The Actor's Carnal Eye: A Contemporary Staging of the Digby MARY MAGDALENE

Peter Cockett
McMaster University

Goo ye to my brethryn, and sey to hem Þer,
Þat Þey procede and go into Galilye,
And Þere xall Þey se me, as I seyd before,
Bodyly, wyth here carnall yye. (1121-5)[1]

To produce or to perform a play is to know it in a different way. This paper was inspired by my experience directing and acting in the production of the Digby *Mary Magdalene* for the *Poculi Ludique Societas* as part of their Saints' Play Festival in the spring of 2003. The performances took place on a football field on the campus of Victoria College, University of Toronto, May 22-24, and were open to the general public as well as to the participants in the conference. The *Poculi Ludique Societas* (henceforth, the PLS) are the University of Toronto's medieval and Renaissance players. Formed in 1964, they have long been at the center of the academic movement to study early English drama through performance. Their productions of the *Castle of Perseverance* and the *York Cycle* stand as landmark achievements in the field. Theatre anthropology such as that undertaken by the PLS is a particular, if not distinct, kind of historiography. The very act of performing a play, as medieval playwrights themselves were well aware, brings the past into the present and disrupts the distinction between the two. Actors play characters from the past, but speak in the present tense and pretend the action is happening to them for the first time. The level of engagement involved in this process creates an intimate connection with the historical material; the actors come to know it not just with their minds but with their hearts and bodies.

My experience working on the PLS production of the Digby *Mary Magdalene* as actor and director has suggested striking comparisons between the process of acting, the play's central concern with witnessing and preaching, and the culture of affective piety of late medieval East Anglia where the play was originally produced.[2] The longing for intimate knowledge of an unknowable past, that informs the activities of the PLS, lies at the heart of the Digby *Play of Mary Magdalene,* and is the impetus behind the devotional practices of affective piety. What follows is an exploration of potential connections

between those practices and the techniques of modern acting. The paper will first address the play's profound concern with a kind of knowing arising from affective imagination and grounded in the emotions and the body. It will then discuss issues of corporeality, representation, and religious experience, examining the writings of medieval mystics and establishing grounds for comparison with the work of acting theorist and director Jerzy Grotowski. This comparison will subsequently be explored through analysis of specific aspects of our production process, focusing primarily on the performance of the lead role. Through this analysis, I hope to establish a more complex understanding of the role played by the actor's physiology in the evangelical process of the play in performance.

Mary Magdalene was a deeply complex cultural symbol in the fifteenth century.[3] From the many strands of symbolism surrounding the saint, the play stresses her role as *apostle apostolorum*, the apostle to the apostles. Victor Scherb has established that significant changes made to the source material for the play focuses attention on Mary as a "carrier of the Christian message" ("Worldy" 5).[4] She is the primary witness to Christ's resurrection, she preaches the good news to her "*dysypyll*" (sd. 1335) in Jerusalem, and then becomes a missionary, converting the king and queen of Marseilles. The problematic opening sequence of the play involving Tiberius Caesar, Herod, and Pilate is connected to Mary's story, although indirectly, through the opposition of these powerful rulers to such preaching. For example, Tiberius singles out those "precharsse of Chrystys incarnacyon" (28) for special hatred and punitive measures.[5] Tiberius's threats have no direct consequence in the play—no soldiers arrive to carry her away—but the fact that he singles out preachers for his attention suggests the ideas of witnessing and preaching were central to the playwright's conception.

Moreover, the play itself is also a means of preaching. Mimi Still Dixon accurately observes that the "operative dramatic metaphor in the play is 'showing' not 'playing'" (237). Jesus appears to the Marys to "shew desyrows hartys I am full nere" (1110), and Mary's appearance in the King of Marseilles's dream is described as a "mervelows shewyng" (1620). The didactic purpose of the miracle play is coincident with the didactic purpose of the miraculous showings stage-managed by Jesus in the course of the play's action: namely, to "knowlege [the audience] Þerwyth, Þat [they] may it beleve" (868). Dixon's juxtaposition of 'showing' with 'playing,' however, is not fully supportable in a 'play' that is itself a kind of 'showing' in which the audience is asked to witness representations of miracles, and in which the primary medium for this 'showing' is the actors' 'playing.' By focusing on the process of this playing and relating it to contemporary practices of affective piety, I hope to reveal the particular manner in which the actor playing Mary works as physiological medium through which the audience might come to a better knowledge of their God.

