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Lesbians, Drag Kings, and Pregnant Queens: The Digby *Mary Magdalene*'s Queer Relationships

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This article argues that the Digby Mary Magdalene*'s biblical, hagiographical, and allegorical characters support performance registers that provide a fertile space for queer relationships to emerge. It begins with Mary's seducer, the lesbian-like Lady Luxuria, whose amiable tongue follows patterns more common to heterosexual seduction scenes. It then examines the Gallant's parodic man-about-town, who wears courtly love as insincerely as his tight clothing and anticipates the flamboyant gender performances of modern drag kings. The article examines the lingering implications of these interactions on Mary's post repentance plot with the Queen of Marseilles and on the play's medieval and modern audiences.*

If it is possible to out-Herod Herod, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* (1515–30) certainly tries. The play's first third stages a parade of tyrants (historical, supernatural, and allegorical), all trying to outdo each other with flamboyant boasts and costumes.[1] However, it is with the introduction of the diabolical vice characters that the play really makes a committed move into camp: '*Her shal entyr the Kyng of the World, the Flesch, and the Dylfe / with the Seven Dedly Synnys, a Bad Angyll, an[d] an Good Angyl'* (sd 304–5).[2] The World, Flesh, and Devil have an advantage over the human tyrants. As allegorical figures they are designed to fully embody pride and worldly excesses. As such, their performances feature several qualities identified in Sontag's early (now-controversial) attempt to define camp, including artifice, stylization, and a sensual attractiveness the audience should mistrust.[3] Yet even these tyrants have one fear: a woman named Mary, who they believe will 'destroye helle' (420). The diabolical forces dispatch their most attractive member, the silver-tongued and sexually charismatic vice Lady Lechery, to tempt Mary into sin. Queer authorities come up with queer solutions to their problems.

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Despite flourishing feminist readings, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* has only recently received attention from queer theorists.[4] With glittering tyrants, devils who complicate male/female binaries, seduction scenes between figures represented as female, draggish tavern performances of courtly love, and a queen made pregnant by a female saint, there is much work to be done. Digby's diversity of performance registers seems to resist heteronormativity at every point, and offers a critical challenge to the terminologies we might use to analyze what is going on. This essay examines moments in the play where behaviours appear lesbian-like (a concept that will be further defined in the following pages); moments where female-presenting characters engage in courtship; and moments where gender is parodied and destabilized through the playfully drag-like performance of the Gallant. Even the play's two 'heterosexual' relationships (between the Marseilles King and Queen and the King of Flesh and his 'spouse' Lady Lechery) seem to parody marital affection or are barren until Mary's intervention. In a play that builds its key moments of spectacle, temptation, and redemption on the blurring of sex, gender, and attraction, the expansiveness of the term 'queer' is an appropriate way to describe the Digby *Mary Magdalene*'s performance modes.[5] As the introduction to this Issues in Review section also observes, my use of the term queer here both names the play's lesbian, drag, and genderfluid-like elements as distinct manifestations of queer performance cultures and seeks to resist the too-prevalent use of the term by studies which promise a discussion of queer medieval subject matter but in the end, predominantly focus on male homosexual examples.[6] Through character studies of Lechery, the Gallant, and Mary, this article expands this work, reading the queer performances patterned across the play's temptation section as acts of lesbian-like courtship.[7] Tison Pugh notes the lesbian potential of Mary's fall into sin in his brief consideration of the play, and this article aims to construct a dedicated reading of just how embedded and important a lesbian reading of this scene is in terms of understanding Mary's character.[8] However, where Pugh argues that this potential takes the form of Lechery performing the 'male social role' of courtly lover, this essay confronts the play's emphasis on the female-coding of Lechery, the diabolical counsel's choice of her as the vice most likely to tempt Mary, and evidence of Mary's attraction to Lechery's femininity as opposed to Mary's more robust resistance to the 'male' Gallant.[9] I then consider whether the Gallant's masculinity might anticipate the performance styles of modern drag kings: a lesbian-originating performance form that similarly showcases artificial markers of masculinity.[10] In so doing, this essay aims to provide methodologies with which to analyze, and perhaps one day stage,

Mary Magdalene in a way that embraces its medieval and modern queer performance histories.

