

WORSHIPPING *CORPUS CHRISTI*:  
MARY MAGDALENE IN THE ENGLISH MYSTERY CYCLES

JOANNA KAZIK

*University of Łódź*

ABSTRACT

The open-ended form of the Scripture and the multiplicity of apocryphal and folk traditions pertaining to the saint often make it difficult to differentiate Mary Magdalene from other Marys in the cycles. She can be identified as Mary of Bethany, the woman who washed Christ's feet, the repentant prostitute or, most importantly, the woman to whom the risen Christ appears. The aim of this article is to examine the presentation of the saint in the Resurrection pageants in the English mystery plays. Her spirituality which exceeds a purely human perspective focused on the "here and now" and her devotion, often expressed by the playwrights in terms of physicality, will be discussed. Dramatic implications of the apostles' rejection of the news of the Resurrection, announced by Mary Magdalene, will be investigated, and an interpretation of the silence of the saint, accused by them of idle "carping", will be offered. Finally, the divergent attitudes of Mary Magdalene and the disbelieving Thomas towards the risen Christ will be examined.

Mary Magdalene is one of those intriguing characters for whom it is almost impossible to differentiate fact from fiction. What is known about this saint, considered to be Jesus' most faithful disciple, is a conflation of scriptural narratives, apocryphal stories and folk beliefs. Biographical facts about Mary Magdalene, provided in the gospels of Mark, Luke and John, are in popular perception often intermingled with less indisputable details about her life, and historical data are intertwined with fictional elements.

As an example of penitence and deep faith, Mary Magdalene is also an important female character in the English cycle plays. She is referred to by the mystery playwrights as the woman from whom Jesus drove out evil spirits, the repentant prostitute, the woman taken in adultery, Lazarus' sister, and the woman who washed Christ's feet before the Last Supper. Magdalene also accompanies other women at the cross and, together with two other Marys, attends

the Sepulchre to anoint Christ's body. Most importantly, however, she is the first person to whom the resurrected Christ appears.

The following paper focuses on the presentation of Mary Magdalene in the pageants dealing with the events following the Crucifixion: the saint's search for Christ's body, Jesus' appearance to her and the annunciation of the news of the Resurrection to the apostles. First, Mary's specific spirituality, rooted in her physicality and often experienced somatically, will be discussed and placed in the context of medieval staging and acting conventions. Secondly, the disciples' disbelief in the woman's words and the divergent attitudes of Mary Magdalene and the incredulous Thomas towards the risen Christ will be examined.

The biblical exemplars of Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene are found in the gospels of John and Mark. John offers a relatively thorough account of the appearance of the angels to Mary and then of the meeting between Jesus and the woman.<sup>1</sup> Mark, on the other hand, makes only a brief mention to Christ's appearance and Mary's confrontation with the apostles.<sup>2</sup>

The N-Town plays offer the most extensive dramatisation of the event whilst the Chester cycle, somewhat consistently with its overall attitude towards women (Coletti 1990: 89), omits it altogether. Additionally, the cycles vary in the presentation of some minor elements, such as the number of angels that appear to Mary Magdalene or the details immediately preceding Jesus' appearance: whilst in the Scripture two angels await Mary at the tomb, in the N-Town plays there is only one angel; in the York and Towneley cycles Jesus greets her directly.

Mary's lamentation over the disappearance of Christ's body opens the pageant in the York plays and in the N-Town plays. Echoing the Blessed Virgin's

<sup>1</sup> "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.' (John 20: 11-18)

<sup>2</sup> "Now after the rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it." (Mark 16: 9-11)

words uttered during the Crucifixion,<sup>3</sup> Mary Magdalene complains of utmost sorrow that makes her heart break and takes her voice away. As she grieves in the N-Town cycle,

For hertyly sorwe myn herte doth breke.  
With wepynge terys I wasch my face.  
Alas, for sorwe I may not speke –  
My Lorde is gon þat hereinne wase.

