

# Pilate's Special Letter: Writing, Theater, and Spiritual Knowledge in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*

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## I.

In 1453, William Oldhall, the duke of York's chamberlain, was accused of putting up libels on doors and windows at Bury St. Edmunds. According to an Ipswich jury report, Oldhall and his accomplices posted "diverse bills and writing" claiming that Henry VI, through the counsel of the duke of Suffolk, had sold England to France and that England would be ruled by the king's uncle of France. The report also states that the insurgents sent letters to several counties of England "urging rebellion against the king, on account of which the duke of Suffolk was murdered."<sup>1</sup> As an important document that bears witness to this historical incident of sedition, the jury report testifies to an active textual environment, in which written forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Public Record Office, Ancient Indictments Suffolk, K. B. 9/118/30. I use the record quoted in Lander 63.

communication, pasted on men's doors and windows, emerged as a familiar feature of the society. The language of the jury, however, conveys their anxiety about the subversive power of written words as well as their doubt about the claims of the insurgents. The jury charges that the rebels produced "bills" and "letters" with an intention to bring discord between the king and his subjects and to usurp the throne; therefore, the rebels' claims that the king had sold England to France is not reliable. As the jury claims, the rebels' messages could have been fabrications with a specific purpose for propaganda. How then can we trust the jury report as a faithful record of this event? To what extent can we rely on the truth of its account? How impartial could the report be? Produced during a period marked by an increased use of propaganda, this document could not have been immune to factional interests and opinions.<sup>2</sup> Our skepticism over the reliability of a written document is justified when we read the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene*, particularly the scene in which Pilate attempts to falsify the scriptural event of Christ's Crucifixion.

Focusing on the letter of Pilate to Tiberius represented in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, this paper explores anxiety about written documents and textual authority in East Anglian drama. Although scholars have suggested that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* was composed during the late fifteenth century and has significant connections to Bury St. Edmunds, a direct link between the play and the Ipswich jury report cannot be established especially since no external evidence exists to confirm the play's exact provenance.<sup>3</sup> The historical event registered in the jury report, however, was neither a unique nor peculiar phenomenon of the moment; both the

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the Oldhall trial mentioned in the Ipswich jury report as an example, Scase states that some descriptions of bills contained in chronicles could be fabrications, since allegations of bill-posting would have been easy to concoct and hard to disprove (228).

<sup>3</sup> On the provenance of the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, see Coletti, *The Drama of Saints* 36-7; Gibson, "Bury St. Edmunds" 56-90; and Findon 15-6.

Ipswich jury report and the Digby play are deeply implicated in the growth of documentary culture testified by the number of wills, letters, and household accounts produced by the prosperous gentry and nobility in East Anglia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Rather than celebrating the expediency of written words, however, the play demonstrates resistance to the spread of documentary culture, criticizing its inefficacy and use as a tool of oppression and bureaucratic corruption. The letters of the temporal rulers in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* exemplify such skepticism about writing and the value of written documents. The negative theatrical representations of the letter are closely related to the importance of spectacle and bodily experience in East Anglian drama. Discussing the late medieval religious culture of East Anglia, Gail McMurray Gibson observes that the fundamental goal of fifteenth-century aesthetics is to “steryn mannys affecciou and his herte to devocioun” through concrete images, since simple men may feel more by “syghte þan be heryng or redyngge” (14-5).<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of Incarnation, which glorified God’s image in human form and likeness, received a literal interpretation in the Christian art of this period and established one of the crucial principles of the fifteenth century religious drama.

Gibson’s monumental discussions of late medieval religious culture and the “incarnational” aesthetic have made the attention to visual and spectacular images essential to the study of East Anglian plays, triggering many critical works on the importance of spectacle and its social context.<sup>5</sup> Scarcely any effort has been made, however, to read East Anglian drama

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<sup>4</sup> The quotations are from *Dives and Pauper* 82.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Coldewey, for example, describes “spectacle” as the “single distinguishing theatrical characteristic” of East Anglian plays and argues that the spectacular aspect originated in their function as “profit making enterprises” (206). See also, “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays,” in which Meg Twycross discusses how medieval drama exploits to the full the potential for spectacle in the characters’ movement about the stage (63).

in view of the conspicuous growth of documentary culture in the region and its impact on late medieval theatrical productions. This paper argues that the East Anglian saint's play mobilizes developments in late medieval documentary culture in order to demonstrate how the visual and physical dimensions of theater give access to spiritual truths with a kind of immediacy that the written document cannot provide. Writing is an important theme in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* because it is unstable and thereby implicitly counters a different idea of the Word, Christ. The emphasis on bodily experience implicated in the spectacle and concrete images of medieval theater expresses anxiety about the spread of writing and written documents, which became more and more important in contemporary society.