A 'plesaunt lady'

If allegorical characters are not human, is it possible for one to perform as a lesbian? The complicated relationships drawn between allegorical and human agencies in the Digby play have long been a subject of critical debate. A deadly sin, Lechery is a nonhuman entity. Theresa Coletti notes 'this evil cohort … marks the play's shift from the biblical historical world to an allegorical one'.[11] However, Digby's parade of human and allegorical tyrants also demonstrates that the distinction between the two is not always obvious. Philip Butterworth argues that all characters on the medieval stage were understood to be representations, or representative of, the religious figures they stood in the place of. This means that characters can't always easily be clearly separated into allegorical and human or realistic characters. There is no way, for example, that the medieval stock tyrant character of Herod might be considered a realistic human figure.[12] Moreover, allegorical and non-allegorical figures are performed by the gendered bodies of actors in performance, and both gender and status alike were constructed through costume, make-up, and language.[13] While I agree with Coletti's point that the play shifts from historical antagonists to diabolical representations, the latter still therefore register as gendered entities in performance. Allegorical figures were conventionally given characteristics suggestive of human gender roles as a means of best expressing the vices they represent. For example, *Mankind*'s vices parody young masculinity, and the soul is a fallen woman in *Wisdom*.[14] An area of overlap therefore exists between the medieval performance of allegorical characters as exaggerated and gendered performances of certain human characteristics and the drag acts considered in the second half of this essay. An awareness of the constructedness of allegorical performances must have been particularly the case for Digby audiences watching Lechery, the vice most associated with theatricality and false signs. Garrett Epp's analysis of the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (1400) considers the tract's characterization of theatre as a lecher who performs signs, but not deeds, of love.[15] The Digby Lechery plays exactly this role: professing love, then endangering Mary's soul. But while Lechery in the *Treatise* is an abstract concept, the Digby *Mary Magdalene* takes great care in representing Lechery as female. If allegorical figures signal truths about real human behaviours, then the stress placed on Lechery's femininity emphasizes the fact that Mary finds women extremely attractive: a curious choice for a play about a famous prostitute saint.

References to Lechery's femininity feature heavily even before her assignation as tempter. The King of Flesh introduces her as 'My fayere spowse', 'plesaunt lady', and 'bewtews byrd' (347–57). Similar language is patterned throughout *Mary Magdalene*, anticipating the speeches the Gallant and the King of Marseilles use for their female objects of desire. Throughout this scene, Flesh emphasizes Lechery's womanliness, desirability, and beauty: attributes also used by Syrus, Lechery, and the Gallant to praise Mary.[16] How far female beauty was realized in performances by male actors has long been a subject of consideration and overlaps with the question of defining allegorical and non-allegorical characterizations. Katie Normington notes that 'the distance between transvestism on stage and "real" womanhood is irrelevant, since both genders are fictitious', and Pamela Sheingorn agrees that 'actors perform the genders of all roles they play, whether these involve cross-dressing or not'.[17] In this play, however, it is specifically Lechery's performance of femininity that convinces the diabolical authorities she is the vice most likely to seduce Mary into sin:

> Flesh Now ye, Lady Lechery, yow must don your attendans,
> For yow be flowyr fayrest of femynyté.
> Yow shal go desyyr servyse and byn at hure atendauns,
> For ye shal sonest entyr, ye beral of bewte. (422–5)

Given that Mary has hitherto given no hint of spiritual fragility, Flesh's belief that Lechery will 'soonest enter' is intriguing. The idea that feminine and beautiful Lechery is most likely to tempt Mary is consistent with contemporary Fall imagery, where the serpent's beautiful female face mirrored Eve's. This device occasionally carried into plays: in the *Gwreans an Bys* (1530–50), Lucifer chooses the serpent because it looks like a fair maiden.[18] In the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, however, their following interaction suggests that Lechery may also be chosen because the vices understand women are more attractive to Mary than men. Even if Lechery's desire is a false performance, Mary's response to her is sincere.