(37.1-4)

The tears with which she washed Christ's feet before the Crucifixion are invoked to suggest her desolation and create an emotional framework of the Passion. In the York cycle, Magdalene seems to be overtaken by extreme grief, swoons and feels that her wits are gone,

Mi witte is waste nowe in wede,  
I walowe, I walke, nowe woo is me.

(39.9-10)

Mary's affective response to the disappearance of Christ's body, even though briefly described in the biblical narrative, is greatly expanded in these two cycles. Her emotions outweigh an intellectual reflection over the event and acquire certain somatic qualities: the pain not only makes the woman's heart heavy, but also leaves her speechless, as if the tragedy she was experiencing could not be expressed in words. In contrast to the presentation of the Blessed Virgin, whose distress in the York cycle never becomes excessive (Gray 1972: 123; Woolf 1972: 265), Mary Magdalene laments, and her despair is conveyed in terms of physical action. Movement, implied by dynamic verbs, is used to symbolise her extreme anguish that verges on insanity.

Furthermore, in the N-Town cycle, the memory of the mercy and help which she received from Jesus makes her anguish even more profound. In keeping

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that there existed interesting similarities between representations of the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene in the late Middle Ages. Both saints were identified as the Church or Christ's brides; both were seen as intermediaries whose intercession could win God's mercy or assist people in their daily toil, and whose human nature was believed to be a bridge between the divine and the worldly. Furthermore, similar imagery was used to describe the two women in the popular tradition. Both the Virgin and Mary Magdalene were called "the star of the sea" in certain hymns or prayers, and light metaphors were used to refer to both women (Davidson 1986: 97). In the Digby Play of Mary Magdalene, the saint is dressed in a blue mantle, typical of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and, similarly to the mother of God in the mystery cycles, she renounces earthly food to accept only "þe fode þat comyt from heven on hye, / Thatt God wyll me send" (Digby Mary Magdalene, 2001-2002).

with the biblical accounts found in Luke (8:2) and Mark (16:9),<sup>4</sup> Mary Magdalene identifies herself as the woman whom the Saviour healed, and she mourns her “owyn dere Lorde”, who “vij deuelys fro me dyd take” (37.6). The cleansing of the demons establishes a connection between Jesus and the woman, and makes the sense of the loss more intense. The bond that exists between them enhances her tragedy and prompts greater sorrow. Mary appreciates the scope of Christ’s sacrifice for the sake of humankind and emphasises its importance by relating it to her own life,

The whiche my sowle from synne to saue  
From develys sefne he mad me qwyght.

(N-Town, 37.76-77)

The act of healing is recalled to enhance the spiritual significance of Christ’s death for every person. It is not only an example of Jesus’ ministry which anticipates liberation from sin but allows the divine to enter the world of an individual as well. Thus, Mary Magdalene’s experience of Christ’s death is deeply personal, and his redemptive task is presented not only an abstract concept but is inextricably connected with her life. The history of salvation is introduced into her personal experience. What is emphasised is an individualistic aspect of lay worship, characteristic of late medieval East Anglian piety (Fewer 1998: 125).

Undoubtedly, Mary’s affective response to Christ’s death and the disappearance of his body, her swooning or erratic movement should be attributed to acting conventions which controlled the presentation of emotions on stage and reflected the medieval mourning practice. The wringing of hands, throwing up one’s arms, tearing at one’s hair were most probably a sign of passionate grief and, as documented in the visual arts, constituted part of ritualised mourning in the Middle Ages (Davidson 2001: 82-83; Haskins 1995: 205-206). However, the emphasis placed on the woman’s feelings, as well as parallel emotional and physical behaviours could have been a deliberate technique employed by the authors of the pageants whose aim was to involve the audience in the events presented. Whilst naturalistic acting or excessive gestures were used to express grief or despair in the Middle Ages, the effect that the plays were to stimulate was as important to medieval producers and actors as the religious message. As Davidson aptly suggests, “vibrant and lively performance would have been the

<sup>4</sup> “Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons” (Mark 16: 9). “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8: 1-3).

goal – and perhaps a goal more often than not achieved in these plays – which were highly admired in their time” (2001: 69). Furthermore, a consistent emphasis on Mary’s emotions and her affective rather than intellectual perception seems to suggest a purposeful dramatic movement in the plays. At the same time, feelings are given positive valences whilst purely intellectual activities, associated with virility in the pageants discussed, are challenged.