## II.

A thriving center of English cloth trade, East Anglia in the fifteenth century laid claim to many prominent writers, including Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Osbern Bokenham, John Norwich, John Metham, and the hagiographer John Capgrave. Though not from East Anglia, John Lydgate was deeply involved with the production of East Anglian drama, spending most of his life as a monk at the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds.<sup>6</sup> Home of many monks trained in Oxford, the abbey was one of the greatest centers of religious learning and owned a library with two thousand manuscripts, making it in the fifteenth century second only to Oxford. Not only professional and religious writers but also numerous laymen and laywomen contributed to nurturing textual culture as literary patrons, readers, testators, and letter-writers. According to Ralph Hanna III and A.

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<sup>6</sup> Gibson suggests Lydgate's authorship of parts of the *N-Town cycle*, pointing to Bury St. Edmunds as its provenance ("Bury St. Edmunds" 90).

S. G. Edwards, the Ellesmere manuscript of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* has a connection with Bury St. Edmunds since Pastons, Drury's, and De Veres, outstanding families in the neighborhood of Bury St. Edmunds, seem to have been involved with the production and circulation of the manuscript as its potential owners or readers (16). The literate activities of East Anglian laywomen are similarly well documented. Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, for instance, evidences women's contribution to the growth of a regional literary culture. As Carole Meale points out, in Bokenham's book, six of the thirteen legends were explicitly written for East Anglian laywomen (138).<sup>7</sup>

East Anglia was also one of the most litigious regions in England. Its close association with contemporary legal circles was another crucial factor in the establishment of the region's written culture. Historians have explored the contribution of legal professions to the intellectual and cultural development of late medieval English society, particularly the educational construction of the Inns of Court (Ives, "Common Lawyers" 181-217; Clanchy 21-28; Green xiv; Parkes 555-77).<sup>8</sup> Among the Inns active in the fifteenth century, Lincoln's Inn had a special connection with East Anglia; it had a high proportion of students from the region because lawyers from Lincoln's Inn became patrons and sent local students to the institution they had attended (Ives, *Common Lawyers* 36; Moreton 10). Compared to other Inns of Court, Lincoln's Inn had a highly developed educational system concentrating on learning legal texts (Ives, "Common Lawyers" 206-07),

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<sup>7</sup> For detailed discussions of the literate activities by late medieval East Anglian laymen and laywomen, see Beadle 89-105; Coldewey 192; Coletti, *The Drama of Saints* 6-10; Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion* Chapters 2 and 4; Meale 138; and Scherb, *Staging Faith* 23-9.

<sup>8</sup> The Inns of Court was also an important center of dramatic activities. Historical records show that Lincoln's Inn regularly celebrated Christmas festivities with professional players and minstrels; see Ives, *The Common Lawyers* 38; and "The Common Lawyers" 183-5.

which might explain why East Anglia had a written culture relatively more mature than those of other regions. The contribution of many notable lawyer families in this region, such as the Pastons and the Townshends, were enormous. The Pastons composed and preserved a massive number of letters and documents, whose prolific and vivid accounts attest to the family's deep trust in the value of written evidence. The Townshends were also famous for their meticulous record-keeping; the personal records cataloging all the deeds and evidences relating to their property show that the family understood what they could achieve with writing.

