata virgine & martyre*. The Annunciating Angel, with three parts of its frame, appears in the first column on c. A1v.

---