The authors of the Towneley cycle approach Mary’s search for Christ’s body in a manner slightly different from that of the N-Town or York dramatists. The *planctus* that opens the pageant in the latter cycles is absent in the Towneley plays, and Mary directly addresses the people gathered to learn whether they have taken the body away,

Say me, gatherynere, I the pray,  
If thou bare oght my Lord away?

(26.580-1)

She does not mourn on stage, and her grief is only later mentioned by Jesus. In contrast to the other cycles, the saint appears to be enterprising and practical, and is resolved to find the body of her teacher. Her determination gives her strength and becomes a constructive facet in her grief. Even though sorrowful, Mary Magdalene in the Towneley plays actively looks for Jesus’ body, and even confronts his persecutors. Unlike the N-Town plays, she does not mourn in isolation but goes out into the world as if in anticipation of her apostolic mission. The dramatist seems to present her as a vehicle of female creativity who, similarly to the Blessed Virgin, negates the effect of Eve’s thoughtless sin or Noah’s wife’s belligerence. Traditional gender roles seem to be reversed in this scene, and Mary Magdalene is shown as an active agent who persists in accomplishing her goal. Her actions are generative and symbolically unite the sphere of the private and the public. Mary’s personal, feminine experience of sorrow and mourning is combined with traditionally virile resourcefulness and activity. Additionally, Mary’s search for Christ’s body brings to mind the theme of quest, so far typical of medieval knights in romances. The inclusion of both masculine and feminine traits in the presentation of the saint makes it possible to dissolve gender boundaries.

In the Towneley and N-Town cycles, enquired by the disguised Jesus why she weeps, Magdalene explains that a “grettyr cawse had nevyr woman” (N-Town, 37.25) and that she must find the Lord’s body. The York cycle, on the other hand, elaborates on a short biblical exchange between the sorrowful woman and Jesus, whom she takes to be a “goode gardner” (39.42). The expansion of the conversation lets the authors of this cycle create suspense and enhance the dramatic effect of the play, which reaches its climax when Jesus reveals his identity.

In the York cycle, the Saviour asks *Maria* probing questions not only why she “wepis soo” but also what she intends to do with “pat body bare” (39.50), reminding her that his suffering was to free humankind from sin (39.53-58), and that her efforts will not alleviate his pain or the memory of it. Magdalene explains that she intends to perform the last rites. As if repeating the act of washing and drying Christ’s feet before the Last Supper, Mary Magdalene wants to clean the Lord’s disfigured and bleeding body. She declares that “dry schulde I wype pat nowe is wete” (39.60). She wishes to take care of Christ’s earthly remains and to pay him due respect. His body functions as a relic that can comfort his faithful believer. As Mary says,

Might I hym fange vnto my fee,  
Of all my woo he wolde me wrake.

(39.48-49)

