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Blazoning Mary Magdalene

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Mary Magdalene is a significant figure in the Christian world, largely due to her unique relationship with Christ. As a woman and a reformed prostitute, the Magdalene is an unlikely friend to the son of God. However, despite her low social status and sinful past, Mary is featured in all four Gospels and is present at several crucial moments in Christ's life and death: she anoints his feet as a sign of humbleness, witnesses his crucifixion and is the first to see his resurrection, after which she leaves society to lead a contemplative life in the desert. As patron saint of repentant sinners and the contemplative life, Mary Magdalene was an aspirational figure in late medieval piety, and the subject of many religious paintings and statues. There were Magdalene cults in Europe from as early as the sixth century, with interest at its peak in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries (Jansen, 18-48). Consequently, accounts of Mary's life took on an almost mythical quality, with apocryphal texts such as Jacobus de Voraigne's influential *The Golden Legend* drawing together the stories of several biblical women. This is evident in the Digby manuscript Magdalene play written around 1490-1530, which conflates Mary as the apostle of the Apostles, with Mary sister of Martha and the woman who has devils exorcised from her by Christ. As well as using scriptural references, the Digby Magdalene also draws heavily on Jacobus to create a narrative of the Magdalene's entire life.

As an embodiment of titillating sinner, penitent and intimate of Christ, the Magdalene came to symbolise ideal feminine piety. Her dramatic repentance and tears at Christ's suffering align her with the very physical and emotional expression of faith often referred to as affective piety. This is evident in late medieval images of the Magdalene, which play upon her golden hair and curvaceous form; typically identifying her as scantily clad, with tearful eyes cast heavenward (Haskins, 229-270). Mary's physicality is mirrored in her closeness to Christ: she anoints his body in life and death, and also the first to witness his true self in the resurrection. This perhaps suggested to the devout that they too could shape their spiritual destiny through mortal acts and gestures. Her feminine softness and her ability to cross borders between the human with the divine meant that she was a popular figure of intercession, frequently called upon in prayer to

speed requests to God. The physicality associated with the Magdalene perhaps also led medieval worshippers to regard her as an active instigator of change, a saint who would respond to pleas.

It is not surprising, then, that the popular conception of the Magdalene underwent serious attack during the Reformation. Those who believed fiercely in *sola scriptura* (literally “scripture alone”; a belief pioneered by Martin Luther that Christian doctrine should be based purely on what is written in the scriptures) were alarmed by elaborately embellished accounts of the saint’s life, and deemed the brightly painted and lovingly dressed wooden statues idolatrous. The feminine softness and intimacy of faith that Catholics had come to love in the Magdalene image appeared blasphemous to Reformers who believed that God was too great to be comprehended. Mary could not simply be written out of the scriptures, however, and her vivacious medieval conception had to be negotiated and written anew by Reformation theologians.

Lewis Wager’s play *The Life and Repentaunce of Marie Magdalene* is perhaps the strongest example we have of an English playwright taking on the medieval Magdalene. Entered into the stationer’s register in 1566 and written some time before Wager’s death in 1562, the play is one of the latest examples we have of an English saint play and has a very strong Calvinist influence. In this paper I will explore how Wager uses the poetic conceit of the blazon to diffuse the implications of the Magdalene’s corporeality and re-identify her within Reformation theology.

The blazon is a poetic conceit that became popular in the sixteenth century, and features most commonly in love poetry. In a typical blazon, the poet catalogues his mistress’ features one by one, his roving words travelling around her face, through her hair and down her body. As Nancy Vickers has succinctly noted, “it is, in large part, the product of men talking to men about women” (96). The effect of the blazon can clearly be seen in the following sonnet from Spenser’s *Amoretti*:

“Comming to kisse her lyps, (such grace I found)
Me seemd I smelt a gardin of sweet flowres:

That dainty odours from them threw around
for damzels fit to decke their louers bowres.
Her lips did smell lyke vnto Gillyflowers,
Her ruddy cheekes lyke vnto Roses red:
Her snowy browes lyke budded Bellamoures,
Her louely eyes lyke Pincks but newly spread,
Her goodly bosome lyke a Strawberry bed,
Her neck lyke to a bounch of Cullambynes:
Her brest lyke lillyes, ere theyr leaues be shed,
Her nipples lyke yong blossomd lessemynes:
Such fragrant flowres doe giue most odorous smell,
But her sweet odour did them all excell.” (*Sonnet 64*)

Here the poet transforms his mistress’ body into an elaborate garden, allowing him to express sensual pleasure through a chaste veil of floral similes. At the same time, however, the poet’s imagination transforms a simple kiss into a space where he is free to roam his lover’s entire body: “Me seemd I smelt a gardin of sweet flowers.”