Scholars seeking to find evidence of lesbian pasts persistently come up against problems of definition. Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watt discuss the challenges of identifying lesbian histories without having to first unpick tedious accusations of anachronism.[19] Some of the emerging critical terms — lesbian-like, proto-feminist — seek to deal with anachronism at the risk of framing their historical subjects through simile.[20] While Carolyn Dinshaw makes an important case for acknowledging the emotive affect of 'queer historical touch' between temporally distant experiences, Valerie Traub cautions that although there are moments of similarity (which she calls lesbian typologies) across history,

the social forces acting in each case are vastly different.[21] Meanwhile, Judith Bennet acknowledges the fatigue of fretting over the difference between past sexual identities and sexual acts. She revisits her description of 'women with affinities to modern lesbianisms' as 'lesbian-like', hoping to expand our fields of evidence beyond proof of sexual activities, while challenging easy dismissals of possible lesbian experience.[22] These challenges of anachronism, definition, and identification carry a discouraging weight. Even considering an artform as representational and subject to diverse individual audience experiences as early drama, it still feels safer in terms of critical pushback to analyze depictions of heterosexual relationships — even though these, too, were frequently represented by male players.[23] Yet expanding our close reading of sources is crucial. Lucy Allen-Goss advocates readings sensitive to 'female desires that do not answer to structuring masculine desire', suggesting 'reading against the grain' can reveal 'moments where constellations of embodied affects and double meanings let us glimpse a sexuality that might have been'.[24] In this spirit, I argue that the seduction scenes performed by Digby's Lechery and Gallant feature moments of 'lesbian-like' intimacy, and use embodiment and language to resist the masculine desires present in the rest of the play. Adopting Bennet's 'like', I recognize that medieval dramatic *personae* were not real, desiring beings. As representations, they can only be like, rather than telling us how medieval women might have conducted relationships. However, as the Lechery/Flesh and the royal Marseilles marriages show, this is also true for the play's heterosexual relationships.

Using the Tongue

The lesbian-like character of Mary and Lechery's relationship is therefore well established before their first encounter. Flesh's order 'go desyyr servyse and byn at hure atendauns' (424) seems initially to order Lechery to perform the servant-procuress role more common to medieval romance. But service is also a common love motif, and when Lechery approaches Mary, it becomes clear she is performing the latter role:

> Lechery Heyl, lady, most laudabyll of alyauuns!
> Heyl, oryent as the sonne in hys reflexité!
> Myche pepul be comfortyd be your benyng afyauns.
> Bryter than the bornyd is your bemys of bewté,
> Most debonarius wyth your aungelly delycyté. (440–4)

These are not the words of a servant seeking employment. Lechery flatters Mary, elevating her prematurely with references to brightness and radiance usually applied to the Virgin and other female saints. While such descriptions would be appropriate for Mary after her ascension to sainthood, at this stage they align Mary with the play's glittering tyrants and open her to pride (the sin later personified by the Gallant). Lechery's language here is elevated compared to her sexualized speeches to Flesh, suggesting she is adept at adapting her seduction techniques to individuals. Such selective adaptation is highly effective. As the scene develops, it becomes clear Mary and Lechery have a mutual appreciation of each other's femininity. Mary receives Lechery's address in the spirit of courtship, but also assumes the part of active wooer by adopting Lechery's register and verse form:

> Mary Your debonarius obedyans ravyssyt me to trankquelyté.
> Now, syth ye desyre, in eche degree,
> To receyve yow I have grett delectacyon.
> Ye be hartely welcum onto me!
> Your tong is so amyabyll, devydyd wyth reson. (447–51)