The play offers a variety of means to help the Christian believe. In her keynote paper at the PLS Saint's Play Festival, Theresa Colleti argued that the play, which is so much a part of the Catholic culture of affective piety, also engages with the iconoclastic attitudes emerging locally at the time; the use of visual media to inspire faith is set over the power of the written word, while at the same time the play exposes the interpretive difficulties arising from such use of visual symbols.[6] On one hand, Jesus says that the "joye Þat is in Jherusallem heuenly,/Can nevyr be compylyd be covnnyng of clerke" (805-6), undermining the efficacy of the word as a carrier of spiritual truth; on the other

hand, Colleti argued, the similarity between the rituals of Catholicism and the rituals of Marseilles's pagan temple raises serious questions about the validity of using material images to communicate spiritual truth. This argument opens up the complexity of the play's attitude to representational practices to excellent effect, but there is a further layer that can be added to her interpretation and that I believe is central to the conception of the play. There are three moments in the play where reference is made to the limited communicative power of the word and each of them relates to the articulation of emotion. When the resurrected Jesus has revealed himself to Mary, she says:

> Itt is innvmerabyll to expresse,
> Or for ony tong for to tell,
> Of my joye how myche itt is,
> So myche my peynnys itt doth excelle! (1100-1103)

The other two instances come from the mouth of Jesus himself. From heaven he praises his mother with an elaborate series of metaphors, but then says: "The goodnesse of my mothere no tong can expresse,/Nere no clerke of hyre, hyre joyys can wryth" (1364-5). Again it is the articulation of the emotion 'joy' that is beyond the capacity of clerks. Jesus' previous questioning of the power of words already mentioned above is worth quoting in full. He says:

> Of all infyrmyte, Þer is non to deth.
> For of all peynnys, Þat is impossyble
> To vndyrestond by reson; to know Þe werke,
> The joye Þat is in Jherusallem heuenly,
> Can nevyr be compylyd be covnnung of clerke –
> To se Þe joyys of Þe Fathyr in glory,
> The joyys of Þe Sonne whych owth to be magnyfyed,
> And of Þe Therd Person, Þe Holy Gost, truly,
> And all thre, but on in heuen gloryfyed! (802-10)

This implies that "joyys" can be *seen*, which supports Coletti's juxtaposition of words with images, but also that the pain of death and the joy of heaven are beyond words—they are "impossyble/To vndyrestond by reson." Knowing such joy and such pain requires more than the power of reason and the medium of language provide, which is an indicator that knowing sacred truth in this play is more than mere comprehending, it is a matter of *apprehending* the divine. In this play, to borrow the words of St. Anselm of Canterbury, words and reason can only take the faithful so far, and for a more profound knowledge of God, the play demands recourse to other media and to other faculties of human understanding.

The devotional practices of affective piety provided means for late medieval Christians to access the divine, and examination of these practices reveals that they also aimed for an emotional knowledge beyond the power of words. By meditating on books, objects, or images—relics, statues, paintings, or stained glass windows, for example—the Christian extended compassion towards Christ's suffering and thereby came to an affective understanding of his sacrifice. The level of lay engagement with such practices is debatable, but Gail McMurry Gibson's work on the religious culture of East Anglia suggests that their influence was pervasive. Gibson argues that the *Meditationes vitae Christi* translated by Nicholas Love was "probably the single greatest influence on lay

devotional life in England in the late Middle Ages" (21). The compassionate sympathy with Christ's suffering encouraged by the *Meditationes*, borne of quiet contemplation of the events of the gospel, represents the conservative end of a range of practices which can be collected under the headings of affective piety and *imitatio Christi*. Mere empathy, for example, is not enough for the East Anglian anchorite Julian of Norwich; she longed for a closer identification with Christ and those that were with him in his hours of tribulation:

> [M]ethought I had sume feleing in the passion of Christe, but yet I desired more be the grace of God. Methought I would have beene that time with Mary Magdalen and with other that were Christs lovers, and therefore I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour, and of the compassion of our Lady and of all His trew lovers that seene that time His peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with Him. Other sight ner sheweing of God desired I never none till the soule was departid fro the body. The cause of this petition was that after the sheweing I should have the more trew minde in the passion of Christe. (Crampton 39)

She identifies her longing first with Mary Magdalene, the protagonist of our play and the primary witness to Christ's resurrection. However, the real object of her desire is to share in Christ's suffering on the cross. She says that she already has "sume feleing in the Passion of Christe" but hopes that a "bodily sight" would lead her to have "the more trew minde in the passion of Christe." Although it may seem that feeling and understanding are juxtaposed, it is the fusion of the two that is typical of affective piety.

In her seminal work *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Walker Bynum warns that it is a mistake to understand late medieval religiosity in terms of a dualism between body and soul; the body was often in conflict with the soul, but it was also a means through which one could experience spiritual enlightenment.[7] Julian's longings, described above, suggest that a separation between reason and physical experience is also artificial in the context of late medieval religiosity. Julian wants to attain "more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour" and this knowledge involves more than a rational understanding—she longs to "suffer with Him." It is the vicarious experience of Christ's suffering that she hopes will bring her to "the more trew minde in the Passion of Christe." The knowledge she hopes to acquire is more than intellect alone can achieve: she longs for an affective experience of Christ's passion. What she receives is a series of visions or "sheweings", and it is apparent that the "bodily sight" is not simply the sight of Christ's body but her wish to "see" *with* her body, with her "carnall eye."

