
Theresa Coletti’s impressive book not only presents a stunning reading of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, but also reshapes the field of medieval drama studies by reading dramatic texts as a “species of vernacular theological writing,” and by introducing gender into the discussions of East Anglian culture and of sacramental theatricality that have preoccupied recent drama scholars. Coletti shifts focus from Mary Magdalene’s more modern association with fallen female sexuality and conversion to her medieval identity as contemplative, divine witness, and female preacher. She demonstrates that Mary Magdalene was at the center of late medieval debates about the sources of spiritual authority, “symbolically mediat[ing] cultural tensions between masculine and feminine religious authority; institutional and individual modes of spiritual expression; authorized and unauthorized forms of revelation and sacred speech” (5). Coletti’s book joins recent scholarship in rejecting typological and eschatological approaches to hagiography, arguing instead for a “culturally specific” Mary Magdalene who participated in a feminine religious culture of East Anglia, a culture evident not only in the Digby play at the center of the book, but also in the impressively wide range of materials discussed, such as texts by Osbern Bokenham, Margery Kempe, and Julian of Norwich, and dramas such as the N-Town Mary play, and the iconography of East Anglian parish churches. In its interest in visual and material culture, its meticulous attention to local genealogies of patronage, and its focus on a specifically East Anglian dramatic and religious culture that blended lay and monastic pieties, the book shows the influence of Gail McMurray Gibson’s *Theater of Devotion*. But in contrast to the work of Gibson and others, Coletti puts dramatic
texts in dialogue with major devotional works, intervening in conventional literary history which has tended to isolate medieval drama from mainstream tradition and suggesting a new account of the history of vernacular English literature that speaks to the importance of feminized, performative devotional reading practice in addition to a Chaucer-centered laureate tradition. Coletti’s book deftly complicates scholarship on the femininization of Christ and the connection between female devotion and affective piety. In a characteristically nuanced and incisive account, Coletti argues that gender is crucial to the Digby play “not because the drama seeks to model female behavior, but rather because the play associates femininity with a spiritual ideal that was broadly available in late medieval culture” (134). *The Drama of Saints* both illuminates the role of Mary Magdalene in East Anglian religious culture and contributes significantly to our understanding of late medieval female and feminine piety. In Chapter One, Coletti outlines methodological problems associated with the study of the Digby manuscript, which contains the two sole surviving examples of the saint’s play, both of which have carried the burden of defining the genre. Instead of seeing the Digby play as paradigmatic of a genre, or emblematic of a transhistorical realm of Christian values, Coletti advocates reading the play as “exceptional,” recognizing its participation in the construction of social and political power. Historical and material referents can be elusive however, since, as is often the case with East Anglian drama, few pieces of information link the Digby play to a particular place, person, or time, although the play can be assigned to East Anglia on the basis of dialect. In the last part of this chapter, Coletti makes the fascinating suggestion that the play’s images of sickness and healing, its mingling of material and spiritual values, and its preoccupation with charity “resonate with the spiritual ideology and activities of the late medieval hospital” (39).

Drawing on a wide range of texts and images, Chapter Two argues for a distinctively East Anglian tradition of female
piety epitomized by the figure of Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene's example "bound together" the penitence and asceticism that were central attributes of late medieval women's traditional and alternative religious vocations" (53). Comparing the iconography of the west Norfolk church of Wiggenhall St. Mary the Virgin to the Prologues to Osbern Bokenham's legends, Coletti argues that both can be located in "East Anglian networks of religious patronage and lay dedication to the eremitic, feminine spiritual ideals [...]" (73). For recluse Julian of Norwich, Mary Magdalene underscored experiential knowledge and was an emblem of a corporeal theology of penance, while for Margery Kempe, Mary Magdalene was a "symbolic signature" for "unresolved tensions between the spiritual and the corporeal" (98). Finally, Coletti argues that the Digby play, like Hilton's Scale of Perfection, parallels the experience of its saintly heroine with the contemplative's progress toward perfection; her affective and contemplative example offered a spiritual model to devout late medieval religious and lay people of both sexes. This chapter also examines the Digby Mary Magdalene in light of visionary and charismatic women whose example and experience evidence late medieval preoccupations with gender and authority, arguing that the play capitalizes on the propensity of late medieval holy women to invoke Mary Magdalene's example to authorize their own spiritual acts. In depicting Mary Magdalene as a preacher, Coletti argues, the play invokes the terms of contemporary debates focused on feminine access to public spiritual authority.

Chapter Three argues that the dramatist emphasized Mary Magdalene's mystical and contemplative authority rather than her penitential biography. The Digby play, like Hilton's Scale of Perfection, parallels the experience of its saintly heroine with the contemplative's progress toward perfection; her affective and contemplative example offered a spiritual model to devout late medieval religious and lay people of both sexes. This chapter also examines the Digby Mary Magdalene in light of visionary and charismatic women whose example and experience evidence late medieval preoccupations with gender and authority, arguing that the play capitalizes on the propensity of late medieval holy women to invoke Mary Magdalene's example to authorize their own spiritual acts. In depicting Mary Magdalene as a preacher, Coletti argues, the play invokes the terms of contemporary debates focused on feminine access to public spiritual authority.

In Chapter Four, Coletti focuses on the depiction of Christ's nativity and resurrection in the Digby play to explore
the sustained conflation of
the characteristics of Mary
Magdalene and the Virgin
Mary, a comparison familiar
from exegetical and spiritual
traditions. Coletti argues for a
contrast between the depiction
of gender in the earthly realm,
where conservative domestic
values are maintained, and the
spiritual realm where there is “a
salvific crossing of [gender] roles
and attributes” (168). In contrast
to recent scholarly accounts
emphasizing a feminized
late medieval Christ, Coletti
describes the Digby Magdalene
as the “saintly counterpart of
a Christ who is constituted as
a masculine Godhead and a
feminine manhood and endows
[. . . ] [her] [. . . ] with the
masculine functions of preacher,
teacher, governor and spiritual
guide” (189).

Chapter Five adds gender to
recent considerations of the
sacramentality of late medieval
theater to make the fascinating
claim that the Digby saint can
be seen as “a condensed figure
for the drama itself” since the
late medieval identities of Mary
Magdalene are informed by the
same tensions between spiritual
and physical, human and divine

that dominate a sacramental
aesthetic. Like the Chester
Antichrist, the Digby Magdalene
is a “hagiographical theater of
visual and experiential proof”
(191) that self-consciously
critiques the reliability of
dramatic images as a source of
sacred knowledge. Dramatic
versions of the resurrection in
the English Biblical cycles and
in Digby “inscribe the defining
moment of Christian belief [. . . ]
as a feminine, physical encounter
with the sacred” (209).

Mary Magdalene and the Drama
of Saints strikes a balance
between a thick description
of East Anglian religious
culture and careful readings of
individual texts and images.
Although its primary focus is on
the Digby play and the figure
of Mary Magdalene, the book
is a significant contribution to
drama studies, to scholarship
on feminine and female
constructions of medieval
piety, and more broadly to our
understanding of vernacular
English literature.

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