This reverent attitude towards Christ’s dead body, not explicit in the biblical account of the event, is concomitant with the perception of the body in general, and Jesus’ body in particular, in the late Middle Ages. It is reminiscent of *the memoria passionis*, a meditative tradition and “the most characteristic and pervasive element of late-medieval imagery [of the Passion]” (Lewis 1996: 204). Christ’s wounds, so called “speaking wounds”, as well as his blood, still visible after his death, testify to his human pain and remind the believer that eternal life was brought about by Jesus’ sacrifice. This “affective piety which had become central to popular religion in Northern Europe” (Davidson 2001: 73) emphasised both Christ’s Passion, symbolised by his “earthly robe”, and his salvific Resurrection. The importance of his body through which the conquest over sin is possible is validated by the references to its remedial qualities. In the pageants of the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene notices that “of ilke a myscheue [Christ] is medycyne/ And bote of all” (York, 38.195-196), and “to ich sore he was medycyne” (Towneley, 26.359). Similarly, Lazarus’ sisters in the pageants of the raising of Lazarus in the York and Chester cycles believe that Christ is the only medicine that could heal their pain. In the York cycle, Lazarus’ sister, called *Maria* and popularly identified with Mary Magdalene, complains that no medicine may heal her pain (24.156) and despairs of her misery:

Allas, owtane Goddis will allone,  
pat I schulld sitte to see bis sight!  
For I may morne and make my mone,  
So wo in worlde was neuere wight.

(24.147-150)

In the Chester cycle, Lazarus’ sister, Mary, also hopes to receive solace from Jesus,

Here will I sitt and mourninge make  
Tyll that Jesu my sorrowe slake.  
My teene to harte, lord, thou take,  
And leeche mee of my woe.

(13.325-328)

In the Towneley cycle, Mary Magdalene’s declaration upon meeting Jesus that “now I am hole that thou art here” (26.608) further corroborates the belief in the healing properties of his body. The adjective “hole” implies not only the peace of mind which she regains but also the wholeness or integrity of her body and soul, indicative of spiritual excellence and chastity (Bynum 1992: 287).

At the same time, it has to be noticed that women have traditionally been considered to be better suited for the role of providers of services to the body (Bynum 1992: 246). Caring for dead bodies and preparing them for burial are elements of medieval women’s responsibilities that, in this case, are elevated to a metaphysical experience. The feminine, physical experience of spirituality is here manifested through attending to the human body of the son of God (Milner 1994: 393-394).

The dramatic effect in the plays of the Resurrection is achieved not only through Mary Magdalene’s behaviour but also through the opposition between the lamentation and her later happiness when she meets and recognises the Redeemer. In the Towneley cycle, she welcomes her teacher “Rabony, my Lord so dere!” (26.607) and rejoices that,

I am as light as leyfe on tre  
For ioyfulf sight that I can se...

(26.648-449)

In the N-Town cycle, the woman comments on her dejection and subsequent joy when Jesus appears to her,

For mornynge sore I was nere mad.  
Grettere sorwe zit nevyr whith had  
Whan my Lord away was gon.  
But now in herte I am so glad,  
So grett a joy nevyr wyff had non.

(37.69-73)

The juxtaposition of sorrow and elation gives the playwrights an opportunity to reveal the tension underlying Mary’s quest for Jesus’ body. The affective gravity of the situation and the desperate attempts to honour Christ’s body in the manner most suitable from the human perspective reinforce the joyous implications of the miracle. The contrast between the woman’s despair and her happiness effectively illustrate the deliverance from misery into happiness.

Christ's request to announce the Resurrection to his brothers in Galilee, to which Mary gladly accedes, closes the pageant in all the cycles. The apostolic mission that Mary embarks on is particularly stressed in the Towneley cycle, where the woman promises Jesus to make her "vyage to tell theym hastily" (26.633-4) and rejoices that she can share the good news with the disciples. The characteristic medieval theme of pilgrimage and quest is consistently brought to the fore in this cycle to emphasise the importance of the role that Mary plays in the scheme of Redemption.

The Towneley playwrights also use this opportunity to highlight the dramatic quality inherent in the event and bear out the conflict that underlies Mary Magdalene's task. As indicated in the scriptural narrative, Mary Magdalene's words are challenged by the apostles, who accuse her of foolishness and gullibility. In the pageant of Thomas of India in the Towneley cycle, the disciples openly reject her words. The men are convinced that Magdalene is trying to beguile them, and, despite Christ's promise to rise from the dead, they do not seem to believe that the Resurrection is possible. *Petrus* deflates the importance of Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene and tries to persuade her it was only an apparition,

It is som spirite or els som gast;  
Othere was it nocht.