Another famous (or infamous) East Anglian mystic, Margery Kempe, also experiences such visions. A most striking example occurs during her pilgrimage to the holy land; the author describes how she was led with other pilgrims by friars carrying a cross, who told them how Christ had "suffered in every place."

> And the forseyd creatur wept and sobbyd so plentyuowsly as thow sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodyly ey sufferyng hys Passyon at that tyme. Befor hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplacyon, and that cawsyd hir to have compassyon. And when thei cam up onto the Mownt of Calvarye sche fel down that sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys

> abrode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as thow hir hert schulde a brostyn asundyr, for in the cite of hir sowle sche saw veryly and freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. Beforn hir face sche herd and saw in hir gostly sygth the mornyng of owyr Lady, of Sen John and Mary Mawdelyn, and of many other that lovyd owyr Lord. And sche had so gret compassyon and so gret peyn to se owyr Lordys peyn that sche myt not kepe hirself fro krying and roryng thow sche schuld a be ded therfor. (Staley 1568-79)

The writer distinguishes Margery's vision from actual sight of Christ's passion: Margery responds "*as thow* sche had seyn owyr Lord wyth hir bodyly ey [italics mine]" and he calls the vision a "ghostly sight." However, Margery's physical response as she writhed on the ground and stretched her arms out in imitation of the crucifixion was a corporeal witnessing of the suffering of Christ; through feeling and physicalizing Christ's pain, she found a form of knowledge akin to seeing. The physiological experience was a kind of knowing that is beyond words and the powers of reason.

For a contemporary actor such as myself, the comparison between this physical and emotional identification and the practice of my own craft is obvious and unavoidable. However, the nature of that identification and its significance to this paper is complex. Identification with one's role lies at the heart of most modern actor training. Working under the influence of Stanislavski and his many followers, actors are trained to "be" their character, as the popular saying goes, to "live" rather than act their role. In spite of the popular view of his work, however, through insistence on the primacy of the text, Stanislavski maintains focus on the representation of character rather than self-presentation by the actor. The kind of identification involved in his process, therefore, is distinct from the activities of the mystics cited above. For them, the issue is their own corporeal and emotional experience of Christ's suffering, rather than their ability to represent accurately Christ's suffering. The method actor is locked within Realism's fourth wall, in theory operating exclusively as a sign of something else within a fictive world. But the actor always remains an actor, and their physical presence has an unquestionable influence on the reception and understanding of the action in any play. Furthermore, many avant-garde theatre practitioners have chosen to stress this physical theatrical presence over the represented world of the drama. One such practitioner was the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski. In her paper, "Holy Theatre/Ecstatic Theatre," Mary E. Giles makes a compelling comparison between his work and the descriptions of the ecstasies of Sor Maria of Santo Domingo. She notes especially the "centrality of the body" to both forms of "performance" and the "interconnectedness of aesthetic and spiritual experience" (128). Giles's comparison offers new insight into the way in which an actor can operate as medium for sacred truth in religious drama. It demands a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the relationships between actor, role, and audience.

Grotowski wanted his theatre to be a "secular sacrum" populated by "holy" actors (49). Trained under the influence of Stanislavski, Grotowski wanted a theatre that moved beyond the representation of everyday reality or mere naturalness. The actor was not to play a role, rather he

> must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself. It is not a question of portraying himself under

> certain given circumstances, of 'living' a part; nor does it entail the distant sort of acting common to epic theatre and based on cold calculation. The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is behind our everyday mask—the innermost core of our personality—in order to sacrifice it, expose it (37).

The 'holy' actor is a "person who, through his art, climbs upon the stake and performs an act of self-sacrifice" (43). The site of this sacrifice is the actor's body. In fact, the holy actor is a "man who works in public with his body, offering it publicly." It is not acceptable if "this body restricts itself to demonstrating what it is," only through physical discipline and training can the 'holy' actor turn his body into "an obedient instrument capable of performing a spiritual act" (33). The 'holy' actor should not present his body to the audience in an egotistical display; such behavior is compared to that of a courtesan (34). However, if the actor "does not exhibit his body, but annihilates it, burns it, frees it from every resistance to any psychic impulse, then he does not sell his body but sacrifices it. He repeats the atonement; he is close to holiness" (34). The religious metaphors Grotowski uses to describe acting make the comparison with the medieval practice of *imitatio Christi* readily apparent. The 'holy' actor, who makes a "total gift of himself" (17) and performs an "act of self-sacrifice" (43) for the audience, *is like* Christ, he "repeats the atonement."

The comparison I am proposing is clearly facilitated by the fact that the goal of Grotowski's theatre was spiritual, and that, although he rejected his Roman Catholic heritage, his metaphors are all borrowed from religion. As he himself admitted, the aesthetic of his theatre was personal to him and specific to his cultural context. Grotowski's was a spiritual but secular theatre, and the purpose of the actor's atonement was different to the objective of a medieval mystic, or to Christ himself as imagined in the Gospels. The purpose of Grotowski's theatre has much in common with what we now call psychotherapy. Grotowski himself, however, felt the connection between his quest for a 'holy' theatre and theatre's historical roots. He writes:

> The theatre, when it was still part of religion, was already theatre: it liberated the spiritual energy of the congregation or tribe by incorporating myth and profaning or rather transcending it. The spectator thus had a renewed awareness of his personal truth in the truth of the myth, and through fright and a sense of the sacred he came to catharsis (22-23).

