

A UNIFYING THEME IN THE DIGBY MARY MAGDALENE

by

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The anonymous play Mary Magdalene made its appearance around the years 1480-1490, just as the period called the Middle Ages was coming to an end in England and the New Learning (with its roots of modern literature) was about to be introduced. The play was presumably performed some time before 1520,<sup>1</sup> was copied into the Digby Manuscript 133, at the Bodleian, and somehow survived the reformers. To this date it has been edited and published in its entirety in the limited 1835 edition of Sharp's Ancient Mysteries from the Digby Manuscript;<sup>2</sup> by F. J. Furnivall in 1882 for the New Shakspeare Society,<sup>3</sup> an edition reissued by the Early English Text Society in 1896; by David Bevington in 1975;<sup>4</sup> and by Leon Lewis in his dissertation "The Play of Mary Magdalene."<sup>5</sup> In addition, it is found in part in Adams' and in Pollard's anthologies.<sup>6</sup>

The Mary Magdalene is something of an anomaly in that it seems to be a haphazardly constructed staging of hagiographical material, arbitrarily adorned with mystery cycle elements and morality insertions. As a result the traditional response to it has been to regard it as crudely written and lacking in appreciable organic structuring, spectacular in some parts, dull in others, and in any case not complying with any classical concept of dramatic unity.

In the earliest critical work on this play, "Die Digby Spiele," K. Schmidt in 1885 began this line of thinking; he called it

eine so schwache Leistung, . . . zusammengewurfelt aus  
allen möglichen gänzlich überflüssigen scenen.  
[translation: such a weak performance . . . thrown to-  
gether out of all possible totally superfluous scenes]<sup>7</sup>

Pollard continued along this line (1923), saying "it has the least possible unity."<sup>8</sup>

This generally low critical regard for the play's unity went

relatively unchallenged until recently, when more favorable criticism began to appear. In 1951, Sister M. Chauvin, in a study concerned with the figure of the Magdalene in continental as well as English medieval drama, pointed out many of the Digby play's merits and charms, and even proposed that the author,

relying entirely upon his own dramatic instinct,  
selected from his source such themes and incidents  
as were necessary to provide unity to the play,  
and these he treated with characteristic originality,  
freedom and artistry.<sup>9</sup>

Chauvin, however, did not mention any single unifying principle other than the figure of the Magdalene herself, and thus did not make a strong case for the play's unity.

Despite Chauvin's positive emphasis on the artistry, however, negative opinion still persisted. This is illustrated by Arnold Williams, who, writing in 1961, negated one of the very merits Chauvin had praised:

This sprawling play is hardly memorable dramatic art. Characterization, the interplay of character and situation, the purposeful selection of incident to embody theme, of these it has scarcely any. [*italics mine*]<sup>10</sup>

It was not until Leon Lewis's dissertation in 1963 that a full-scale enthusiastic, sympathetic discussion of the Digby Mary Magdalene was undertaken and the theory advanced that this play, rather than being a curious and unworthy remnant of an obscure form, or an amorphous piecing together of other forms, is a "literary milestone" which "contains the fossils of the earliest liturgical drama" and the "seeds of the drama of the Golden Age."<sup>11</sup> Lewis nicely supports the idea of at least a loose structure, but does not devote his main concerns to proving it, although he finds a "unity and consistency of purpose in the underlying theme of spiritual progress--or more dramatically, the theme of the pilgrimage."<sup>12</sup> Pilgrimage, in the medieval sense, meant a journey that was not only physical but spiritual; thus the various romantic episodes of the Magdalene's life provide the play with a

pilgrimage from her pagan life to her sainthood.

This underlying theme of pilgrimage is rather loose and general, however. Since the play is composed of such a controversial fusion of forms, the possibility that it possessed any more than scant or general unity or conscious organization in terms of a specific theme seems to have aroused little comment until in a recent article entitled "Sovereignty in the Digby Mary Magdalene" John W. Velz advanced the theory that the single theme of sovereignty is traceable throughout the play, dramatically and structurally unifying it and possibly supporting an argument for the careful craftsmanship of the playwright. Velz notes that, at the time of the play Mary Magdalene, "sovereignty . . . was the focus of European political philosophy" and he demonstrates further that the play is most concerned with the "true sovereignty of God which the play repeatedly contrasts with false claims to dominion made by men."<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, a corollary to Velz' emphasis on the rulers: yet another theme--so conventional as to nearly escape modern notice--works along with those of sovereignty and pilgrimage. This theme is the contrasted rewards of proud and humble behavior. It is particularly manifest in scenes involving types of masters and servants, especially since Mary Magdalene is the prime example of humble servitude to Christ, himself the chief model of a humble yet efficacious master. Working as counterpoint and parallel throughout the play are a variety of other master-servant relationships, which, together with the language of the play, support and dramatize pride and humility; the play achieves unity through the use of theme.

In this study I intend to argue for the minority opinion of recent criticism that the Mary Magdalene play is a consciously crafted and even successful drama. To support this view I shall first examine some general ways of looking at the medieval dramatic experience, or concepts of medieval



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mimetics, and Mary Magdalene's place in that general view. Then I intend to demonstrate how significant and well-known the conventional Christian homiletic theme of pride contrasted with humility was to a medieval audience. Lastly, I shall examine the play in terms of the playwright's use of language and visual personifications of Pride and Humility as a unifying device, particularly in those scenes involving the interactions of master and servant types.

Before tracing the unifying theme of pride and humility through the various scenes of Mary Magdalene it will be necessary to look at some of the major concepts of medieval drama upon which this paper is based. One reason that some critics and editors have been hesitant to acknowledge even merits, let alone unity in Mary Magdalene, is traceable perhaps to a more modern way of ways of looking at medieval drama--and at life--which are not in accordance with a medieval way of thinking and which therefore will have to be in part rejected for the purposes of this study.