(Towneley, 28.8-9)

He attempts to belittle the woman and to subvert her authority by referring to common sense. The apostle accuses Mary Magdalene of "capring" (28.7) and mockingly discredits her words,

We may trow on no kyns wyse  
That ded man may to lyfe ryse...

(28.10-11)

*Petrus* seems both to challenge the miracle of Lazarus, which foreshadowed Jesus' rising from the dead, and to undermine the possibility of the Resurrection.

Furthermore, whilst Christ's tormented body is perceived by the woman as a sign that anticipates the conquest over sin, it is used by *Paulus* to highlight the irreversibility of Christ's demise. Mary, albeit initially sorrowful, believes that the wounds will bring eternal life; *Paulus*, on the other hand, takes them to be a proof of Christ's death,

The Iues maide hym grymly blede  
Through feete, handys, and syde.  
With nayles on rode thay dyd hym hang;  
Wherfor, woman, thou says wrang.

(28.14-17)

The nails which were driven through the Redeemer's hands and feet or the blood which covered his body symbolically expose his human pain. The apostles are convinced that the suffering inflicted on Jesus brought about his irrevocable death, and unconditionally reject Mary's words accusing her "of being wrong". *Petrus*, who seems to have given up hope of the Resurrection, scolds the woman,

Do way, woman! Let be thi fare,  
For shame and also syn;  
If we make neuer sich care,  
His lyfe may we not wyn.

(28.24-27)

Mary Magdalene's enthusiastic joy and genuine will to share the news dramatically clash with the apostles' harsh disbelief. Whilst Magdalene readily embraces the miracle of the Resurrection, the disciples are cautious and distrustful, and appear to be unable to see beyond the material world on this occasion. They criticise her and refuse to acknowledge the truth of the message she is to deliver. Furthermore, the apostles reject the woman's words on the basis of her gender,

And it is wretyn in oure law,  
Ther is no trust in womans saw,  
No trust faith to belefe.

(28.29-31)

To support his argument against the veracity of Mary Magdalene's testimony, *Paulus* even quotes "oure bookes" which state that women are like apples: appealing on the outside, dangerous on the inside,

In oure bookes thus fynde we wretyn –  
All manere of men well it wyttyn –  
Of women on this wyse:  
'Till an appyll she is lyke;  
Withoutten faille ther is none slyke  
In horde ther it lyse.

Bot if a man assay it wittely,  
It is full roten inwardly  
At the colke within.

(28.35-43)

The apostles' vituperative accusation is not a random outburst but is deeply rooted in medieval beliefs and expressed in the homiletic tradition. Medieval sermons often cautioned against impatient and excessively talkative women,

“inconstant as the swallow” (Owst 1966: 386). Thus, the disciples’ accusations of falsehood and deceit fall within an established tradition of anti-feminist preaching.

The clash between the disciples and Mary Magdalene in the plays also serves an important rhetorical function. Firstly, the proverbial affinity between women and apples evoked by the apostles seems to be an inversion of the popular belief that the appearance to a woman after the Resurrection symbolically reversed the consequences of original sin. Secondly, both the dramatic effect of the apostles’ disbelief and the attending didactic moral, contained in the biblical description of the event, are fully used by the playwrights to convey the religious message. The apostles’ confidence in their judgement exposes their deficiencies and is, importantly, referred to by Mary Magdalene as “heresy” (Towneley, 28.23).

Most feminist critics argue that the refusal to accept Mary’s words represents the suppression of women’s voices and consequently the rejection of female spirituality. Some, however, highlight Mary Magdalene’s final triumph despite her initial humiliation. Those critics construe Mary Magdalene’s silence as a symbol of increased female spirituality and claim that the woman’s role as a *nuntia* is challenged by the disciples precisely because her heightened divine insight surpasses their understanding of the miracle. Even though the humiliation that Mary Magdalene is subjected to makes her final triumph bitter, the accusations aimed at subverting her authority actually reveal the frailty of the men’s faith. Stereotypical beliefs in women’s garrulousness and folly are momentarily reversed, and their futility shown.