It is revealed here that the goal for Grotowski is a connection with "personal truth" rather than with the absolute or divine. And yet, although Grotowski was not a Christian believer, he still longed for something that could connect his secular and heterogeneous audience. He felt that the myths put forward by his culture had lost much of their power through association with specific and therefore limited orthodoxies, but that

> even with the loss of a 'common sky' of belief and the loss of impregnable boundaries, the perceptivity of the human organism remains. Only myth—incarnate in the fact of the actor, in his living organism—can function as a taboo. The violation of the living organism, the exposure

> carried to outrageous excess, returns us to a concrete mythical situation, an experience of common human truth (23).

The medieval mystics who fasted to the point of starvation, flagellated their own bodies, or cut themselves in imitation of Christ's stigmata, violated their "living organism[s]" to return them specifically to the "concrete mythical situation" of Christ's sacrifice, to experience what, to them, was the "common human truth," and to uncover the *imago dei* residing beneath their "everyday mask." The notion of the *imago dei* conflates personal and divine truth and adds validity to my comparison, even allowing for the fact that the divine was also distinct from the personal/corporeal in the medieval imagination.

Grotowski's understanding of the art of acting is profound and has proved broadly applicable, filtering through to actors today via such influential voice coaches as Patsy Rodenberg and Kristin Linklater.[8] The aesthetic goal of his own theatre was the psychic or spiritual penetration of actor and audience, but the central methodological problem he confronted was the creation of spontaneous repetition, that is the fundamental paradox of acting that is faced by theatre practitioners of all styles and genres. Grotowski states that the pragmatic goal of his training was to remove "the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction in such a way that the impulse is already an outer reaction. Impulse and action are concurrent" (16). The means to this pragmatic goal he calls the "*via negativa*" which is "not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks" (17). The attitude, or state of mind, required to achieve the spontaneous repetition of action is again comparable to the writings of medieval mystics. "The process," he says, "though to some extent dependent on concentration, confidence, exposure[...]is not voluntary. The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role," and the "decisive factor in this process is humility, a spiritual disposition: not to **do** something but to refrain from doing something, otherwise the excess becomes impudence instead of sacrifice" (17). The 'holy' actor, therefore, is not willful and proud, but humble and open to impulse, though like medieval mystics such as Margery Kempe the holy actor risks accusations of egotism and impudence. The "self-sacrifice" is both a (re)presentation of self and a destruction of self: self-centered and yet humble.

Sarah Beckwith argues that Margery Kempe's *imitatio* "engenders a porosity of identity, an exchange between Christ and Margery," which implies a merging of Margery and Christ, of actor and role, comparable to that described by Grotowski. However, she also suggests that Margery renegotiated her own "cultural position" through "identification and role-playing" (*Christ's Body* 83). This observation addresses the fact that Margery was able to liberate herself from patriarchal restrictions on her liberty, but it grants her more volition in the matter than she claims for herself and it implies that her spirituality was a pretence used to forge herself a more empowered social identity. Beckwith's reading of the text illuminates the complex significations of Margery's book in relation to late medieval religiosity, but it deliberately reads beyond the stated intent of her biographer who takes pains to establish that her visions and her crying that so amazed and annoyed her contemporaries were not self-generated, but were caused by the grace of God. Furthermore, the following description of an incidence of such crying articulates her visionary experience as a loss of identity rather than the assumption of an alternative identity, or role-play. At Leicester:

> sche behelde a crucyfyx was petewsly poyntyd and lamentabyl

> to beheldyn, thorw whech beheldyng the Passyon of owr Lord entryd hir mende, wherthorw sche gan meltyn and al to relentyn be terys of pyté and compassyown. Than the fyer of lofe kyndelyd so yern in hir hert that sche myth not kepyn it prevy, for, whedyr sche wolde er not, it cawsyd hir to brekyn owte wyth a lowde voys and cryen merveylowslyche and wepyn and sobbyn ful hedewslyche that many a man and woman wondryd on hir therfor. (2608-13)

The visionary experience as it is described is not willful—she cries "whedyr sche wolde er not." Furthermore, "al to relentyn be terys" is translated by the editor as "completely dissolve in" tears (2609-10), which implies the dissolution of self, rather than the assumption of a role. This notion of the loss of self is echoed in the writing of other medieval mystics. For example, James of Vitry, speaking of mystics in general wrote that: "Some of these women dissolved with such a particular and marvelous love toward God that they languished with desire and for years had rarely been able to rise from their beds. They had no other infirmity, save that their souls were melted with desire of him" (Qtd. in Bynum *Holy Feast*, 13).