One of the features of that view has been the apparently felt need to classify medieval plays into modern categories: mystery, morality, or saint's play. As Hardin Craig points out, however, "these categories exist only in the mind of the scholar."<sup>14</sup> Another approach has been to see such plays as transitional pieces which receive their chief recognition in having contained the seed of later "good," i.e., Renaissance, drama. John Hurrell has rightly called this attitude "recourse to the theories of naivete, of groping crudity, or of anticipation of future dramatic achievements."<sup>15</sup>

Certainly these modern critical opinions were not part of the consciousness of a medieval audience or playwright, and cannot contribute to an understanding of the technique used by the Mary Magdalene playwright to achieve unity, based on his familiarity with the expectations of his audience. The analysis of unifying features in Mary Magdalene is therefore

better served by closer consideration of medieval habits of thought and conventions of drama. Two assumptions seem particularly necessary.

A first underlying assumption of my view is that the audience of medieval drama was accustomed to having didactic themes conveyed to them primarily through sermons. As G. R. Owst has submitted, the homiletic material was directly contributory to literature,<sup>16</sup> and indeed, ideas such as those about pilgrimage, penitence and pride were certainly widespread and familiar. One such example of these conventional themes is found in Chaucer's Parson's Tale, which takes as its subject penitence as the proper way to the Celestial City, Jerusalem; the penitent pilgrim of this life must moreover reject Pride, which is "the general roote of alle harmes" and the other six deadly sins as well.<sup>17</sup>

A second important assumption is that the age and audience was considerably more receptive not only to religious motifs, but to themes recurring repeatedly and being reworked in new ways into new literature. Since there was an understanding of "simple unity of all created things and of all aspects of life, human and divine . . . a world in which nothing is irrelevant or inappropriate,"<sup>18</sup> dramatic repetition of a variety of familiar as well as incongruous themes was possible. The dramatic repetition of themes was sort of a harmonious and thematically unified ritual celebration (like a Mass) and not monotonous. Thus, a natural way for the dramatic play to proceed was by repetition of thematically related scenes.

Commenting upon this medieval habit of amalgamating and repeating familiar themes, which has its extension in the type of drama we are about to examine, Harold C. Gardiner has said:

the medieval mind was quick to see and appreciate, albeit at times but confusedly, ever-present 'meanings' in common events and everyday occurrences. The interpretation of present realities in the terms of eternity was a habit of mind, ingrained and fostered by a whole tradition of medieval

exegesis and preaching . . . the general fondness for allegory until late in the seventeenth century is proof of how deeply this habit of mind was rooted.<sup>19</sup>

Adoption of a medieval point of view becomes especially important since this play is extremely long; does not fit a single genre category; admits time lapses of up to 30 years in the break between contiguous scenes; employs burning houses, earthquakes, and ships battered by storms; seems to lose sight of its main figure occasionally; and, according to its editors Furnivall and Adams, breaks apart in the middle where biblical materials seem to give way gradually to legendary-romantic material.

However, we must not require the dramatist to abide by modern notions of dramatic unity. The concept of God's universe through the Middle Ages seems to have included a vision of all creation, so that it would be quite natural for a mimetic production to admit both an expansive temporal scope from pre-creation to Doomsday, as well as a vast spatial scope in the Chain of Being. Thus it was possible and even natural to "mingle kings and clowns," to travel across the Mediterranean swiftly, and to provide for spectacular catastrophes and miracles such as we find in Mary Magdalene. Among the structuring devices supporting this concept are scenes which announce and reinforce a theme, and characters who act not out of psychological motivation, but to fulfill ideological principles.

We find, too, parallel and contrasted actions, repeated modes and formulas in visual staging, and inclusion of seemingly unrelated scenes which are arranged with inventiveness to convey allegorically a thematic substance. Many of these features of medieval drama clearly apply to the Mary Magdalene play. We can see that the breadth of scope rises out of the playwright's wealth of materials, characters and incidents to choose from. Since the play's chances of success were enhanced by choice of materials familiar to the audience, a brief consideration of those source materials dealing with

the figure of Mary Magdalene might be illuminating.

Though Caxton's Golden Legend is often cited as an important contributing source upon which the Mary Magdalene playwright based his legendary scenes, it seems equally possible that the play might have preceded the Caxton printing of 1483, or that the playwright was familiar with earlier treatments of the legends upon which the Golden Legend was also based. These include the original Latin Legenda Aurea of the latter 13th century, by Jacobus de Voragine, or an English vernacular translation of it made about 1438. At any rate, the Magdalene's legend had been popularized by the time of the composition of the play.

The Digby playwright combined these romantic-legendary elements with the liturgical dramatic backgrounds of the character Mary Magdalene. He took such incidents as the conversion of Marcyll, the 30 years in the desert and the ship voyages from legendary material, altered them to suit his dramatic purposes, and wove them throughout the play to support and amplify his character Magdalene, as well as others known to him from liturgical drama.

The Magdalene character by the mid-15th century had already acquired a certain prominence in some of the earliest presentations of English as well as continental drama. First she had appeared as one of the three Maries in Easter, Resurrection or quem quaeritis tropes. Because of her increasing popularity, we find Mary Magdalene in all of the principal cycles in scenes of Christ's appearance to her alone at the sepulchre, the raising of Lazarus (generally considered to be her brother), and the dinner at Simon's and wiping of Jesus's feet with her hair.<sup>20</sup> These strictly biblical vignettes from her life served to assure the character a place in the developing English drama.

However, it is for the first time in the Digby play that Mary Magdalene

is the central figure, not a subsidiary character. Her popularity as repentant sinner had been enhanced by the infusion of legendary or apoc-rhphal material and she acquired vast dramatic interest.

Some of that interest derives from the fact that Mary Magdalene is an outstanding type of penitent, as well as fallen woman. No doubt some of her popularity is based on and furthered by her capability of sinning (she was originally a misled servant to Satan) insofar as it made her a human who could be redeemed through the grace of God as well as her own good works. She was not merely a one-dimensional candidate for sainthood based on her untempted servitude to Christ's will.