The intellectual and literate culture of East Anglia explains the textual metaphors abounding in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. The textual activities of the three tyrants in the play, all engaged with reading, writing, and interpreting documents, represent increasing East Anglian investment in written culture. Tiberius dictates to the Provost his letter to Herod and Pilate, requesting information about Christians disobedient to his rule; later Pilate replies to Tiberius's request in writing. Associated only with evil characters, however, the textual activities of these tyrants are portrayed in a negative way. Herod first appears on stage with his "show-stopping fit" (Bush 158) upon hearing the philosophers' interpretation of the scriptural prophecy. A raging Herod, who expected from the philosophers flattering words confirming his sovereignty, threatens Christ and his followers with flaying and murder when the philosophers quote the Bible that "a myty duke xal rese and reyn / Whych xall reyn and rewle all Israell. / No kyng aʒens hys worthyneſ xall opteyn" (180-82).<sup>9</sup> As both Herod and his philosophers consider Scripture only as a document and interpret it literally, they fail to perceive the spiritual message of the Gospel.

Herod's reading of the scriptural passage has social and religious undertones that are highly evocative of the issues surrounding the Lollard

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<sup>9</sup> All the quotations from the Digby *Mary Magdalene* in this paper are from the EETS edition.

movement during the late Middle Ages. Interestingly, John Wycliff employs in *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior* the analogy of a scribe's letters and their meaning in order to counter the argument that his views on the Eucharist will lead the people to lose faith in it. Explicating how the letters that scribes "scribble" on a material surface convey meaning to a cleric in a "far more fundamental and noteworthy manner than the material forms signify themselves," Wycliff emphasizes the need for a "hermeneutic leap" (Green 284) between *signified* and *signifier*, an idea indebted to the growth of a literate mentality of the period.<sup>10</sup> The philosophers' interpretation of the scriptural passages and Herod's response show, however, that written letters hardly stimulate spiritual understanding of the *signified*. Herod's limited understanding cannot make the hermeneutic leap between the secular and the spiritual "duke" (180), and erroneously compares himself to God. Lollard heresy trials continued throughout the fifteenth century, and persecution of the Lollards in East Anglia was especially severe during the second quarter of the century. Produced in the period of intensive religious controversy, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* might echo some of the theological arguments concerning the Lollards.

Despite Herod's boast about his authority as the "grettest governowur"

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<sup>10</sup> As for Wycliff's analogy of the scribe's letters in *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior*, see the passage quoted in Green 284: "The following concrete example will demonstrate how bare and absurd is the argument that if it were to remain bread it might signify the substance of bread more than the body of Christ: When scribes scribble letters, phrases, and statements on a material surface, these remain as material overlay and by their accidents signify the overlay itself. And yet these accidents, set down in order to convey meaning to those who by skill and other natural qualities understand letters, signify in a far more fundamental and noteworthy manner than the material forms signify themselves, insofar that what layperson takes as a natural signification is of worth to the cleric. So much the more should the quality of faith lead the faithful to understand through the consecrated bread the true body of Christ" (translations by Green). On the connection between the Lollard movement and the production of East Anglian drama, see Dillon 27 and 56-57.

(166), in his rant looms the fear of subversion and of “woys” spread “prevely or pertely” (204-05) throughout the land. The tyrant’s concerns about rebels who disobey the king and the law are reminiscent of the Ipswich jury’s report discussed above, in which the jury states that Oldhall and his associates attempted to “destroy the law and the king” and “promoted division and hatred” by circulating “diverse bills and writings” containing false information about the king. Herod’s fear of usurpation by a “myty duke [that] xal rese and reyn [Israel]” resonates with the jury’s charge that the treasonous rebels moved the duke of York to “have the realm and crown of England.” A similar scene occurs in the palace of Tiberius. Apparently, Tiberius is confident about his authority as the “chyff rewlar” (4) whom nobody could disobey. Yet his claim to dominion is unsettled by his awareness of possible subversion, and his first dramatic act as emperor is a demand for information about people rebellious to his rule. When the Provost promptly responds to his demand for information, Tiberius exclaims, “Lo how all þe word obeyit my domynacyon!” (31). But the emperor’s next speech about his fear of Christ who is yet to be born but “dare [him] dysseobey” (32) reveals the groundlessness of his own sense of power and authority. This insecure tyrant uses writing as an instrument of domination. The Digby dramatist’s critique of Tiberius’s “textual” tyranny is evident as he conveys to Herod and Pilate his will to suppress seditious voices in the form of a written letter. Condemning anyone who speaks against (“grocth or grone” 38) him and preaches “Crystys incarnacyon” (28), Tiberius orders them to find out “harlettys” since both of them hold their power “of me [Tiberius] be ryth” (126).