The blazon can also be used to a more artificial effect, where the resulting feminine image is often eerily distorted and unhuman:

“Queen Virtue's court, which some call Stella's face,
Prepar'd by Nature's choicest furniture,
Hath his front built of alabaster pure;
Gold in the covering of that stately place.

The door by which sometimes comes forth her Grace
Red porphir is, which lock of pearl makes sure,
Whose porches rich (which name of cheeks endure)
Marble mix'd red and white do interlace.

The windows now through which this heav'nly guest

Looks o'er the world, and can find nothing such,
Which dare claim from those lights the name of best,

Of touch they are that without touch doth touch,
Which Cupid's self from Beauty's mine did draw:
Of touch they are, and poor I am their straw." (Philip Sidney, *Sonnet 9*)

Here the chaste mistress' face is transformed into the inanimate facade of a building, made of beautiful but cold stone. We can read patriarchal objectification of the female here, but also an unsettling superficiality, as if the beautiful facade is never intended to be breached and the "heav'nly guest" at the windows is but a spectre.

Modern critics such as Vickers generally understand the blazon to disarm the threat of feminine beauty by taking it to pieces and translating it into a series of inanimate - albeit beautiful - objects. These pieces are reassembled into an unattainable and distinctly synthetic fiction that bears almost no resemblance to a real woman, thus protecting the male protagonist from his own desire. One might expect that Wager would use the form to launch a veiled attack on the Magdalene's corporeality, simultaneously praising her as a saint whilst disarming the allure of that dangerous body. Yet, Wager's blazon reveals itself to be unconventional and complex, its stereotypical form hiding a remarkably dextrous manipulation of the Magdalene's identity.

Wager deploys the blazon at the play's key turning point: the moment of Mary's repentance. In this version of the Magdalene story, an orphaned and rather vain Mary is singled out and befriended by a group of devils in the form of vices, who urge her into prostitution. After some scandalous plotting by the devils and a suggestive pun or two, Knowledge of Sin is awoken in Mary when she hears the voice of the Law condemning her. Hearing her remorse, Christ arrives to offer Mary salvation. He drives the devils from her and then gives her "Faith and Repentance... with all other vertues to thy health requisite" (l.1329-1330). At this moment of salvation it is not Mary who speaks, but Repentance himself. His is the longest speech in the play so far, and incorporates the all important blazon:

“As thus, like as the eyes haue ben vaynly spent
Upon worldly and carnall delectations,
So henceforth to wepyng and teares must be bent,
And wholly giuen to godly contemplations.
Likewise as the ears haue ben open always
To here the blasphemying of Gods holy name,
And fylthy talkyng euermore night and day,
Nowe they must be turned away from the same.
And glad to heare the Gospell of saluation,
How God hath mercy on them that doe call,
And how he is full of pitie and miseration;
Raisying vp suche agayne as by synne dyd fall.
The tong which blasphemie hath spoken,
Yea and filthily, to hurt of soule and body:
Whereby the precepts of God haue ben broken,
Must hence forth praise God for his mercy daily.
Thus like as all the members in tymes past,
Haue ben seruantes of vnrighteousnesse and synne,
Now Repentance doth that seruice away cast,
And to mortifie all his lustes doth begynne.
True repentance neuer turneth backe agayn:
For he yt laieth his had on the plough, & loketh away,
Is not apt in the kingdom of heauen to raigne,
Nor to be saued with my saintes at the last day.” (l.1355-1378)

Perhaps the first thing to notice here is that Wager’s blazon is instructive rather than descriptive; the transformation is internal and moral rather than bodily and visible. As Grant Williams has noted, the conventional blazon is an “exclusively figurative phenomenon” that uniquely acknowledges poetic language as signifier and strives to convert it into something tangible (46). It is this quality of bodying forth the absent mistress that so lends the blazon to the erotic - the reader gorges on rich sensory

experience in place of the body he cannot touch. Wager, however, denies Mary Magdalene her physicality by describing what repentant eyes, ears and tongues “must be” (l.1362). In what should be a moment of glorious figurative embodiment, Mary is forced into a transitional state, and becomes lost in the gap between previous sin and imminent piety.