Mary finds two things attractive about Lechery: her obedience and her 'amiable', rational tongue. These attributes are usually proscribed as female ideals, giving the impression Mary is impressed, not because Lechery has adopted a masculine courtly lover role, but because she has performed flawless womanhood. These balanced speeches put Lechery and Mary in affinity. Coletti suggests Mary is susceptible to flattery because her father has also valued her as 'fayur and ful of femynyté' (71).[25] Perhaps this also taught Mary what to value in women who are equally worthy of courtly desire. Mary praises Lechery with words otherwise used by Digby's male characters to describe female beauty, while the sensually-loaded 'delectation' and emphasis on Lechery's 'tong … so amyabyll' suggest that this attraction includes the senses of hearing and taste as well as visual appraisal. Mary describes herself as being 'ravyssyt' (ravished) by Lechery's address, suggesting a sexual element to this exchange which frames Lechery's tongue as an instrument of seduction. Mary's equation of speech and tongue also perhaps references cunnilingus. Allen-Goss points to language as a primary place we might glimpse the 'lesbian-like erotic', especially in 'moments where women seek to appropriate or embody forms of "masculine" agency, equipping themselves with literal or metaphorical prostheses'.[26] In this scene, Lechery's tongue is both an erotic object with the capacity to ravish Mary and a tool of metaphor: able to articulate the carefully-crafted praise needed to woo the saint. Unlike the Gallant's clumsy

sexual overtures, Lechery's tongue is responsive to Mary's needs. When Mary reveals her 'hevy' grief (454), Lechery switches tack, moving smoothly from love language to consolation. Lechery's advice to distract herself with pleasing 'sportys' is poor, but Mary responds, 'Ye be my hartys leche' (461), while her abandonment of her castle hints that Lechery's company is the 'sport' that most pleases her.[27] This courtship scene therefore offers a challenge to reading the Digby Mary's fall into sin as a narrative of heterosexual downfall.

Clothes Unmaking the Man: The Tavern's Resident Drag King

The seduction of Mary is therefore complete before the Gallant enters the scene, suggesting that, at most, he acts as a form of prosthesis for Lechery. Allen-Goss talks about such prostheses in other forms of medieval literature, 'in which a masculine body may act as a surrogate for female experience, or a female body may vicariously claim male same-sex intimacies as its blueprint for affection'.[28] This next section considers whether we might see a similar surrogate embodiment in the Gallant used by Lechery to complete Mary's seduction. Several critics claim that, following Lechery's success, Mary is as easily seduced by the Gallant. Normington suggests Mary assumes Lechery's role as 'womanly temptress of the gallant Curiosity', while Joanne Findon argues that Mary's grief 'leaves her vulnerable to the flattery of Lechery … and Curiosity, the attractive and smooth-talking young man in the tavern'.[29] But compared to Lechery, the Gallant has a far tougher time. This is because there is something parodic, inauthentic, and artificial in his character. These qualities are also present in Lechery but are only drawn attention to in the Gallant's performance. The tavern scene is set up as a play-within-a-play. The Taverner is played by the already-introduced Gluttony, and the Gallant is played by Pride, also given the name Curiosity in the manuscript.[30] While Lechery adopts a human persona not dissimilar to her vice form, Pride grapples with multiple levels of pretence in parodying the excesses of fashionable masculinity.[31] Rather than being Findon's 'attractive and smooth talking young man', the Gallant is neither attractive smooth-talking nor young (he admits he shaves to seem 'yyng'). His speech is worth quoting in full for the culminative effect of his pretence to be appreciated:

> Hof, hof, hof! A frysch new galaunt!
> Ware of thryst; ley that adoune!
> What? Wene ye, syrrys, that I were a marchant
> Because that I am new com to town?

> Wyth sum praty tasppysstere wold I fayne rownd!
> I have a shert of reynnys wyth slevys peneawnt,
> A lase of sylke for my lady constant.
> A, how she is bewtefull and ressplendant!
> Whan I am from hyre presens, lord, how I syhe!
> I wol awye sovereyns and soiettys I dysdeyne.
> In wyntyr a stomachyr, in somyr non att al;
> My dobelet and my hossys evyr together abyde.
> I woll, or even, be shavyn for to seme yyng.
> With here agen the her I love mych pleyyng —
> That makyt me ilegant and lusty in lykyng.
> Thus I lefe in this world; I do it for no pryde. (491–506)

The Gallant's parody of the man about town, who wears his courtly love as insincerely as his fashionable clothing, seems to anticipate the comic gender performance of another form of lesbian performance culture designed for a female gaze: the modern drag king.