In support of the larger concept of penitent pilgrimage there is, then, in the Digby Mary Magdalene an idea which was familiar to medieval audiences and which possibly escapes modern notice. This is the theme of individual pridefulness or humility. Its relationship to the ultimate fate of the soul in Christian morality was of great personal interest to medieval audiences, and would be a natural subject to attract a playwright's interest.

The playwright expressed this idea in dramatic form, deriving the readily available abstract idea of pride and humility from the homiletic material of preachers and, to a lesser extent, perhaps, from the literature of his contemporaries.

In sermons as well as in the literature of his age, the medieval man could encounter the concept that "pride goeth before a fall." and, "pride destroys in a man obedience and meekness."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, those very virtues of obedience and meekness are the ones which Mary Magdalene, who fell to Pride, develops through the course of the play in order to achieve salvation.

As the play progresses, Mary Magdalene eventually learns humility from Christ's example, and in turn other characters learn from her example. The

Mary Magdalene playwright, in his function as a didactic moralist, endowed every type of character (divine, celestial, diabolic, minor, comic, holy) with varying degrees of pride or humility.

This didactic moralism was used expansively to cover a wide range of Pride's symptoms. Pride, we are told in Chaucer's Parson's Tale, has many branches and twigs: "Inobedience, Avauntynge [Boasting], Ypocrisie, Despit, Arrogance, Impudence, Swellynge of Herte, Insolence, Elacioun"<sup>22</sup> and many others which are abundantly portrayed in various characters in Mary Magdalene, reinforcing the theme for the medieval audience.

These diverse glimpses of various types in the play make good dramatic sense when we remember that the Christian theme of the sins of pride and virtues of humility was an important living part of the medieval daily consciousness, and encompassed a truly vast array of lesser (but important) concepts subsumed within it, including an individual's concept of his appointed place in life.

The Mary Magdalene playwright has expressed the idea in dramatic form with language and action, and has repeated the theme as a structuring pattern through the play's diverse characters and events. Particularly in the frequent and sometimes contrasted scenes of master and servant this theme comes to light.

Next, I shall examine how this theme is incorporated repetitively in the play's action and language as dramatic metaphor, by which is meant that the audience is given not only the penitent saint to emulate, but varied, recurrent patterns of concrete examples of right or wrong actions which aid (through humility) or hinder (through pride) the attainment of salvation.

In weaving the variations on pride and humility through the play, the playwright has produced spectacle mixed with doctrine; entertainment and

edification are complementary. Comic (farcical) and boasting scenes, juxtaposed with the Magdalene's scenes, are particularly important in conveying this theme.

Almost none of the scenes are causally connected, one to the next.<sup>23</sup> Though the play may be considered continuous in action in terms of Mary's pilgrimage, it is nevertheless necessary to provide a skeletal outline.

In Part I (Furnivall's division) at the same time Caesar and other secular powers are concerned with the Christian problem as a threat to their sovereignty, various episodes from Mary Magdalene's life are presented. She is a dutiful maiden at the beginning. Her father Cyrus wills her the castle Maudleyn, then dies. World, Flesh and Devil, fearful of her virtue as a threat to their powers and to the existence of hell, undertake with the help of the seven deadly sins to bring her to spiritual ruin, and at first they succeed, by sending Lechery to be her servant. Servant and mistress go to a tavern, where Mary meets Pride disguised as a "galaunt," and becomes servant to him and to the other deadly sins. She is later urged by a good angel to repent, and does so humbly in Jesus' presence at the house of Simon the Leper. Other stock biblical scenes follow, such as the raising of Lazarus, her brother, and her meeting of the risen Christ near his tomb.

The long and sensational Part II, composed primarily of legendary materials, finds Mary, now Christ's "apostylesse," going by ship to Marseilles, where she encounters the heathen King and Queen, and eventually converts them through her example and her miracles. The last part of the play quietly presents Mary's thirty year sojourn in the desert, and her serene death and salvation, where she receives the crown of sainthood.

This outline of the play confirms its superficial disunity. What unity there is must therefore be construed in terms of a total theme and



multiple focus, with some help from thematically related analogical scenes which underline and vivify the essential dramatic thrust of the play. This we should keep in mind as we move to an examination of the play.

The first scene provides the motif of prideful power which is carried through the next few scenes and through the play. Tiberius Caesar commands "slylens" and obedience with the traditional ruler's prologue. He proudly makes known to those about him in his Roman court that his power and might are not to be challenged, and that, as a result, Christians will be suppressed. The motif of prideful, boasting ruler is carried through the next three scenes where we see, in turn, Cyrus, father of Mary Magdalene, then the ranting Herod, and finally Pilate. All four leaders, as well as the King of Marcyllie, whom we see much later, emphasize their sovereignty and pride.

The shift to Cyrus in the second scene, breaking the chain of command, as it were, of the usual secular powers, immediately introduces us to our main character, Mary Magdalene, and likewise announces her noble lineage. Her position among the nobles at the start of the play emphasizes her nobility yet provides for the significance of her degradation and contrast in her later humble life-style.

At the end of these scenes there is a call for "wyn and spices," common enough perhaps in medieval drama, but in this play significant in that it sets up a concern the play will have with sustenance of one sort or another. It also serves to portray the lavishness of those scenes in which it occurs, in contrast to Magdalene's humble fare later.

Cyrus, though powerful and proud, is a "good" power figure. We see this in the early scene where he wills property to his children, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and generally shows fatherly concern. He describes Mary, for example, as "ful fayr and ful of femynyte" (71), and refers to his dead wife. This is of course a tag, but is later contrasted in its

application to the vice character Lechery (423) and to the Queen of Marcyllle (943).<sup>24</sup>

After Cyrus has blessed his children, who are left sorrowing, he dies (Scene 6). Death is a concern of this play, since it deals with, among other things, Christ's might over all realms. Mary, it might be noted, when given her portion of the inheritance, sees it in terms of the concrete material gains it would provide her with, enabling her to keep out of the way of poverty and lead a privileged life. This behaviour contrasts sharply with that of her sister Martha, who properly appreciates her father's boon "consederyng ower lowlynes and humylyte" (103).