Additionally, gendered criticism seems to be employed consistently in the plays to expose the feebleness of some characters. Thomas, who later on in the Towneley cycle refuses to believe that Jesus is alive, similarly accuses the apostles of an irrational attitude and compares them to women. His words echo the arguments used earlier by Paul and Peter to dismiss Mary Magdalene. Thomas claims that,

Youre resons ar deface;  
Ye ar as women, rad for blood  
And lightly oft solaced.

(28.402-404)

In the Scriveners’ play in the York cycle, despite the alliterative lament which somewhat resembles Mary Madgalene’s somatised mourning, Thomas flatly refuses to believe the apostles. However, unlike Magdalene, whose initial dirge and dejection are contrasted with her later joy, Thomas’ sorrow is used to bring to light his inability to accept the Resurrection unconditionally. Convinced of the finality of Jesus’ death on the cross, he disdainfully jeers at the apostles’ words,

Do waie, thes tales is but a trayne  
Of fooles vnwise.  
He þat was fully slayne,  
How schulde he rise?

(41.135-138)

Thomas not only accuses the disciples of foolishness (41.136-137) but in a way reminiscent of Paul’s mocking response to Mary Magdalene’s words in the Towneley cycle, he also whole-heartedly argues that what they saw was an illusive phantom,

I laye my liff it was some sperit  
3e wende wer hee.

(41.149-150)

The differences between male and female spiritual experience can be noticed in Mary Magdalene’s and Thomas’ attitudes to the risen Christ. Both saints want to touch Christ, their motivation, however, is quite different. Magdalene’s gesture is an expression of joy and adoration. In the N-Town cycle, when Jesus reveals his identity, Magdalene wants to approach him and kiss his feet. Similarly, the kiss that she wants to place on Jesus’ feet in the N-Town cycle (“thyn holy fete þat I may kys”, 37.41) is a tribute paid to Jesus and a sign of both welcome and respect.<sup>5</sup> As Davidson argues in his analysis of instances of kissing in some pageants in the Corpus Christi plays, Mary Magdalene’s “kisses are not intended to be seen in terms of the physically erotic” (2001: 72), whilst, generally speaking, kissing Jesus in the cycles “should denote reverence and devotion, love and respect, and should further be an emblem of social cohesion” (2001: 71). Thus, Mary Magdalene’s kiss symbolises a happy reunification and stands for her relief when she meets the Saviour. Her delight and veneration are translated into the need for physical closeness, and her gesture is that of intimate worship. At the same time, her kiss contradicts Judas’ kiss which disclosed Jesus to the chief priests and elders.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, feet seem to be the focal point of tribute and worship in the N-Town cycle. For instance, in the play about Joseph’s doubt, upon realising the miraculous nature of his wife’s pregnancy, the carpenter wants to kiss the Virgin’s feet as a sign of apology and veneration. Mary, however, suggests that he should kiss her mouth,

Joseph: 3oure swete fete now lete my kys.  
Mary: Nay, lett be my fete, not þo 3e take;  
My mowthe 3e may kys, iwys,  
And welcom onto me.

(12.185-188)

Thomas' gesture of touching Christ's resurrected body, on the other hand, seems to reverberate Judas' kiss of betrayal and additionally evokes the action of piercing Christ's side during the Passion. In the York cycle, the disbelieving apostle even conjures up the image of the spear with which the soldier tore Jesus' side when he reassures the disciples he will believe only when he can touch the Lord,

Tille þat I see his body bare  
 And sithen my fyngir putte in thare  
 Within his hyde,  
 And fele the wounde þe spere did schere  
 Rist in his syde,  
 Are schalle I trowe no tales betwene.

