

Lady, Hero, Saint: The Digby Play's Mary Magdalene, by Joanne Findon.
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In *Lady, Hero, Saint: The Digby Play's Mary Magdalene*, Joanne Findon considers the various ways that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play reflects and inflects its contemporary literary contexts. She offers four interpretive chapters that examine the play's relationship to lyric poetry, medieval romance, comedy, and gendered spaces, along with an introduction outlining important contexts and intertexts and an appended summary of the play. Detailed and well researched, Findon's close analysis of a dense text, too often overlooked, is a welcome addition to the recent resurgence of the study of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century drama.

The lengthy introduction to this work ambitiously sets out to provide an expansive background of literary and cultural history to which Findon's analysis will return periodically. Included in this introduction are a valuable contextualization of the play within East Anglian socioeconomic history and an insightful analysis of contemporary female audiences. The strongest moments here demonstrate an adept integration of textual analysis and literary history, as in the middle of the chapter, where Findon discusses the portrayal of tyrants in the play and their analogous contemporaries. However, some contexts are surprisingly brief and feel disconnected from her focus on close textual interpretations. The section on fifteenth-century English writing, for example, dwells only momentarily on such prolific and influential writers as John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve; the whole of East Anglian drama is similarly covered in an unexpectedly concise fashion. Nevertheless, the introduction maps out the contemporary complexities that underlay later interpretations of the text.

The first chapter contextualizes the Digby *Mary Magdalene* within contemporary lyric poetry. Findon's readings rely on a vast and well researched set of intertexts from which she is able to draw a number of astute conclusions. The chapter unpacks "multivalent" images of the natural world, including flora, arbors, jewels, and animal imagery that Findon argues are used by the Digby playwright to destabilize "conventions and stereotypes about women, femininity, and even heroism" (57). The chapter covers a wide range of lyric moments and might leave some readers wishing that the author had limited her examples to more thorough readings of only the most significant intertexts. Nevertheless, helpful headings will direct readers to the most relevant sections wherein they will find a wealth of complex and interrelated texts, both secular and religious.

The second chapter, “Arbours and Ships: Intersections with Medieval Romance,” offers insightful readings of *Mary Magdalene’s* reimagining of these two key romance motifs, which Findon suggests subvert the generic expectations of the East Anglian audience by challenging prototypical representations of passive romance women and offering an “active model of Christian womanhood” (120). After a brief introduction to romance conventions and “memes,” the focus of the chapter is divided equally between images of women in gardens/arbors and abandoned on the sea. The chapter explores the relationship(s) between the Digby play and a number of contemporary romances, but is also attentive to the changes that have been made from its sources and the well recognized interplay between the genres of romance and saints lives. The argument is bookended by a brief consideration of the audience of both the play and medieval romance and the “horizon of expectations” that such an audience might have brought to its understanding and reception of the Mary Magdalene play.

The third chapter, “Fantasy Women and Lustful Men: The Function of Comedy,” is the most problematic and structurally unsound for me. Findon’s ability to weave together a multitude of disparate texts—such an asset in the other chapters—breaks down in this chapter. While some of the sections present fruitful readings of particular scenes, the chapter takes on too many individual moments and devolves into a collection of interesting observations, never quite coming together to present a unified reading. This chapter addresses the role of comedy in mediating tensions stemming from social hierarchies (in representations of humorous mariners), religious corruption (in fabliaux representations of the pagan temple), and gender (by mocking masculine desire). Her readings are valuable and the observations made in this chapter could likely constitute a full book itself, if fully developed. There is great potential in her claim that the comedy in the play “performs important cultural work in staging social tensions within a culture marked by increasing social, political, economic, religious and literary fluidity,” but such broad claims simply cannot be fully explored in a single monograph chapter.

The final chapter, “The Poetics of Gendered Space,” will likely be of greatest interest to the readers of *Medieval Feminist Forum*. In this chapter, Findon breaks from the previous chapters’ focus on particular genres of writing. Rather than piecing together a mosaic of intertextual tesserae, this chapter concentrates more attentively on the Digby play, offering a thorough examination of the manipulation of concrete and liminal spaces in the play. The argument of this chapter centers on Mary’s ability to move between and within the *locus* (scaffold) and *platea* (arena) staging, the fluidity of which Findon argues “suggests the

flexibility of the female protagonist who can cross boundaries between private and public, innocence and experience, and survive to move into a new phase of life” (169). The chapter provides new and valuable readings of the relationships between gendered performances and gendered spaces in *Mary Magdalene* and skillfully ties those readings to current trends in the scholarship of medieval literature and drama.

I believe the wide range of readings and intertexts (along with the helpful play summary) will make this text most valuable for students and those just beginning to study the Digby play, while more established scholars will find much to be gained from Findon’s attention to particular tropes, “memes,” and images. Overall, this book will likely open up further readings of an important, but undervalued, play. It offers readers of medieval literature a worthwhile resource that expands on the growing body of scholarship discovering that depictions of gender in medieval literature, and particularly in medieval drama, are far more complex and vital than early scholars might have given them credit for.

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