Of course, we need not take Margery's (or her biographer's) understanding at face value. Beckwith's analysis responds to the sense of barely restrained egotism in Margery's book, a response that was shared by many of Margery's contemporaries. The crying described above, for example, led to a confrontation with Leicester's mayor and Margery was forced to defend herself from accusations of witchcraft and publicly affirm her identity as a devout Christian woman. The mystic or actor is always subject to the scrutiny of others, whose judgment of their "performance" may not match with their self-assessment. Furthermore, Beckwith makes it apparent that the articulation of Margery's visions in the book is highly variable and serves different purposes at different times. For the purposes of my argument, however, I want to focus on Margery's self-assessment of the nature of her crying at Leicester (albeit as it is reported by her biographer) as one valid and significant interpretation of her experience. In this conception, contemplation of the crucifix leads to a spontaneous expression of her pity and compassion for Christ's suffering that is not self-willed or voluntary, but is a kind of melting or dissolving of the self, a self-sacrifice, and Margery is thus comparable to Grotowski's holy actor.

Such compassionate identification with suffering is key to the successful performance of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. The play takes its leading characters through precipitous emotional journeys: Mary is told she will inherit her father's castle and then her father dies; she falls into a life of sin, repents, and is then saved; she is joyfully welcomed home by her brother Lazarus, who shortly thereafter dies, and is then resurrected. With little preparatory dialogue, Mary is repeatedly taken from joy to grief and back again and the text calls for an actor that can readily jump from one extreme emotional state to the next.[9] Documentary evidence makes it clear that acting and the production of plays at this time was generally an amateur occupation, and it is likely that this often resulted in what we would describe as amateurish acting. It is possible that medieval audience members did not demand or expect the levels of naturalism and emotional conviction we associate with good acting today, but evidence of audience reactions suggest that both of these qualities were highly appreciated at the time. John

R. Elliot has shown that medieval actors were also capable of high achievement and when admired they were most admired for verisimilitude and the emotional power of their performances. We have no means of knowing who took this role in the original performance; however, it is clear that familiarity with the devotional practices of affective piety would have been excellent preparation for whoever was chosen to perform the role, and it is important that we consider such a performance in the context of those practices.

The play of *Mary Magdalene* demands such a performance. Although it sustains interest through the series of spectacular happenings—the sins' assault on Mary's castle, Lazarus' resurrection, Christ's resurrection, the arrival of the ship, the destruction of the temple, and so on—it also requires a compelling performance from the actor playing the title role. In our production of *Mary Magdalene*, I cast the very talented Alex Breede in the leading role.[10] Working with Alex and helping her confront the difficulties of playing Mary provided the inspiration for this paper, illuminating as it did the potential for comparison between acting and the practices of affective piety. Alex and I were both excited by the fact that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* is a medieval "herstory." Mary begins as a dutiful noblewoman's daughter but is led into a life in sin by Lechery and Pride, with help from the other deadly sins. Through Christ's intercession she is rescued, and, after his death, becomes his disciple, embarking on an evangelical mission to Marseilles, where she destroys the pagan temple as a sign of God's power and converts the King and Queen to Christianity. Following this, attention shifts to the King and Queen who embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On their return, Mary leaves Marseilles to live out her days as a hermit in the desert, where, on her death, she is raised by angels into heaven. The destruction of the pagan temple, which seemed the climax of her power, was a major part of our attraction to the play. For much of our rehearsal process, Alex would call down the power of God with a righteous rage as if summoning power from within herself—and God's power became equivalent to her power as a woman and as an actress. This approach, however, created two related problems, the resolution of which was central to the development of her performance. The first problem was technical. As the date of the performance approached, her vocalization of this moment became increasingly forced. The second was a problem of textual interpretation. Mary's prayer at this moment is marked by humility, it starts: "Now, Lord of lordys, to Þi blyssyd name sanctificatt,/Most mekely my feyth I recummend" (1554-1555). As rehearsals progressed, the word "mekely" seemed increasingly incongruous with Alex's performance of the prayer.

Mary prays for a task.
Photo by Alexandra F. Johnston

We confronted the vocal issue by reference to Alex's voice training at York University.[11] Aside from long-standing vocal habits, of which she was relatively free, there are two major factors that block actors from the free use of their voices—anxiety and effort—and these are closely connected, as the actor's frequent response to anxiety about performance is to try harder, which leads to a forcing of the voice. The basic maxim of vocal training in the Linklater tradition taught at York is that you cannot *make* yourself use your voice

well, you have to *let* yourself. This principle is comparable to Grotowski's "*via negativa,*" the actor has to focus on removing the blocks, "not to **do** something, but to refrain from doing" (op. cit.) the things that are preventing his or her voice reaching full, open, and spontaneous expression. As the day of the performance approached, Alex's problems with her voice increased and for understandable reasons—we were performing outside on a small football field, between two buildings but still with relatively poor acoustics, and in competition with Toronto's downtown traffic.[12]