Although Tiberius fills his letter to Herod and Pilate with threats, specifying their subordinate position, Pilate receives it with “grete reverens” (s.d. 256) as if the letter is the emperor himself rather than words written on a piece of sheepskin. Pilate’s reverent gestures carries a spiritual connotation, closely associated with the biblical concept of Jesus as the



“heavenly charter” (Watson 106) and a token of love, through which God communicates himself to humanity in the person of the Word. Tiberius’s message emphasizing the duty and obedience of his subordinates stands in opposition to the unconditional love of God, who forgives even the most wretched sinners. In his letter, Tiberius reminds Pilate and Herod of their obligation to follow the imperial order. Jesus the “King” (753), however, has pity on his “creacyown” (753) and saves Mary Magdalene who has been “drynychyn in synne” (754). The emperor holds sway over Herod and Pilate with the threat of death. But Jesus holds Mary in “obessyawmse” (765) with love and “sokour” (763). Tiberius’s self-centered and aggrandizing words underscore the distance between the degenerated language of human beings and the Word, whereas the incarnate voice of God communicates love and establishes the bonds of a holy community. Jesus the Word conveys peace and unity; Tiberius’s letter only aggravates the “divisioun” that he seeks to redress in vain.

In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, letter-writing, depicted mostly as an activity of the secular power, signals East Anglian dramatic engagement with the social and political functions of writing. While in late medieval England writing served as a convenient means of communication and governance for the gentry and aristocrats who had an urgent need for information, social resistance against this newly developed “technology” was as strong.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the massive circulation of propaganda during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries generated skepticism about the ways that writing could be abused. As the Ipswich jury report shows, a written document was powerful but unreliable as its truth, intermingled with falsehood, was hard to discern. The ways in which Pilate writes and circulates his letter reveal such problems of documentary abuse. After the Resurrection of Christ, Pilate asks his sergeants for advice on how to

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<sup>11</sup> On writing as a kind of “technology,” see Clanchy 88-115.

inform Tiberius about the truth of the event. The dramatist's anachronistic substitution of contemporary figures such as sergeants for the scriptural chief priests introduces the theme of judicial corruption while locating this biblical scene specifically in late medieval England. The characterization of Pilate in this play differs from the scriptural descriptions or the ruthless evil tyrant figure portrayed in the Townley *Play of the Talents*.<sup>12</sup> The biblical accounts present Pilate as a false judge whose indecision leads to the Crucifixion of Christ. He is neither informed of the truth of the Resurrection nor does he understand the meaning of Christ's Passion. But in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Pilate's speech reveals his belief in the actuality of Christ's Resurrection. Pilate calls Jesus "a man of grett vertu" (1253) who had done many wonders while living. He acknowledges the injustice of the Crucifixion, identifying Jesus as a "matyr" crucified by "cawsys ontru" (1255-56). Not only Pilate but also his sergeants believe that Christ has truly risen from the dead, just as he had predicted to the disciples. Truth must be suppressed, however, since it may threaten their own lives. Instead of sending a true account, the sergeants advise Pilate to compose a "pystyll of specyallte" (1267) stating that Christ has died and his disciples have stolen the body.<sup>13</sup>

Pilate's false letter attempts to divorce Christ's Resurrection from its spiritual meaning by "ascribing it to the purely human agency of Christ's grave-robbing apostles" (Scherb, *Staging Faith* 179). But for those who

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike Pilate's defensive gesture in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, Pilate in the Towneley *Play of the Talents* plays an active role in silencing the truth of the Resurrection. In the *Play of the Talents*, it is Pilate himself that promises a reward to the soldiers who guarded the tomb if they will keep silent about the Resurrection; in the Bible, the chief priests, not Pilate, bribe the soldiers.