At Cyrus' death, Mary's wealth and beauty make her vulnerable to what happens next. In scene 7 we suddenly encounter World, Flesh, and Devil and the Seven Deadly sins, all of whom posture as rulers as they meet in a sort of parliament to establish the best means for causing the downfall of Mary Magdalene, since

yf she in vertu styлле may dwelle,  
she xal byn abyll to dystroye helle. (419-420)

Satan, especially, who is "prykeyd in pryde" (358), makes it his particular business to deprive men of that joy which he and his devils "lost for ther pryde" (367). To do so he and the others thus contrive to approach Mary Magdalene in order to make her "A woman of whorshep ower servant" (384).

Satan does not do so directly, however. He sends one of his own servants, Lechery, to do so. The scene involves a great deal of haggling about the devils' respective power and sovereignty, punctuated with a comic episode where Flesh kisses the female personification of Lechery. There is additional comic tone in the ridiculous posturing of the other proud devils, just as Herod is comic in his proud ranting when we already know that Caesar is superior to him and Christ is more powerful than all of them.

It is decided, finally, that Lechery as an intermediary should lure Mary away from the castle of Maudelyn, toward Jerusalem, where the other vices will be waiting. The method of appeal is flattery. Lechery, called Luxurya now, flatters Mary and, ironically, in order to enlist Mary's servitude, offers "your servant to be" (446). This may remind the modern reader of Mephistopheles, who became the dominating "servant" to Faustus; Luxurya does not barter with Mary, however.

Luxurya's action is a hypocrisy to which Mary blindly responds: "your debonarius obedyouns ravyssyt me to trankquelyte!" (447). Luxurya as a vice also means "self-love," so it is not any surprise when we see Mary Magdalene, desirous of self-indulgence, depart with the servant Luxurya, who has persuaded her to amuse herself in order to forget Cyrus' death.

The next scene (9) is the only one with a balanced mixture of literal and allegorical characters. Luxurya brings Mary to the tavern, where the tavern owner is at once a proud boaster in his own domain, reminding us of the earlier boasters. He is also intermediary to Mary's fall, indirectly. Mary meets the "galaunt," called "Curiosity, a Dandy," (stage directions following line 490) who is really Pride in disguise, as we are told by the Bad Angel (550). Once again Mary is seduced by terms of flattery, as Pride-Curiosity boasts of his former conquests and addresses her in terms appealing both to her beauty and to her station (515-521).

Pride and Mary take "soppes in wyne" (536) together, an instance of an increasing interest the play has with sustenance; this scene is echoed ironically in later scenes when Mary's new Master, Christ, repeatedly provides her with corporal and "gostely" bread, and ultimately the Eucharist! (for example, lines 721, 1115, 2027, 2103, 2107).

In this tavern scene, the playwright has thus portrayed Pride as the cause of Mary's fall into sin, assisted by Lechery, or Luxurya.<sup>25</sup> The

emphasis on pride as the cause of man's first sin is certainly not original in homiletic literature, but the incident here emerges from psychological realism--if that overrated term can be applied--while at the same time it sets up a contrast with Mary's later proper submission to a far greater master than Pride.

When Mary is led off by her new seducer-master, she vows (543-46),

Ewyn at your wyl, my dere derlyng!  
thowe ye wyl go to the wordes eynd,  
I wol neuer from yow wynd,  
to dye for your sake.

An ironic echo occurs after a few scenes, when repentant Mary vows to Christ: "I xal porsue the Prophett, wherso he be . . . / And sadly [humbly] folow his lordshep in eche degre" (610, 614). Eventually, she will also say Fiat voluntas tua (2028) to give her full allegiance to her lord, God. The audience, of course, already knows very well the story of her repentance and change of allegiance, and it might be that the playwright is providing them a foretaste of irony in the lines addressed to Pride-Curiosity.

The Bad Angel who has witnessed this fall of Mary Magdalene in Scene 9, reports to the devils that they have gained "a servant fayer and afyabyll" (548) through her allegiance to pride:

ya, pryde callyd corioste, to hur is ful lavdabyll,  
and to hur he is most preysse-abyll,  
for she hath gravnttyd hym al his bones;  
she thynkyt his person so amyabyll,  
to her syte he is semelyar than ony kyng in trones. (550-554)

The dramatic presentation of Mary's life of servitude to sin is very brief, however, since the emphasis in this play is on something other than lechery. We see her in an arbour waiting for one of her "valentyne" (564), and can assume she has known many men at this point. A Good Angel approaches her instead, presumably in a dream vision, and in his words to her reminds us of the cause of her fall:

Remembyr, woman, for thi pore pryde,  
How thi sowle xal lynn in helle fyr! (596-97)

Mary responds with quick repentance and resolves to find Christ, the preacher of "rythwysnesse, and mercy" (587).

Christ, meanwhile, "most benyng and gracyus" (626) and "with pes and grace" (625) (in contrast to earlier power figures), enters Simon's house for a banquet, where Mary finds him. The chief emblematic import of Mary's humility and penitence is fulfilled in the next episode (Scene 14) where she will

wasche the fett of the prophet with  
the terres of hur yys, whypyng hem with hur herre,  
and than a-noynt hym with a precyus noyttment.

Although this is a stage direction, it is also a fitting external or visual manifestation of her humility and submission.

Mary mentions her downfall only in terms of pride when she tells Christ (682) "I haue synnyd in the synne of pryde," and vows to clothe herself (683) "with humelyte." Moreover, in this same scene (14), which is central to the play's themes, Christ has told the parable of the man with two debtors, and how that man's superior position did not inhibit him from treating his debtors with forgiveness. Christ, as creditor and master to all, points out how Mary Magdalene

. . . wassheth my fete, and dothe me servyse,  
and anoy[n]tyt hem with onymentes, lowly knelyng,  
& with her her, fayer and brygth shynnyng,  
she wypeth hem agayn with good In entent. (667-670)

With these words we are reminded of Mary's former pride in her good fortune and her beauty, which she has now submitted to the service of a new master.