While our work on vocal technique no doubt helped her process, the resolution of the technical difficulties proved intimately connected to the interpretive issue: the nature of Mary's empowerment. I had insisted by this time that the prayer must be true to the text and therefore contain the meekness indicated by Mary's words. Alex resisted this direction as she wanted to restore and retain the feeling of empowerment she had felt in early rehearsals. In her defense, it is also clear that Mary *is* empowered at this moment in the play. The question therefore becomes: what is the nature of that empowerment? How can she be meek and empowered at the same time? These are the questions we confronted. In the end, inspiration came from a third party: the one professed Christian member of the cast, who was reading a book called *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Though contested as a theological text, its brief words on Mary Magdalene proved useful to our process. It reads: "The unique place that Magdalene occupies in the history of discipleship owes not to her mysterious love for Jesus but to the miraculous transformation that his love wrought in her life. She simply let herself be loved." Rather than *making* herself love Christ, allowing herself to be loved by Christ empowered Alex/Mary in a different way. The informing idea behind Mary's power then becomes "Jesus loves Mary," rather than "Mary loves Jesus." Mary becomes the humble object of Christ's love rather than the willful subject of her own love. In this interpretation, Mary's empowerment is contained by its dependence on (a male) God. Dixon, however, has argued convincingly that the identification of Christ's flesh as feminine tempers the relationship between power and gender in the play.[13] Our new sense of Mary's empowerment—while less independent and forceful—was much truer to the text and the cultural context in which it was created. Furthermore, the resolution of this interpretive issue also helped Alex overcome the vocal challenges of the role and this must be understood in relation to Grotowski's understanding of the art of acting. The "decisive factor" in the actor's process is "humility," and in allowing herself to be the object of Christ's love, Alex/Mary takes on a "passive readiness to realize an active role"—Grotowski's description of the requisite state for the actor which is not "voluntary". The re-conception of Mary's role as involving a "passive readiness," rather than voluntary self-assertion helped Alex resolve her vocal challenges. Her vocal power was released when she relieved herself and her character of the responsibility to *will* the performance.

The striking coincidence between actor and role, and between the actor's process and the character's journey, although it may have potential applicability to other medieval drama, is specific to this play and to the character of Mary. Alex's process as an actor mirrors the practices of medieval mysticism in which the mystic longed to know Christ through emotional identification. The mystic tries to be like Christ; Alex was trying to be like Mary. But since the play is Mary's *vita* in which the saint enacts the mystic's emotional identification with Christ, Alex's performance of the role also

involved emotional identification with a loving, suffering, and passive Christ, and this identification is a crucial part of the process itself. The humility, the self-penetration, the stripping away of worldly anxieties and fears, the passive readiness for inspiration: all render the actor, mystic, and saint as Christ-like. The extent and validity of this comparison is subject to question. Actors, of course, regularly fail to live up to Grotowski's ideal: they are prone to the same accusations of egotism and pride that were leveled at Margery Kempe. Furthermore, finding the state of passive readiness is enormously difficult and success is not guaranteed—an actor may be inspired one moment and yet force the next. There is also a matter of scale here that cannot be ignored. Alex's performance was in the style of psychological realism and is therefore distinct from the extreme physicalization and vocalization present in Grotowski's theatre and in the visionary performances of medieval mystics. In fact, Grotowski bears a similar relation to the majority of modern actors and to our own production as the medieval mystic bore to general populace of lay worshippers. However, I would argue that, issues of scale aside, the basic physiological experience of the actor playing Mary and the medieval mystic is profoundly similar. The difference lies in the possibility that the medieval mystic's performance might actually put them in contact with the divine

Of course, if the original performer was just such a mystic, or a lay person immersed in the practices of affective piety, it is possible to imagine a performance in which the actor and audience felt the divine presence in the body of the actor. Such a performance should be imagined not simply as a representation of Mary's life story but as a personal act of piety in itself. The performance was the thing; as well as being a sign of the thing. In her work on sacramentality in the York cycle, Sarah Beckwith argues that in sacramental theology "it is the change in the person, not the ritual object, that is the significant and transformative moment. Meaning is not located in the water of baptism but rather in the strenuous and attentive relationship toward it" ("*Sacrum Signum*" 266). It is therefore the change in the audience that is the "significant and transformative moment" in religious theatre, not the semiotics of the representation. In my conception, however, the actor playing Mary is both the subject and the object in the sacramental ritual of theatre. The actor's identification with the role, which I have argued is a dissolving of self as well as a self-presentation, is an act of piety produced in response to the "ritual object" of the text and it is the change in the actor's emotional state that is the initial "significant and transformative moment." The meaning, therefore, is contained in the actor's body that stands as sacramental substitute for the water of baptism. In performance, the actor's act of piety itself becomes a "ritual object" under the gaze of the audience, and it is then the change in the audience's emotions that becomes the "significant and transformative moment."