(41.158-163)

For Thomas, the touch constitutes a necessary tool to substantiate the Resurrection, as, paradoxically, only tangible evidence can make the miracle real. His hand in Christ's wounds is to convince him that Jesus, who "was ded on cros and colder put in pitt" (N-Town, 38.310), could rise from the dead. As the incredulous apostle argues,

I may nevyr beleve these woundyr marveles  
 Tyl þat I haue syght of euery grett wounde,  
 And put in my fyngyr in place of þe nayles.

(N-Town, 38.321-323)

In the Saddlers' play of the doubting Thomas in the Chester cycle, Thomas similarly refuses to acknowledge the Resurrection and assures the apostles that,

Shall I never leeve that this ys trewe,  
 by God omnypotent,  
 but I see in his handes two  
 holes the nayles can in goe  
 and put my fynger eke alsoe  
 theareas the nayles went.

(19.218-223)

Thomas' gesture epitomises the world of the rational and the material. Similarly to the disbelieving midwife in the Wrights' Nativity in the Chester cycle, Salome, who wants to touch the Blessed Mary "in sexu secreto" (6.539 s.d.) to attest to her virginity *post-partum*, Thomas needs a proof that could account for the miracle in human terms. Mary Magdalene, whose spiritual insight allows her to step outside the confines of the human "here and now", does not require a tangible proof to believe in Christ's Resurrection.

Interpretative difficulties of the staging of the plays make an analysis of the spiritual significance of Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene from the point of view of gender relationships less unequivocal. As all-male casts were predominant in England, Mary Magdalene was probably played by a young man or a boy. Although it is impossible to determine the impact that cross-playing may have had on medieval audiences, it is highly plausible that body language, gestures or stage movement was different for men and for women, and, consequently, influenced the overall effect of a performance. A male actor playing Mary Magdalene may have carried an element of parody or misaligned sexuality (Twycross 1983: 135), which would have thwarted the spiritual tone of the pageant and highlighted the caustic tone of the satire directed against women. At the same time, men in female roles may have encouraged a greater degree of stylisation which would have been helpful in creating the atmosphere of non-realism (Carpenter *et al.* 1983: 112, 115). Mary Magdalene's costume or a wig of long hair, the saint's attribute often depicted in the iconography of the period (Davidson 1986: 89, Frugoni 1992: 361-362), could have contributed to the spiritual sublime of the scene. Whilst the effect that cross-dressing may have had may only be conjectured, it is possible that it encouraged an enhanced metaphysical response from the audience in the plays discussed. The actor's masculinity may have been used not to create a comic opportunity to ridicule women but to stimulate a more spiritual, genderless, as it were, understanding of the event, which would, in turn, be required to achieve dramatic coherence and ensure the effectiveness of the religious message of the plays.

The presentation of Mary Magdalene in the pageants dealing with the Resurrection highlights the saint's dedication and trust, and exemplifies the abstract idea of Redemption through one's individual experience. At the same time, Mary's affective approach to Christ's death, burial and the disappearance of his body enables her to overcome limitations of the purely human perspective and differentiates her from other characters whose rationality prevents them from appreciating the miracle of Jesus' sacrifice. Additionally, her human nature, stressed by Mary Magdalene, who refers to the driving out of the demons from her body, allows the mystery playwrights to reflect on those aspects of life through which God is revealed, and, paradoxically, brings her closer to the world of the divine. Even though repudiated by the apostles, Mary Magdalene spiritually excels. What is more, negative stereotyping of women and woman's speech is rejected by the dramatists, whilst the contestation of Mary Magdalene's words, her belief and enthusiasm are used to expose the shakiness of some men's faith. The thoughtless prejudice against women in general is undermined and a more sympathetic attitude is encouraged. Human emotions and physicality are not contrasted with spirituality but are shown as vehicles through which a greater level of faith can be achieved.