In the central lines of acknowledgment of her pride, Mary resolves (in addition to clothing herself with humility) to cultivate "pacyens and char-yte" (685) against wrath and envy. Curiously, nothing is mentioned of lechery or lust here. What is perhaps implied in her conversion is a

modified version of poverty, chastity, and obedience--making these vows more palatable to the lay audience.

Christ's gentle and merciful manner is illustrated when he asks Mary to keep away from sin, drives the seven devils out of her (stage directions do not give us much help envisioning the enactment of this), and departs with his customary vade in pace. To Christ's gentleness we may contrast Herod's harsh manner toward his subordinates when he demands obedience lest "with scharp swerddes to perce the bare" (219). Other haughty impudent rulers throughout the play contrast with Christ's merciful ways of dealing with his servants.

A choric bonus angelus quietly comments on the significance of Christ's mercy in the foregoing events:

Most lowly ower feyth we consyngne,  
that we may com to your blysse gloryfyed from malyngne,  
and with your gostely bred to fede vs, we desyern. (719-721)

Following this very quiet and pious scene there comes a noisy and sensational one. Hell is naturally in an uproar over the sinner who admits that she "was to synne a subiectary" (752) but is now under the rightful lord's "domynacyon" (755). The Bad Angel, something of an eager servant to Satan's circle, now receives his come-uppance for failing in his duty. Fore-shadowing similar scenes later, he is soundly beaten on the buttocks by his master, the King of Devils, or Satan. The function of the servant of an unjust or prideful master is to fulfill a command, come what may. Mercy is not forthcoming from such masters, as it is with Christ.

It is not only the sensation which strikes the reader or observer so much here as the fact that this sensational scene is sandwiched between scenes of Mary's humble servitude and Christ's just and merciful mastery. In contrast, Satan's satisfaction is in dealing out punishment to his ineffectual subordinates, and at the same time dealing humans a blow in

setting a house on fire (it is not clear whose house).

Abundant talk of humble servitude occurs in Scene 16. Mary returns to her brother Lazarus and sister Martha at Castle Maudelyn, which she had left to begin her sinful life.<sup>26</sup> Lazarus, who we know is about to be stricken with death, piously and humbly says to Mary Magdalene

glad In hart of yower obessyawne,  
 wheyl that I leffe, I wyl serve hym with honour,  
 that ye have forsakyn synne and varyawns (765-767)

We are assured, if we did not know before, which camp he is in.

The role of a just master is iterated in the next scene as Mary and Martha go "beyond Jordan" to fetch their master Jesus "in all lowlynesse" (796) in order to cure their brother. Jesus is, among other things, a healer-physician of men's bodies as well as spirits. We have just seen him heal Mary spiritually in scene 14; soon he will raise Lazarus. Between these events, in scene 15, we witness archrival Master Satan committing violence upon a servant for having failed at his duty. The contrast of the two masters is striking.

Furthermore, immediately preceding the raising of Lazarus, the action is suspended as Christ tells (scene 19) of his own submission not only to his Father's will, but for the needs of mankind, for whom he will undergo crowning, beating, scourging and death. The point of his message here is actually the significance of Resurrection, but we are reminded nevertheless of his becoming low, or poor: "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (II Corinth. vii, 9).

The prototype of the Resurrection, Lazarus, is raised, signifying Christ's coming mastery over life and death. In these scenes Christ, as all-powerful healer-physician, is a human-divine example. By now it is clear who is sovereign here, and the stage directions indicate that "all the pepull" spontaneously shout that they believe in Jesus. This is a nice

turn when contrasted with the initial scene in which Tiberius has to threaten and prod his lackeys to shout his recognition as ruler:

lord and lad, to my law doth lowte;  
is it nat so? sey yow all with on showte.

[Here answeryt all the pepul at ons, ya, my lord, ya.

(43-44)

The matter of power has come to a climax, and Christ has wished us vade in pace once again.

Immediately following Jesus' powerful and climactic act of raising Lazarus, we are introduced to a new power figure, the King of Marcyllle. From this point on there is a preponderance of legendary concerns, so that perhaps it is not too much to insist, as Furnivall does with his division here, that "Part II" begins in Scene 21.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to Jesus' parting words to his people, this proud King, like Tiberius and Herod, abusively exhorts his lowly wretches to obey and boasts that he is head of heathendom. He is, nevertheless, capable of addressing his consort in terms of high praise, before he orders wine and spices.

There follows a scene which Madeleine Doran considers "not even tangential to the Magdalene's life,"<sup>28</sup> the Harrowing of Hell. In this play, however, the scene serves to signal the lapse in time, implies that Christ's death and resurrection have occurred, and thus symbolizes his power while moving directly into matters more concerned with the figure of Mary Magdalene.

Although the legendary part has been introduced with the King of Marcyllle, it is suspended for the time being. What comes instead is the oldest scene of liturgical drama: the three women visit the empty tomb of Christ risen. What is significant here is that Mary Magdalene, who leads the group, has followed her Lord to his death, reminding us of her earlier



misplaced vow to the gallant Curiosity, and her present proper loyalties.

The three women address the cross, which they say has bowed down humbly to a divine master who had humbled himself "mannys sowle to bye from all thraldam" (1007). Mary then wanders alone in the garden, dismayed at Christ's disappearance, and meets a man she first takes to be the gardener. This gardener asks (1062) "wom sekest thou? tell me this." His lowly appearance and function is immediately juxtaposed with the higher nature of his true essence as Mary exclaims: "gracyus master and lord" (1070) and later "thou dere worthy emperowere, thou hye devyne!" (1086). She deems herself (even if she cannot kiss or anoint him now) once again his servant, ever willing to fulfill his will (1129-30).