<sup>13</sup> The abuse of legal documents was a popular subject among late medieval reformists. For instance, scribes and lawyers were criticized for forging self-interested documents; see, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*: "They maken fals letters and fals seales and mekeþ fals dedes and charteres and many oþere falsenesses" (37).

cannot comprehend the divine will, the fictional account might sound more plausible. The second Sergeant wholeheartedly supports the first Sergeant's advice, exclaiming that the story is "most lilly [likely] for to be" (1265). He concludes that the false story will be "most prophytabyll" (1268) for all of them. The responses of these sergeants exhibit how truth can be manipulated for the convenience of these corrupt legal representatives. The letter not only saves their lives but also serves to recuperate Pilate's relationship with Herod and gives Pilate a chance to express his loyalty and commitment to the emperor.

The forged news pleases both Herod and Tiberius. Herod receives the letter "full of blys" (1285) and amply reward the messenger. As soon as Tiberius receives the letter, he orders his judges to explain its content and then announces his intention to "cronekyl [...] þe 3ere and þe reynne" (1329) of the events it describes, so that they shall never be forgotten. Such response of Tiberius explains why the truth of written documents and historical records should be questioned. Paul Strohm notes that the "historical" is not easily distinguished from the "literary" since chronicles, trial records, and official documents all contain "fictive elements" that distort and suppress historical truth (5). Tiberius's act of keeping the document is reminiscent of a passage from the fourteenth-century religious tract, *Pore Caitif*, which expounds how to receive properly the chartered body of Christ:

"This charter may no fyre brenne [burn] ... for this scripture hath the fader of hevene hallowed or maad stedfast, and sente yt into the world, the whiche scripture 'may not be undonn,' as the gospel witnessith. This scripture is our lord Jhesu Crist, charter and bulle of our heritage of heuene. Lokke nat this charter in thy cofre, but sette it or wryte it in thyn hert, and alle the creatures in hevene, nor in erthe, ne in helle mow not robbe it neither brenne it fro the but yf thou wilt thiself, assenting to synne. And yf thou kepe wel this charter in thy cofre of

thin hert, with good lyvyng and devoute love lastyngly to thyn ende,  
and trustly and treuly as he is verray God, thorughe vertu of this  
charter thou shalt have thyn heritage of blysse during withoute ende."<sup>14</sup>

Tiberius literally "locks" the charter in the coffer, thereby believing that a mere parchment can preserve the falsified truth forever. Pilate's special epistle, thus chronicled and preserved, exposes the "fictionality" (Strohm 4) of written history. The attempts by Tiberius and Pilate to distort the truth fail, however, since the drama authenticates the event in front of the eyes of the audience. Ironically, with this last speech, Tiberius totally disappears from the drama and, as Bush points out, puts himself into oblivion with the "false epistles and fatuous chronicles" (165).

The act of Tiberius contrasts to that of the three Marys who bear witness to Christ's passion and imprint their experience in the "coffer of their heart." The stage direction indicating the entrance of the three Marys right before they witness the Resurrection of Christ shows the audience how to remember the mystery of God in a proper way:

Here xall entyr þe thre Marris arayyd as chast women,  
wyth sygnis of þe passyon pryntyd ypon þer brest. (s.d. 993)

Scholars have offered various interpretations about this stage direction. Coletti, for instance, finds late medieval ideas of feminine holiness in the description of the three Marys "arrayyd as chast women," asserting that the image of the Marys clothed as chaste women participates in late medieval hagiography's effort to "resignify the vitae of biblical and legendary saints to suit the values and desires of new, devout public" (*The Drama of Saints* 53). Jerome Bush pays attention to the "sygnis of þe passyon" and argues that the sign is a "personal and intimate testimony to faith" (145). Scott

<sup>14</sup> *Pore Caitif*, folios 142<sup>v</sup>-143<sup>r</sup>, quoted in Watson 108. Italics are mine.

Boehnen also shows interest in this stage direction, suggesting that the “sygnis” refer to the badges recommended to late medieval pilgrims returned from Jerusalem (341). All these interpretations attest to the significance of this stage direction as well as the symbolic function of a stage image that represents the process of enhancing religious faith. In particular, the “sygnis of þe passyon pryntyd ypon þer brest” epitomize a significant relationship between bodily experience, sacred knowledge, and religious faith. As the witness to the three Marys’ spiritual experience, the signs of Christ’s Passion printed “ypon þer brest” symbolize the “process of conceiving the Word” (Watson 110). In other words, the three Marys have contained the image of Christ in their hearts and made intimate union with the Godhead. The bodily experience, remembered as a concrete image and imprinted on the heart of the three Marys, contrasts to Pilate’s special epistle, locked up in Tiberius’s archive and erased from memory.

