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Book review - Theresa Coletti: Mary Magdalene and the drama of saints: theater, gender, and religion in Late Medieval England

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THERESA COLETTI: *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

Theresa Coletti's *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints* is a persuasively argued and rigorously researched study that examines the late medieval English career of medieval Christianity's "other Mary." Coletti argues for the significance of the figure of Mary Magdalene within traditions of medieval insular piety dating back to Bede, and more specifically within vernacular East Anglian culture of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Taking as her main focus the early sixteenth-century Digby saint play *Mary Magdalene*, Coletti succeeds in demonstrating the many striking ways in which "late medieval East Anglia's feminine religious culture and commitment to sacred drama coalesce in the figure of Mary Magdalene" (228).

Without getting side-tracked into discussing the many permutations of continental veneration of Mary Magdalene, Coletti deftly draws out the vital ways in which the Digby *Mary Magdalene* reproduced traditional tropes from the saint's legends but also, importantly, distinguished itself from other late medieval representations of this polyvalent figure. In this respect she casts her intertextual net widely but judiciously, focusing on sensitive comparative readings of the play alongside a range of English and regional texts, such as Osbern Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Julian of Norwich's *Showings*, and, in one of the book's most compelling conjunctions, Walter Hilton's contemplative manual *The Scale of Perfection*. In this way Coletti convincingly argues for Mary Magdalene as a figure of idiosyncratic local valency, rather than an emblem of universal humanity.

The heroine of the Digby *Magdalene* is also carefully contextualized within the social and material culture of late East Anglia. Coletti presents us with a culture in which hospitals, pious laywomen, recluses, and Lollards all claimed their own privileged attachments to, and inheritance from, Mary Magdalene. She also present us with a culture whose visual and material artefacts reveal a unique regional devotion to Mary Magdalene as a preacher and a contemplative as well as an embodiment of lay, vernacular devotion. This approach is best served in Coletti's gender-sensitive analysis of vernacular devotional theatre and its ideological and social role as "a learned theatre of theological argument in which the medium itself is implicated in the theater's sacred and profane investments" (229). In this examination of theatre's role as a medium for the East Anglian preoccupation with the role of femininity and the body in devotion, Coletti further elaborates the picture of the East Anglian "incarnational aesthetic" developed by Gail McMurray Gibson in her influential study *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (1989).

The examination of Mary Magdalene's transgressive potential is weighed even-handedly against the more conservative elements of her representation: her alignment with Marian discourse and iconography, for instance, is presented as both authorizing and domesticating. Coletti demonstrates that this unsettling conjunction of orthodoxy and heterodoxy is entirely consistent with late medieval East Anglian devotional culture. Through the particular example of Mary Magdalene, she adds another dimension to the larger portrait painted by Murray and others of late medieval East Anglia as a locus of a "dynamic, conflicted religious culture" (4).

The book concludes with a reflection on the post-medieval search for the "authentic" Mary Magdalene, not only within sixteenth-century polemics, but also within contemporary feminist scholarship. Its final paragraphs point to the perpetuation of the saint's legacy in contemporary films such as Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, suggesting that her volatile embodiment of sexuality and sanctity makes her a figure of continuing significance today.

In the early chapters, Coletti's contextualization of the Digby play within East Anglian devotional practice does occasionally work at the expense of discussing the play itself. In chapter 2, for instance, a single stage direction from the play, in which the three Marys enter "arayyd as chast women" launches a lengthy excursus into ideologies of chastity, and other representations of Mary Magdalene in East Anglia that, while thorough and illuminating, only returns us briefly to the play at the very end. The reader is left to work out retrospectively the play's place in the complex cultural picture that has been painted, a task which would be particularly challenging to those unfamiliar with the play, as no general outline the play's content is given. This is more than made up for, however, in the later chapters, which weave sensitive and inventive close readings of the play into plausible

contextualizations. The slightly disorienting effect in the early chapters, is my only mild criticism of a lucid and assured study that ingeniously uses a single figure to tease out the very particular vitality of East Anglian religion and society in the late Middle Ages.

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