Mary’s body, that controversial object of idolatry, is thus not in the speech at all. After he has exorcised her of the devils, Christ tells Mary “Behold Faith and Repentance to thee here I geue, With all other vertues to thy health requisite” (l.1329-1330), yet as soon as the figure of Repentance speaks he effaces her with this weirdly disembodied blazon. With Mary lost between the grammar of past and future, Repentance’s speech is inevitably about ideal repentance rather than the eponymous heroine. As each body part is catalogued and adjusted to a suitably pious position, Repentance becomes increasingly assertive in his role as subject matter. This culminates in the striking rhyme of the speech’s closing four lines:

“True repentance neuer turneth backe agayn:
For he yt laieth his had on the plough, & loketh away,
Is not apt in the kingdom of heauen to raigne,
Nor to be saued with my sainctes at the last day.” (l.1375-1378)

The biblical reference to Luke 9.62 adds gravity to Repentance’s closing words, and impresses on the reader a strong sense of there being no turning back. Like the man in the scripture of this reference, who cannot say goodbye to his family before setting off with Christ and the Apostles, the pious reader cannot look back to the old familiar Magdalene figure.

In keeping with this transformation of Mary and the act of repentance, the old Catholicism must also become something new. Earlier in his speech, whilst building up to the blazon, Repentance sets out a program of transformation that perhaps applies as much to the old Catholicism as it does to repentance:

“.... All the inward thoughts of the hart

And all the imaginations of the mynde,
Which were occupied euill by Sathans arte,
Must hence forth be turned after an other kynde.” (1.43-46)

The “inward thoughts of the hart” and “imaginations of the mynde” can here perhaps be read as a reference to the affective piety of late medieval Catholicism, with “Sathan’s arte” as the physical art that adorned religious spaces and acted as an aid to those popish “imaginations”. At the same time, however, we are aware that for the purposes of plot these words also apply to Mary herself, even if she has been written out of the moment of celebration. For the narrative to be complete and for the Mary in the play to fulfill the demands of the Magdalene story, she must accept Repentance’s prescription. In some respects, the lines about what eyes, ears and tongues must do to repent are a description of what must happen to Mary if she is to become a legitimate Protestant figure.

Using Repentance’s voice to overshadow Mary’s physicality, casting its gaze so that it skips over her body to a bigger picture of Reformation, Wager breaks the symbolism that posits the traditional Magdalene as the paradigm of pious regret. Instead she becomes aligned with that which “must hence forth be turned after an other kynde” - that is, the old ways of the Catholic church. In this light, the need for spiritual change described by Wager’s Repentance is not a conventional acknowledgement and regret of the past, but a complete rejection of it. The Magdalene figure begins to fracture at this point, as the past and future of the play’s narrative is stretched across a schism in English Christianity’s history. The luxurious and sinful prostitute who opens the play, and whom Wager associates with Catholicism, cannot simply repent. Her past must be negated and she herself must be transformed into her pious Protestant counterpart.

By this point, Wager has so thoroughly inverted the relationship between Repentance and the Magdalene in his play, that Repentance himself requires an exorcism. Even though Mary has just been cleansed of her devils, the allure of her erotic (or Catholic) past lingers on. Repentance finally rids himself of her compromising connotations in the lines that follow the blazon:

“Thus like as all the members in tymes past,

Have ben seuantes of vnrighteousnesse and synne,
Now Repentance doth that seruice away cast,
And to mortifie all his lustes doth begynne.” (l.1371-1374)

“Member” is a significant word here, as it holds several meanings in delicate opposition. One can be a member of mankind, a member of the elect or even a member of Christ. The word can also dissect rather than define an individual, with member signifying a limb or body part, the genitals of either sex, or specifically the penis. Whilst the principle meaning here is obviously a member of mankind, the anatomising force of the blazon also puts us in mind of individual body parts. These members could be disembodied hands handing over money in exchange for church indulgences, or sexual organs driven by lust. Repentance casts away these members, with all their levels of meaning, to disassociate the act of repentance from both the physicality of sin and the physicality of Catholic Church practises, such as buying absolution or performing elaborate deeds of penance. In damning rebuttal, Catholic practises and human sin are united under the banner “vnrighteousnesse and synne”.

Furthermore, tangled within the layers of meaning in “members” is the conviction that members of mankind can become members of Christ if they follow the right spiritual path (which for Wager is a Protestant one). The physicality and sinfulness of the individual body parts cannot equate with the spiritual wholeness of being a member of Christ’s metaphorical body, so Wager’s language forces us to choose. Of course we cannot think of virile members without recollecting Mary’s promiscuous past, which means that the choice is also between Wager’s unflattering portrayal of the titillating Catholic Magdalene who enters the play “triflyng with her garmentes” (l.57) , and the promise of the sober Protestant Magdalene who appears after her repentance “sadly apparelled” (SD.l.1678)

Repentance essentially makes the decision for us when he claims that he “to mortify all lusts doth begynne” (l.1374). “Mortifie” is a word often associated with Catholic extremity, but in this period it was also commonly used to describe the inhibition of vitality, the neutralising of value or significance, and the dulling of colour (OED). In light of this, the mortifying of lusts is perhaps the disarming of the Catholic

Magdalene figure. We are asked to repent our old figure of repentance, to take down the brightly painted statues and become impervious to the glamour of her affective piety. Of course, to mortify is also to kill, and so the unfulfilled violence of the blazon is finally realised as the Magdalene's troublesome body is destroyed.