The actor can also be read as a sign in a process of signification intended to create a fictive world and lead to an articulable meaning, but my conception of performance in this essay exposes the limits of this approach, limits which are indicated by the play's own attitude towards words. It also challenges the criticism leveled at religious drama in the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleying*, namely that a miracle play is only a sign, not sign and deed as is the worship of God (Davidson 99).[14] The performance of Mary is also an act of worship, a deed in itself, and the audience responds not only to the representation of Mary's life but to the actor's affective engagement with that life. The actor playing

Mary is the intermediary between the audience and Mary Magdalene, in the same way that Mary Magdalene so often played the role of intermediary between worshipper and Christ's body in the imaginative life of late medieval religiosity. The performance can be subjected to semiotic analysis, but to do so is to obscure the heart of the play's mystery, which lies in the intersection between the actor and the role, between Alex and Mary. This is not to say that this play is not deeply concerned with the generation of meaning. As Theresa Colleti suggested, the play "encodes issues that were central to practice of representing the sacred in the religious theater of late medieval England"; word is juxtaposed with image, miracle with scripture. Mary calls down the fire from heaven so that God may "dyscus" his "rythwysnesse" (1561). However, this is also significantly a play in which Mary's "hert doth...dyscus"(892), and in performance its central sign is the affective performance by the actor playing Mary.

The audience, of course, cannot know within any degree of empirical certainty what the heart of the actor is discussing. The process of theatrical communication is not an exact science and the argument presented in this paper clearly does not remove the interpretive and theological problems surrounding the performance of religious drama, nor could it. In fact, our performance highlighted those problems, as much as it suggested the alternative response to them articulated above. My actors were largely atheists or agnostics and while they invested themselves emotionally in their characters they remained make-believers rather than believers. This validates the reservations voiced in the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleying* mentioned above. Christian audience members may have found my actors' performances edifying, perhaps even inspiring, but they were reading the performance through their own faith and not through the actors' act of faith. However, if we imagine a medieval performer in the role, steeped in the Christian faith, the actor's body becomes the central medium through which the play works its evangelical power. Beckwith argues that "the prime analogue of the sign is human corporeality itself, *in which*, not behind which, the spiritual 'interiority' of the person communicates, and it is theatre that can manifest the full sacramental complexity of this signification" ("*Sacrum Signum*" 278). The interpretive challenge presented by the actor as an iconic sign reflects sacramental theology which itself is founded on the "tension between outward form and inner thing, between sign and signified." The play cannot resolve this tension, and instead affirms the importance of a kind of sacramental knowing that is beyond the processes of the intellect or the power of words.

The prime reader of signs in the play is Jesus, who turns Mary's act of contrition into a lesson for his host Simon Leprous:

> But, Symont, behold Þis woman, in all wyse,
> How she wyth terys of hyr bettyr wepyng,
> She wassheth my fete and dothe me servyse,
> And annoytyt hem wyth onymentys, lowly knelyng,
> And wyth hur her, fayur and brygth shynnying,
> She wypeth hem agayn wyth good entent. (664-70)

Jesus reads her actions as signs of her "inward mythe" (687), but what is he reading? How does he know that she wipes his feet with "good entent"? The text makes it clear that Mary is relying on Jesus' special knowledge of her spiritual interiority. She approaches him to ask forgiveness, saying: "Thow knowyst my hart and thowt in especyal" (639),

and it is Jesus' privileged access to the heart of Mary that makes him the prime reader of signs in this play. Following the exorcism of the seven devils, Mary reiterates the point saying: "My thowt Þou knewyst wythowttyn ony dowth" (696). Jesus can look beyond exterior signs to find the affective meaning hidden in the hearts and minds of his subjects: he can see the "inner thing" hidden within the "outward form."

In the center of the play, at a point where most modern editors place an intermission, stands the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection. The written text cannot do justice to the power of this sequence in performance. The stage direction tells us that "*Here all Þe pepull and ze Jewys, Mari and Martha, wyth one woys sey Þes wordys: 'We beleve in yow, Savyowr, Jhesus, Jhesus, Jhesus*'" with the implication that the audience might participate in the praise. In our production, the entire cast assembled as mourners and spoke the lines in unison. The technique was simple and the effect surprisingly powerful, which, in spite of the fact that the actors were not believers, could be experienced as a public and heartfelt affirmation of faith. Jesus responds to this by saying: "Of yower good hertys I have advertacyounys,/Wherethorow in soul, holl made ye be." The line is ostensibly addressed to the characters in the play, but by implication the words apply to the other witnesses of the miracle—the actors and the audience. Jesus has "advertacyounys," or observations, of their "good hertys." It is therefore not merely their verbal testament of faith, nor what they see with their eyes, which is mere representation, but what they see with their bodies, what they feel, that is significant to the Jesus of the play. It is the actors' and audience's bodily sight that is a testament of faith (or not, as the case may be). Within the play, the problem of the authenticity of signs is resolved by the deity's ability to perceive faith in the heart of the participants: the difference between sign and deed becomes significant only in the personal relationship between the participants and the play's knowing God.

Notes

1. This and all subsequent references to the *Play of Mary Magdalene* are from Baker, Murphy and Hall, *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodeleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*. The full text of the Oxford Bodleian Digby *Mary Magdalene* (MS 133) is available online at http://image.ox.ack.uk/list?collection=bodleian.