Her ready and humble servitude is an appropriate response to Jesus' earlier words to the three Maries:

be stedfast, and I xall ever with the be,  
and with all tho that to me byn meke. (1094-5)

With these words, Jesus emphasizes to his "pore servantes thre" (1128) and also to the audience, one of the central messages of the play.

An abrupt switch takes us back again to Marseilles, where we are treated to a superficially farcical scene, which incorporates a presbyter and his boy, who are to perform a "hethene servyse" for the King and Queen. The boy-clerk Hawkyn must be one of the cheekiest lads to have appeared in medieval drama. He shows his disrespect for his heathen master, the presbyter, by taunting him and calling him as fat as the Devil, and kindred to the Devil. He also lapses into Latin macaronics where he should be performing the service piously; he behaves in a generally fresh and impudent manner until eventually he is humbled by a beating from his Master (recalling the earlier devil's beating). The dignity of the moment has been severely reduced when the pair finally does get round to the anachronistic offering to Mahomet. In view of the presbyter/clerk scene and the earlier beating

by Satan, along with one scene to come, Arnold Williams' comment that "one imagines all these master-and-boy scenes were done by the same pair of comics" seems very sound indeed.<sup>29</sup>

The burlesque is supportive of the play's themes in its feature of the unmerciful (perhaps diabolic?) master and his impudent servant, particularly as we have just witnessed Mary's quiet submission to her master. Scenes throughout the play are arranged, if not for balanced structure, then at least in such a way as to suggest an equation between rewards for humility and punishments for pride. The scene ends with the presbyter cursing his boy clerk and displaying Mahomet's relics (neck-bone, eyelid, etc.) to the King.

Although the next three scenes are not particularly expedient dramatically, entailing as they do no mention of Mary Magdalene, they nevertheless serve as exposition of and counterpoint to what has just gone before. Pilate sends a messenger to Herod, and Herod to Caesar, with news of the disappearance of Christ's body. Since any Christian observer knows that the Resurrection has taken place, the contrast to Mahomet's pitiful relics in the previous scene is ironic and serves once again to emphasize Christ's power. In Scene 31 Magdalene very briefly and chorically corrects the secular opinion of the three rulers, that the body was stolen, and signals the lapse of time once again with a reference to the Pentecost. We are thus prepared for the stage direction: "Her xal hevyne opyne and Iesus xall shew."

First, he praises his mother Mary in terms of nobility and goodness. Then he turns his attention to Mary Magdalene, making her position of servant to his will once again clear.

"Butt now of my servantt I remembyr the kendnesse" (1366). Like the sovereigns in the scenes just prior to this one, he sends an intermediary,

or messenger, out to give an order. The angel Raphael dutifully replies:

O gloryus lord, I woll resortt  
to shew your servant of yower grace (1372-73)

and goes to tell her to convert Marseilles.

Mary complies obediently and willingly, of course. As she sets out we again encounter a comic-farce scene which underlines thematic demands. A shipmaster has ordered his "boy" to procure food and drink, but the boy declines rather insolently, claiming to be sick. The master is overbearing and impatient, like sovereigns and Satan, and beats the boy. When Magdalene embarks, however, requesting passage to Marseilles, the boy is henceforth "cured" (or fears another beating) and becomes a dutiful servant to the Shipmaster: "All redy, master, at thyn hand" (1445).

Upon landing at Marseilles, Mary encounters the King and preaches to him of the deeds and creative powers of God and the Son, at the same time admonishing of the duties and privileges of God's servants:

. . . al shold reverens make  
to hyr makar that hem doth susteyn,  
vp-on the sonday to leuen In his servyse,  
and hym alonly to serve, I tell yow pleyn. (1523-26)

This ultimate commandment to serve the maker who sustains us, however, only angers the King and he responds by threatening to cut out her tongue rather than give any sustenance after her long journey. They go to the temple in Scene 36 to test the powers of each one's respective deities, and her God supports her in allowing Magdalene to work some miracles: the idol of Mahomet quakes, the temple is destroyed by fire and the priest and clerk sink.

These sensational miracles are of little avail, however, and Magdalene is not entirely successful in her request that the king help the needy and lowly with all his riches. His urgent wish that his wife become pregnant must be granted before he "wyl a-bey thi god, and to hym be meke and myld" (1570).

Mary, meanwhile, returns to her wretched hut and humbly requests sustenance from her master (God). This concern with sustenance, as noted above, has been echoed frequently at various points in the play. Christ, the exemplary master, provides spiritual as well as bodily sustenance and succour to his servants and sinners who are meek. Obedience on the part of servants is rewarded by charity and mercy and grace on the part of the proper masters. These and following scenes with the King of Marcyllle function as instructions to the rich and powerful: Christ takes care of the "gostely" sustenance of his servants in giving them grace; it is the duty of earthly masters and sovereigns to provide charitably for their loyal subjects' bodily needs.

Thus, to enable his servant's success, Christ sends angels to Magdalene with "sustinons corporall" (1590) and in addition, a white robe, to which Mary Magdalene responds:

thys clothyng of whyte is tokenyng of mekenesse.  
now, gracyus Lord, I woll natt wond,  
yower preseptt to obbey with lowlynesse. (1608-10)

In this garment she approaches the King in a sort of dream vision and petitions him to "help them that haue nede" (1632), meaning the poor and hungry and cold. Upon waking he recognizes that it is his duty "Pore folk In mysch[ef], them to susteyn" (1656). With this announcement of his intention to do God's will, his wish for a child is granted.

The fine distinctions between the lowly and the powerful become blurred here as the woman from the humble hut now becomes the once-proud king's deputy. The King trustingly leaves his realm of Provence to Mary to govern, while he and his pregnant wife embark to seek out St. Peter for instruction and baptism.

From the solemn but happy spectacle of conversion we move on to a scene of a lighter nature. A (second?) Shipmaster and his boy, named

Grobbe, spot "Marcylle shore" from their ship; upon arriving, they are requested by the King (possibly in humbler robes by now) to set sail for the Holy Land.

