Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints

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Mary Magdalene, since the early Christian era, has maintained a unique position in Western theological writing, poised between the spiritual and physical, the sacred and profane, the social and political. As a character in medieval drama her vita has assumed special prominence as the “saved sinner” and as the central witness to the mystery of Christ’s resurrection. With careful attention to a variety of materials both textual and visual, Theresa Coletti’s new work, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England*, provides both a broad and deep analysis of Mary Magdalene’s prominence through overlapping discourses of late medieval English culture.

Central to Coletti’s study is the Bodleian Library’s manuscript of the dramatic text on Mary Magdalene (MS Digby 133), simply named the Digby Mary Magdalene. But Coletti broadens the East Anglian scholarly landscape considerably by a synthetic investigation of spiritual, social, and visual texts centered on the feminine as subject and symbol. The Digby play presents a story of Mary Magdalene which conflates all four Gospel accounts and introduces elements from a later legend which tells of the saint’s travels to France, including the conversion of the king and queen of Marseilles and Magdalene’s subsequent retirement from society, to live as a hermit in the South of France.

Coletti acknowledges an epistemological burden in the study of medieval dramatic literature, brought on by the instability of the text evoked from the material critical enterprises that she undertakes. While other scholars debate the primacy of either the dramatic text or the performance text over the other, Colletti has managed to include a serious consideration of both in recognizing that medieval English plays, as Richard Beadle has prompted, are “‘extremely intellectual . . . written by people whose training was theological and rhetorical’; such texts require ‘a lot of strenuous thinking’ to tease out their meaning” (15). Colletti has teased the work in a variety of directions, offering provocatively detailed readings of the issues that the play elicits rather than a totalizing theory or unified reading of the play itself. Recognizing the complexity of analyzing late medieval theater and performance as it intersects with festival practice, religious ritual, and social custom, Coletti’s wide-ranging work provides a rich and provocative analysis of late medieval culture.

The second chapter of Coletti’s book, which focuses on East Anglian
Magdalenes, is less interesting than the rest of her book for scholars who might want a more detailed analysis of the Digby play. Standard criticism has tended to view the importance of the Digby play’s enormous theatrical complexity, as one of medieval drama’s most ambitiously metatheatrical, “weaving together hagiographical narrative, courtly discourse, mercantile and anticlerical satire, scriptural texts, and contemplative and mystical idioms” in a play with “technical and mechanical virtuosity” (25). Coletti examines the Digby Mary Magdalene, however, by first tracing the anonymous author’s East Anglian influences within greater medieval religious and dramatic writings and in the context of devotional practice of late medieval East Anglian culture. In so doing, she eschews the privileging of an eschatological framework of the play and replaces it with a more polemic reading that places Mary Magdalene as a critique of the Church’s relationship to heavenly power.

Coletti’s analysis of visual material culture is impressive, beginning with the relationship of the play to the architecture of parish churches, rood screen images, and activities associated with late medieval hospital to carved images of women religious on the bench-ends of pews. Believing that East Anglians “honored feminine sources of sacred power” (49), Coletti also traces influences from traditional sources such as Julian of Norwich’s Revelation of Love, Margery Kempe’s auto-hagiography, the morality Wisdom, and the N-Town Mary Play, among others.

Coupled with the play’s stage directions of Mary Magdalene and her companions to be “arrayed as chaste women” (99), Coletti collects a stunning array of images both visual and textual that explore the importance of the female body in relationship to sin and salvation. The most incisive and provocative work occurs in the last two chapters of the book where she addresses the role of the feminine in salvation history and centers her approach on the Digby Mary Magdalene itself, a text that conflated images of the Virgin Mary with Mary Magdalene and continually poses the question, “how can the spiritual be bodied forth in the physical?” (203).

Mary Magdalene’s identity in late medieval East Anglia, Coletti believes, centers on the body, where holy women achieved salvation “not by rejecting the physicality with which women were regularly identified, but by ‘sinking more fully into it’” (213). As a saint whose love for Christ combined both the erotic and spiritual, Mary Magdalene provides a controversial figure within theological discourse. The Digby Mary Magdalene, enormous in theological and dramatic scope, provides Coletti a basis for examining the drama within a larger framework of the feminine contribution to late medieval religious practice.

Theresa Coletti, author of Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory, has added another incisive and scholarly work to her study of medieval history, culture and literature. For readers interested in medieval drama and not versed in Latin or Middle English, Coletti offers no translations throughout the book. Clearly written for scholars of Middle English studies, the book is an elegantly written and valuable resource on theater, gender, and religion in late medieval England.