## REFERENCES

- Baker, C. – John L. Murphy – Louis B. Hall (eds.)  
 1982 *The late medieval religious plays of Bodleian Mss Digby 133 and E Museo 160.* (EETS o.s. 283). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beadle, Richard (ed.)  
 1982 *The York Plays.* London: Arnold.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker  
 1992 *Fragmentation and redemption: Essays on gender and the human body in medieval religion.* New York London: Zone Books.
- Cadegan, U. M. – J. L. Heft  
 1990 "Mary-of-Nazareth, feminism, and the tradition", *Thought – A Review of Culture and Idea* 65, 257: 169-189.
- Carpenter, Sarah – Peter Happé – Henrietta Twycross-Martin – Diana Wyatt – Carl Heap  
 1983 "Thoughts on 'Transvestism' by diverse hands", *Medieval English Theatre* 5, 1: 110-122.
- Coletti, Theresa  
 1990 "Reading REED. History and the records of early English drama", in: Lee Patterson (ed.), 248-284.  
 1979 "The design of the Digby Play of *Mary Magdalene*", *Studies in: Philology* 76, 4: 313-333.
- Davidson, Clifford  
 1986 "The Middle English Saints Play and its iconography", in: Clifford Davidson (ed.), 31-122.  
 2001 "Gesture in medieval British drama", in: Clifford Davidson (ed.), 66-127.
- Davidson, Clifford (ed.)  
 1986 *The Saint Play in medieval Europe.* (Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series 8). Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications.  
 2001 *Gesture in medieval drama.* (Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series 28). Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications.
- Fewer, Colin  
 1998 "The 'Fyure' of the market: The N-Town cycle and East Anglian lay piety", *Philological Quarterly* 77.2: 117-147.
- Frugoni, Chiara  
 1992 "The imagined woman" (translated by Clarissa Botsford), in: Christine Klapisch-Zuber (ed.), 336-422.
- Gray, Douglas  
 1972 *Themes and images in the medieval English religious lyric.* London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Haskins, Susan  
 1995 *Mary Magdalen. Myth and metaphor.* New York: Riverhead Books.
- The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition.*  
 1993 London: Thomas Nelson.
- Klapisch-Zuber, Christine (ed.)  
 1992 *A history of women in the west. Silences of the Middle Ages.* Cambridge, Mass., London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, Flora  
 1996 "The wound in Christ's side and the instruments of the Passion: Gendered experience and response", in: L. Smith and J. Taylor (eds.), 204-229.
- Lumiansky, R.M. – D. Mills (eds.)  
 1986 *The Chester Mystery Cycle.* (EETS s.s. 3, 9). London: Oxford University Press.

- Milner, Susannah  
 1994 "Female asceticism", *Philological Quarterly* 73:4: 285-401.
- Owst, G.R.  
 1966 *Literature and pulpit in medieval England.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Patterson, Lee (ed.)  
 1990 *Literary practice and social change in Britain, 1380-1530.* (The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics, 8). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rastall, Richard  
 1985 "Female roles in all-male casts", *Medieval English Theatre* 7, 1: 25-51.
- Schlauch, Margaret  
 1956 *Medieval English literature and its social foundations.* Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, London: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, L. – J. Taylor (eds.)  
 1996 *Women and the book. Assessing the visual evidence.* London: The British Library.
- Spector, Stephen (ed.)  
 1991 *The N-Town Play.* (EETS s.s. 11-12). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevens, Martin – A.C. Cawley (eds.)  
 1994 *The Towneley Plays.* (EETS s.s. 23-24). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Twycross, Meg  
 1983 "'Transvestism' in the Mystery Plays", *Medieval English Theatre* 5, 2: 123-80.
- Waters, Claire M.  
 1997 "Dangerous beauty, beautiful speech: Gendered eloquence in medieval preaching", *Essays in Medieval Studies* 14, online edition  
 <<http://www.luc.edu/publications/medieval/>>.
- Woolf, Rosemary  
 1972 *The English Mystery Plays.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.