Other late medieval East Anglian texts similarly emphasize the importance of visual and corporeal experience in attaining spiritual knowledge. For instance, Julian of Norwich opens her *Revelation of Love* with a declaration of her desire for corporeal and visual evidence of divine love. Julian’s desire for the “bodily sight” of the suffering Christ is primarily grounded in her understanding of direct physical experience as a source of spiritual authority. She believes that participating in the scene of Christ’s Passion and experiencing the same emotional sufferings of the beholders would give her “more trew minde in the passion of Christe” (39). Julian’s belief that visual experience would encourage her faith in God is compatible with the devotional function that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* aims to perform with its appeal to the visual and corporeal. The affective nature of East Anglian religious culture reverberates in Lydgate’s *Testament*, where the poet presents detailed and gruesome images of a suffering Christ in order to rouse the compassion of the readers. In the voice of Jesus, the poet repeatedly urges his readers to behold and remember: “Emprente thes

thynges in thyn inward thought, / And grue hem depe in thy remembraunce, / Thynke on hem 'wel', and forgete hem nowght" (874-76). The poet desires to excite the readers' imagination with his visual images in order that they can make the "word flesh" and "print" the concrete and visual images "ypon þer brest."

In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the spectacular stage images that culminate in Jesus' bodily purgation of a sinful woman serve to re-enact biblical events and persons, offering to the audience a chance to participate in the sacred moments created by theatrical illusion and to be emotionally stirred. The significance of carnal experience for an understanding of divine knowledge is conspicuous even in the scene where Mary preaches to the king of Marcyll about the creation of the world. Victor Scherb argues that her preaching does not "outline her personal experience of Christ's ministry in any significant way"; rather than witnessing to her bodily experience of divine love, Mary's sermon draws the audience's attention to "divinely inspired truth authenticated in Scripture" ("Worldly and Sacred Messengers" 7). Indeed, enumerating how "holy wrytt berytt wettnesse" (1500) and "skryptur declarytt pleyn" (1521), Mary relies on scriptural authority in order to support her spiritual knowledge. But it is important to note that Mary's belief in the scriptural account occurs only after her personal and bodily experience of divine ministry:

[MARIA.] O þou, gloryus Lord, þis reherysd for my sped,  
 Sowle helth attys tyme for to recure.  
 Lord, for þat I was in whanhope, now stond I in dred,  
 But þat þi gret mercy wyth me may endure.  
 My thowth þou knewyst wythowtyn ony dowth.  
 Now may I trost þe techeing of Isaye in skryptur,  
 Wos report of þi nobyllnesse rennyt fere abowt! (692-98)

Mary's testimonial after her bodily purgation of seven devils that she

“now” understands the “techeyng of Isaye in scryptur” (697) emphasizes the importance of her personal experience in endorsing the written account of the prophet.<sup>15</sup> She believes in the sayings of Isaiah because, unlike Pilate’s forged letter, the scriptural narratives could be verified and “re-enacted.”<sup>16</sup> Mary’s direct experience of Jesus’ mercy, his Passion and Resurrection, enables her to believe even divine mysteries she has never witnessed or experienced. Her sermon to the king of Marcyll shows that she has now attained a higher level of spirituality that does not require visual testimony. Mary’s language demonstrates her authority and learning; she quotes the Bible directly to demonstrate her command of the scriptural “sentens” (1452): “Syr, I wyll declare al and sum, / What from God fryst ded procede. / He seyde, ‘In principio erat verbum,’ / And with þat he provyd hys grett Godhed!” (1481-84). After hearing the sermon, the king of Marcyll exclaims, “herke, woman, thow hast many resonnyys grett!” (1526). The king’s remark testifies to Mary’s final acquisition of intellectual understanding of the divine “lawys” (1452).