A comic scene ensues when the Shipmaster, not recognizing a King, hints at lechery in suggesting that the man has "stollyn sum mannes wyffe" (1735) and wants to carry her away. The converted King's language and attitude is far from his earlier heathen blustering: instead of "blabyr-lyppyd bycchys" (927), recalling Satan's "betyll browyd bycheys" (724), he now prefers to call his subordinates "gentyll marraner" or "gentyll master" (1868, 1882).

Soon after they set sail, the Queen goes into labor, delivers a boy during a raging storm, and dies. Superstition causes those on shipboard to urge the King to leave her and the baby on a large rock nearby, but the king is concerned that for lack of sustenance the baby must die. He leaves them, nevertheless and finally disembarks in Palestine, handsomely rewarding, not bribing, his ship-servants.

A proud king has by stages become apprentice to a humble fisherman. After two years' apprenticeship to Peter, to whom he had come "ower the se, Crystes servant and yower to be" (1855-6), he is baptized. He returns homeward by way of the rock and finds his Queen and son miraculously restored and preserved. The Queen proclaims, "O demvr Mavdlyn, my bodyys sustynavns" (1903). Once they have reached Marseilles, they generously reward the sailors, then praise, thank and kneel down before Mary Magdalene, who comes to welcome them. In this act of obeisance it becomes clear that Christian spiritual claims take mastery over powerful worldly ones.

Mary has greeted them with a conventional thought of the Middle Ages, and one which supports the major themes of the play: Paupertas est donum Dei. In a set didactic speech which reminds us of the Beatitudes, she

points out that poverty is a gift of God, and is furthermore God's test of humility and meekness. Even kings must be made to endure this dungeon of sorrow called earthly existence, in order to merit rewards in the after-life. Or, as T. S. Eliot puts it in Murder in the Cathedral: "Make yourself the lowest on earth to be high in heaven." The emphasis in the last few scenes is clearly on how the powerful and proud can humble themselves to become proper servants to God's will while at the same time providing for their unfortunate brethren placed below them on earth. As the royal pair kneel before her, therefore, Mary Magdalene proclaims:

god blyssyt alle tho that byn meke and good,  
 & he blyssyd all tho that wepe for synne.  
 they be blyssyd that the hungor and the thorsty gyff fode,  
 they be blessyd that byn mercyfull a-gen wrecched men. (1932-35)

This modified Sermon on the Mount moves the King to resolve to reject Mahound totally and persecute heretics:

. . . hys pryde owt of my love xall have polucion,  
 & holle on-to Iesu I me be-take. (1988-89)

With her mission completed, Mary goes to live with humility, charity and abstinence in the desert "all dayys of my lyfe" (1995). The reader, if not the observer, might remember her intention to follow her seducer Pride "to the wordes eynd" (544).

The last part of the play is mainly expository-didactic with little interplay of character. There is, however, a great deal of language pertaining to Mary's servitude, obedience and patience. "Fiat voluntas tua" she says to her Lord, who has sent angels for 30 years to give her sustenance. A priest serves as intermediary to Mary Magdalene from God, just as the angels have, and it is he who humbly administers that final sustenance provided by the Master to his servant: the Eucharist. Mary Magdalene receives the "celestial bred" and dies, achieving a high place and a crown by the merits of her humility and works.

## Conclusion

Mary Magdalene was written in an age when accepted drama was that which portrayed a total view of God's universe and man's means to salvation within that universe. Such drama assisted the church by instructing the laity in ways to salvation by providing appealing dramatic examples to emulate. The life of Mary Magdalene was probably particularly effective in this regard, since she was a popular model of humble and penitent servitude to God, having achieved salvation despite her previous fall (through pride) into sinfulness.

In this dramatic rendering of her pilgrimage toward salvation we have seen that the language of pride and humility, mastery and servitude, suffuses the play. Pride can manifest itself in any character in the play, regardless of station. Blind, vain pride causes Mary Magdalene to fall; proud boasting, misused power over subordinates, and self-gratifying behavior are traits found in devils, kings, and even shipmasters and heathen priests. Servants of these masters show pride in their recalcitrant manner of insolent behavior, and are almost inevitably beaten by their unmerciful masters.

In contrast to prideful behavior, however, the play gives us three powerful examples of humility: God (or Christ); Mary Magdalene; and the King of Marcyllle. God humbles himself to become man, resulting in man's Redemption. Christ is shown in Mary Magdalene to be the most worthy of masters in that he constantly grants mercy and sustenance, in contrast to masters who announce their pride and beat their servants. Mary Magdalene becomes servant to God's will, resulting in individual salvation, example, and sainthood. She learns humble behavior and becomes an example for it to the King of Marcyllle, who becomes a proper earthly master when he assumes the function of providing corporal sustenance and comfort to his poor subjects. The secular figure King of Marcyllle thus puts away pride and provides for the poor, resulting ultimately in the conversion of Europe.

We can see then that the master/servant relationships are a natural means for the dramatic appearance of pride and humility. Proud masters of any rank demand respect and obedience, give out verbal abuse and beatings, and deny mercy. Proper masters on the other hand receive praise spontaneously, bestow mercy and forgiveness readily, are generous in giving material boons, and endow disciples or trusted servants with power. Obedience and meekness, not insolence on the part of servants, are reciprocated and rewarded with mercy and generosity from proper masters.

It is especially significant that these themes are conveyed not only in the central scenes involving Mary Magdalene in her ministry to Christ, or in didactic interludes, but also in the comic and traditional boasting scenes considered by most critics to be extraneous. These scenes, too, are incorporated to reinforce and reassert the thematic progression.