The biblical reference immediately after these lines: "For he yt laieth his had on the plough, & loketh away, is not apt in the kingdom of heaven to raigne" (l.1376-1377), quietly ushers in the new, Protestant Mary. The reference is to the very last verse of Luke 9, which follows on to the chapter featuring Mary, sister of Martha. During the Reformation, humanist scholars such as Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples had challenged traditional populist accounts of Mary Magdalene's life, which rolled together several scriptural women. (Hufstader, 31-32)

Perhaps in this reference, Wager is drawing our attention to the discrepancies in the Catholic Magdalene's identity, and suggesting that an attentive listener may be a better role model than a reformed prostitute. Mary, Martha's sister, sits at the feet of Christ listening whilst Martha busies herself serving him, and when Martha complains Christ assures her that Mary has chosen the right priorities. In many ways, this Mary is a far more suitable Protestant paradigm; her studious piety is based on contemplation and the acquiring of spiritual knowledge rather than the show of good works embodied in Martha's hospitality. As Patricia Badir has demonstrated, later Protestant writers developed a tradition of the Magdalene as a meditative visionary, focussing on her role as the first to perceive and believe in Christ's resurrection (*Medieval Poetics*, 205-219). The moment of Mary's repentance in Wager's play perhaps hints at the beginning of this reconfiguration.

In conclusion, Wager's use of the blazon, and indeed his treatment of Mary Magdalene are far more complex than they have been given credit for. One critic has dismissively described Wager's Mary as "the three dimensional puppet who will be replaced by the flattened, two-dimensional surfaces of the word" but this is to underestimate the depth and flexibility of the word to Reformation theologians (Badir, *Iconoclasm and Striptease*, 9). For these early Protestants Christ was the living embodiment of God's word, and private, genuine belief in this word was the only way to

salvation. By associating his Protestant Magdalene with the attentive listener rather than the physical intimate of Christ, Wager provides her with a prominent and powerful position within Reformation theology.

The shift away from fascination with Mary's physicality reflects a similar change in her relationship to Christ, which creates a new *sola scriptura* ideal. The new studious Magdalene appears to have transcended the need to know God's word through its physical encasements on earth. Rather than knowing a signification of the word through the medium of Christ's body, she has unadulterated access to it by listening to Christ's words, which are a clearer expression of his true form as word of God. From this, we receive a new sense of Mary as a figure of privileged position. Her closeness to God is her visionary ability to see beyond the corporeal to what is really there. This visionary quality is translated into the image of a reader when we imagine the gap between Christ's body and God's word as akin to the words on a page and their meaning.

Indeed, the diffusion of corporeality perhaps even extends to the play itself. Puritan anti-theatre polemic was rife at this time, as the natural physicality and visual trickery of drama was considered sinful by some. (Collinson, 95-112.) Wager acknowledges this in the careful disclaimer offered by his prologue:

“We desire no man in this point to be offended,
In that vertures with vice shall we here introduce,
For in men and women they have depended:
And therefore figuratively to speake, it is the vse.
I trust that all wise men will accept our excuse.
Of the Preface for this season here I make an ende,
In godly myrth to spend the tyme we doe intende.” (1.80-86)

The prologue's insistence that the play is wholly “figurative” transforms it into an extended literary trope. As with the blazon, this self-conscious figuring forth allows for a strong sensory impact whilst simultaneously insisting upon the superficiality of the representation. Right from the beginning of the play, Wager is asking us to read the performance in the same way that the visionary Mary reads Christ's body. In this respect,

the Protestant Magdalene perhaps resides over the play text before Wager has even begun to introduce her. In light of her presence, the feigned violence of the blazon and the titillating exploitation of the pre-penitent Mary become metaphors for their opposites. The blazon has its roots in “blaze”, which is to display publicly, to flaunt or brazenly unfurl one’s colours, yet Wager’s blazon closes the Magdalene’s body from our attentions and allows her a mind, a mind liberated by visionary reading. In re-identifying Mary Magdalene this way, Wager cleverly fits this popular figure neatly into Protestant Reformation theology. Perhaps more significantly though, he also reconfigures the ideology associated with the Magdalene: that of man’s relationship with God and our means to salvation. By creating a new identity for the Magdalene, Wager assists in the political drive to create a new identity for English Christians.

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