Christ also communicates the idea that sacred knowledge can be attained not by learning but by experience. Throughout the play, Christ expounds to Mary and his disciples the need for visual experience that may enable them to have true faith in his miracles. Informed of the death of Lazarus, Jesus tells his disciples that “Tyme ys comyn of very cognysyon” (846). Jesus then states that the raising of Lazarus will attest to the truth of his own resurrection: “I, therfor, hastely follow me now, / For Lazar is ded, verily to preve; / Whe[r]for I am joyfull, I sey onto yow, / That I knowledge yow therwyth, that ye may it believe” (865-68). This account of

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<sup>15</sup> See Coletti, *The Drama of Saints* 212. Coletti states that the drama by nature privileges the material over spiritual. The “inescapable materiality” makes drama an ideal medium for exploiting the “central tensions activated by Mary Magdalene’s witness to the Resurrection.”

<sup>16</sup> Twycross, “Beyond the Picture Theory” 592. Twycross asserts that “narrative re-enactments” are the staple of the mystery plays.

the divine will implicated in his Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection shows the inseparable link between visual experience, faith, and “very cognysyon.” After his own Resurrection, Jesus appears physically in front of the three Marys. Jesus then sends them off to the other apostles to come to Galilee so that they can see him, “bodily, wyth here carnally ye” (1124). His speech sums up the importance of bodily experience in attaining true knowledge.

### III.

Medieval drama is more than a written text. A dead letter inscribed on a piece of parchment, Pilate’s special epistle scarcely communicates truth. By reenacting the scene of Christ’s Resurrection to which Mary Magdalene bears witness, however, the drama invites the audience to participate in the same scene and understand the truth of biblical events. Spectacular images in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* aim to engage the feeling of participation and a sense of unity among the viewers, which the written messages of the temporal rulers also seek but fail to achieve. Jesus’ speech after the Resurrection that he will be with anyone only if they will seek him with “veruence of love” (1093) addresses not only the three Marys but also the audience and entire humanity. Jesus promises to “shew” himself physically to whoever asks for him, just as he appeared to Mary Magdalene. As if to verify his promise, as soon as Mary Jacob expresses her wish to see him with her own eye, Jesus appears again, saying “To shew desyrows hartys I am full nere, / Women, I apere to yow and sey, ‘Awete!’” (1110-11). The second appearance of the resurrected Jesus illustrates the magical power of the theater that makes the miracle possible. As Clifford Davidson states, medieval saint plays were designed to bring into view a representation of a saint now residing with God and thus available to be invoked by the



worshippers (52). More effective than writing, medieval drama invites the audience to participate physically in the biblical events performing in front of their eyes and to find themselves emotionally implicated. In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, the Scriptural “information” (171) prophesying the coming of Christ fails to communicate the correct message to Herod and the philosophers. Moreover, the Latin passage (“*Et ambulabunt gentes in lumine [tuo], et reges / In splendore ortus tui*”; 175-56) would have been too abstract for the medieval audience to understand its message. Mary stood nearby when Christ was crucified and was the first to see his resurrection. The dramatic representation of Mary Magdalene exploits her significance as the first-hand witness to Christ’s godhead. By participating with her in the theatrically reproduced scenes of Jesus’s Passion and Resurrection, the audience receives the biblical message and remembers it. The symbolic image of the saint as well as anxiety about the growing importance of writing and written documents in contemporary society influenced the negative representations of writing in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*.

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**ABSTRACT****Pilate's Special Letter: Writing, Theater, and Spiritual Knowledge in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*****Hyunyang Lim**

Focusing on the problem of disinformation represented by Pilate's special letter to Tiberius in the Digby play of *Mary Magdalene*, this paper examines how the conspicuous growth of documentary culture in fifteenth-century East Anglia influenced late medieval theatrical productions in this region. Writing is an important theme in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* because it is unstable and thereby implicitly counters a different idea of the Word, Christ. The emphasis on bodily experience, implicated in the spectacle and concrete images of medieval theater, expresses social anxiety to the spread of writing and written documents, which became increasingly important but susceptible for abuse. By inviting the audience to participate physically in the theatrically reproduced biblical events, the East Anglian drama gives access to the spiritual truths that Pilate's forged document attempts to manipulate.

**Key Words** | The Digby *Mary Magdalene*, writing, theater, incarnational aesthetic, documentary culture, East Anglia