Thus, the theme of pride and humility, conveyed primarily by language and personified in the interplay of masters and servants, gives the play a unified direction where psychological intrigue and motivations may be lacking. There emerges a panoramic but thematically unified play which lends both universality and particularity to the concept of man's relations to his God and to his fellow man. It is a play for everyman; at least, every medieval man, since modern Western man has probably lost much of the perspective through which to appreciate and enjoy it.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>F. J. Furnivall, The Digby Plays, Early English Text Society, E.S., No. 70 (1896; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. vii. This text was reprinted from Furnivall's edition for the New Shakspeare Society in 1882, reissued by E.E.T.S. in 1896 and reprinted in 1930 and in 1967. Furnivall notes the MS. copier's date, 1512, and cites evidence that the text was possibly written "20 years in advance." (Line numbers in parentheses in the examination of the play refer to Furnivall's edition; <sup>1</sup>p and <sup>3</sup> have been modified to th and y.)

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Sharp, Ancient Mysteries from the Digby Manuscript, (Edinburgh: Abbotsford Club, 1835). Furnivall, p. vii, says that only 50 copies were issued.

<sup>3</sup>See note 1.

<sup>4</sup>David Bevington, Medieval Drama (Cambridge: Houghton, 1975), pp. 687-753.

<sup>5</sup>Leon Lewis, "The Play of Mary Magdalene," Diss. University of Wisconsin, 1963.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Q. Adams, ed., Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas (Cambridge: Houghton, 1924), pp. 225-242. Adams reprints the first half, or Scenes 1-20, the part he believes to have been performed before lunch. Alfred W. Pollard, ed., English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), pp. 49-63. Pollard includes extracts from the play of Mary Magdalene.

<sup>7</sup>K. Schmidt, "Die Digby Spiele: Fortsetzung und Schluss," Anglia, 8 (1885), 372.

<sup>8</sup>Pollard, p. 193.

<sup>9</sup>Sister Mary John of Carmel Chauvin, The Role of Mary Magdalene in Medieval Drama (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1951), p. 186.

<sup>10</sup>Arnold Williams, The Drama of Medieval England (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1961), p. 166.

<sup>11</sup>Lewis, p. i.

<sup>12</sup>Lewis, p. xliii. Sister Chauvin has also commented briefly upon this theme (p. 195). Because of his view of this theme, Lewis has edited the play in a somewhat different manner from Furnivall's, particularly as regards division of scenes, but his edition is not readily available. See note 26.

<sup>13</sup>John W. Velz, "Sovereignty in the Digby Mary Magdalene," Comparative Drama, 2 (1968), 32-33. I am indebted to Velz's article for many of the thoughts concerning proud rulers.

<sup>14</sup> Hardin Craig, English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> John Hurrell, "The Figural Approach to Medieval Drama," College English, 26 (1965), 602.

<sup>16</sup> G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961).

<sup>17</sup> F. N. Robinson, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Houghton, 1957), p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> Hurrell, p. 601.

<sup>19</sup> Harold C. Gardiner, Mysteries End (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Compare such scenes from the cycles as the following: Lazarus scenes in Chester XIII, Ludus XXV, Towneley XXI and York XXIV; At Simon the Leper's in Chester XIV and Ludus XXVII; Mary Magdalene in the Garden or at the Sepulchre in Chester XXVIII, Ludus XXXVII, Towneley XXVIII and York XXXIX.

<sup>21</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press: 1952), p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Madeleine Doran, Endeavours of Art (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 263.

<sup>24</sup> A positive, respectful attitude toward women is significant in a play whose heroine should be emulated. Curiosity and Flesh patronize their women with lust. King of Marcyll, initially a heathen but later a "good" character, from the outset describes his consort in proper terms, as she also will be a model of conversion.

<sup>25</sup> Bloomfield notes, (p. 431) that the "tavern is called the devil's church" and cites (p. 215) "in a description of the devil's church, (Lollard's Lanterne of Ligt) we are told that its foundations are gluttony and lechery, and its roof is pride." He further notes (p. 206) that a late 15th century Cambridge poem "attempts, without complete success, to make an acrostic out of the seven letters of "galaunt" to apply to the initial letters of the seven deadly sins." The Digby playwright has only personified Pride in his "galaunt." (l 550)

<sup>26</sup> Owst, p. 93, notes that it is a "commonplace of the pulpit" to portray symbolic castles attacked by vices.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, p. xliv, finds an interesting 5-part structure rather than dividing the play in the usual manner of biblical-legendary: "1) the early life, family background, etc.; 2) the fall; 3) the conversion; 4) the life in the world; 5) the life of meditation and spiritual perfection."

<sup>28</sup>Doran, p. 264.

<sup>29</sup>Williams, p. 166.

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A UNIFYING THEME IN THE DIGBY MARY MAGDALENE

by

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## Abstract

Until very recently critics seem to have presumed that the Digby play of Mary Magdalene lacks unity primarily because it is an elaborate combination of mystery cycle scenes, allegorical morality elements and romantic hagiography. This study attempts to show in an examination of the structure of the play that the playwright has consciously employed in various ways the conventional homiletic theme of Pride contrasted with Humility to give the play cohesion. A consideration of medieval notions of drama contributes to this different way of comprehending unity in terms of theme.

The playwright has used the thematic contrast of Pride and Humility not only in the Magdalene's scenes and in the didactic passages of the play, but also in those scenes involving characters who are seen by most critics as extraneous: boasting sovereigns and "realistic" comic/farcical pairs.

In this play it is Pride that causes Mary Magdalene to fall, while Humility is the greatest virtue with which she clothes herself to achieve her servitude to the true Master, Christ. In addition, the playwright portrays the workings of Pride and Humility in other master-servant relationships which serve the play's thematic aims by providing verbal and visual comment, counterpoint, parallel and contrast.

Proud masters of various ranks demand respect and obedience, give out verbal abuse and beatings, and deny mercy. In contrast, proper masters (Christ is the chief example) receive praise spontaneously, bestow mercy and forgiveness readily, and are charitable and provide spiritual or corporal sustenance for their subjects or subordinates. Proud servants who show insolence are almost inevitably beaten by their masters. The humble servant, of which Mary Magdalene is the chief example, is obedient, meek and patient, and ultimately wins the crown of sainthood.

The play progresses thematically to show in various ways the consequences of Pride and rewards of humble behavior in Mary Magdalene's life and in medieval man's struggle towards salvation.