2. The cultural environment in which the play is produced is explored in detail in Gail McMurray Gibson's *The Theatre of Devotion*.

3. In his paper, "'zu clepist Mary Mawdelyn in-to zi sowle to wolcomyn me': The Veneration of Mary Magdalen in Late Medieval East Anglia," Victor Scherb gave detailed evidence of the range of functions Mary played in late medieval East Anglian art and literature. She was the "exemplar of penitence," "patron to the sick," "model of grief" and "herald of spiritual joy" in addition to fulfilling her role as apostle to the apostles. I would like to thank Victor for providing me with a copy of his paper for use in preparation of this article. For an exploration of the significance of this important Christian saint in Europe as a whole, see Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of Magdalene* and Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*.

4. Scherb establishes the many ways in which the playwright adapts his sources in order to focus attention on Mary as a preacher. In the sources, for example, Mary escapes the Holy Land with many other disciples on a boat and is blown to Marseilles by chance. In the play, Christ sends his angels directly to Mary with specific instructions for an evangelical mission to Marseilles.

5. Although this to my mind is the most significant interpretation, there are other valid ways to understand the rationale behind the Caesar-Herod-Pilate triumvirate. John W. Velz argues that the playwright is juxtaposing secular power with spiritual power in his article: "Sovereignty in the Digby *Mary Magdalene,*" while Theresa Coletti notes that the motif of banqueting, started in Caesar's opening scene, is part of the play's exploration of bodily and spiritual nourishment in "The Design of the Digby Play of *Mary Magdalene*." In his recent article, "The Meaning of the Digby *Mary Magdalene,*" Jacob Bennett argues that an understanding of Marian theology gives the play its unity. His article illuminates some of the more obscure and confusing passages of the play, but there is no clear relationship between Marian theology and the words of Caesar and his cronies. The Marian influence therefore cannot be said to give unity to the play as a whole. Ultimately the play is not to be admired for its aesthetic unity but for the breadth of its vision and the depth of its involvement with the complex theology surrounding the figure of Magdalene.

6. I would like to thank Theresa Coletti for providing me with a copy of her paper presented at the Saints' Play Festival, a revised version of which has been published in her new book: *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England*. All references are to this edition. Her approach to the play was informed by the work of Sarah Beckwith on the York Cycle (*Sacrum Signum* and *Signifying God*) and Beckwith's work stands as an important influence on this paper.

7. "The goal of religious women was[...]to realize the opportunity of physicality. They strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation" (*Holy Feast* 246). Mimi Still Dixon's article cited above explores the deep relationship between female spirituality as described in Bynum's book and the play of *Mary Magdalene*. This issue is also explored by Susannah Milner in her article "Flesh and Food: The Function of Female Asceticism in the Digby *Mary Magdalene.*" My concern is with the nature of the physiological experience implied by the mystics' texts and not with the specific connection between this experience and gender.

8. Their approach has been disseminated by their work with voice coaches and actors in theatre schools across the world. They have both reluctantly recorded their physiological methods in words: see Kristin Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, and Patsy Rodenburg, *The Actor Speaks: Voice and the Performer*.

9. The same is true of for the King of Marseilles, who experiences a storm at sea, the birth of his son, and the death of his wife within twenty lines or so. Lazarus and Martha

also go on comparable emotional roller coasters. It is worth noting, however, that the arguments I am making about the significance of medieval acting are only applicable to such roles, and are most significant to the role of Mary, whose journey in the play, conforming as it does to the pattern of the saints' *vita,* itself imitates the life of Christ. The nature of the process for the actors playing the devils and other representatives of evil and its relationship to their lives as practicing Christians could be a fruitful area of study, but such work lies beyond the scope of this paper.

10. Alex is young and relatively inexperienced, but brought a powerful performance of Medea to the audition, proving she was well equipped to pull off Mary's life-in-sin and her later empowerment when she destroys the pagan temple. A subsequent recall audition revealed a youth and innocence belied by her performance in the role of Medea that would clearly work well for Mary's younger days.

11. Alex had worked with Antonio Ocampo-Guzman, who is now Assistant Professor in performance at Florida State's School of Theatre.

12. I would like to extend my gratitude to David Klausner for his useful workshop on the use of the voice in open-air performances and particularly for his tip on using windows as sounding boards.

13. Mimi Still Dixon's article cited above, develops compelling arguments about the play's relationship with specifically feminine forms of late medieval spirituality. Using Bynum's analysis in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Dixon shows how the identification of Christ's flesh as feminine, tempers the relationship between power and gender in the play.

14. The relationship between the treatise and devotional drama has been challenged by Lawrence M. Clopper, most recently in his article "Is the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* A Lollard Tract Against Devotional Drama?" I do not wish to engage with his arguments in this paper and proceed only in the presumption that the *Tretise* could be referring to devotional drama, and that its relationship with such works leads us to interesting arguments about a contemporary understanding of them.

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