The performance traditions of drag kings have been less studied than those of queens, and the form has changed significantly within the last twenty years.[32] Early drag kings were primarily female-bodied and performing for lesbian audiences. Differentiating the performance traditions of male impersonators and drag kings, Halberstam notes that, while impersonators aim for plausibility, 'the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity the mainstay of her act'.[33] The Digby Gallant, too, performs masculinity parodically by placing it under sustained focus. The early drive to differentiate drag kings from queens noted important variations in the performance styles.[34] More recent studies examine how performances centre the enjoyment of parody: 'Drag king performance takes and exploits markers of "masculinity" to the point that these markers become visible as constructions'.[35] Making gendered markers visible has the effect of destabilizing the very idea of binary identities, whilst also suggesting the expansiveness of attraction for predominantly queer and lesbian audiences. This process of making visible is particularly helpful for considering the Digby Gallant, as parodying masculine markers was also a common performance tool in early drama. Medieval plays satirized a dizzying range of masculinities, including tyrant and bureaucratic masculinities (through biblical characters such as Herod and Pilate); upper-class masculinities (the Digby Syrus); religious leaders (the bishops and anti-Semitic 'Jewish' authorities that populate all play types); husbands (Pilate, Noah, Joseph);

guildsmen (Noah and the Croxton merchants); and working-class masculinities (Cain and Abel, shepherds, and soldiers). While Halberstam notes of the earliest king acts that there were at the time 'few places in American culture where male masculinity reveals itself to be staged or performative',[36] early drama generated a multiplicity of masculine masks which could be rapidly donned, performed, held up for critical or humorous reflection, then dropped.[37]

Given that the Gallant was performed by a male actor representing a male character (or rather, a male actor representing a vice pretending to be a man), how appropriate is the comparison to modern drag kings? Today, drag king acts are performed by cis women and men, trans, and nonbinary performers: 'Anyone (regardless of gender) who consciously makes a performance out of masculinity'.[38] This idea of conscious performance is useful to understanding the Gallant, as it suggests an element of acknowledged artifice that the other male characters listed above do not perform. This kind of tacit acknowledgement is also present in the few examples we have from the period of female-to-male cross dressing, such as the 1348 tournament where fifty women dressed in 'various and amazing men's clothes' carrying daggers, or in *Wisdom*, whose Lechery is accompanied by six women dancers — three dressed as gallants: '*Here entreth six women in sut, thre dysgysyde as galontes and thre as matrones, wyth wondyrfull vysurs [masks]*' (sd 752).[39] *Wisdom*'s gallant characters, as in *Mary Magdalene*, represent 'a sprynge of Lechery' (746) and wear elaborate costumes. A stock character type appearing in multiple East Anglian plays, the gallant figure represented material excess with flamboyant costume and performance.[40] Gallant figures therefore signalled the artificiality of the masculine modes they represented, often by drawing attention to the material and theatrical labour that had gone into constructing them.[41] As I note elsewhere, character types that draw attention to the mechanics of their own theatricality remind audiences these things are not real, while self-descriptive speeches call attention to the inauthenticity of these performances.[42] Such qualities differentiate these types from other cross-played roles (such as Mary), and, as Halberstam argues of kinging, performances such as these 'render masculinity visible and theatrical.'[43]

The most obvious of these strategies for the Digby Gallant is the way he draws attention to his costume and its effect on his body shape. His fashionable 'shert of reynnys wyth slevys peneawnt' (496–7) artificially extends his body, allowing him to occupy more performance space. These garments are as gauchely inappropriate for a tavern setting as wearing a Prada ballgown to a local dive bar. The sleeves, and the lover's lace he insincerely wears 'for my lady constant', suggest the Gallant is taking up space beyond his bodily and emotional capabilities. Other

costume elements change the body through nipping and flattening. The winter 'stomacher' indicates a vest or waistcoat, but the garment was also used to have a slimming effect, and the Gallant is unnecessarily proud that his doublet and hose 'evyr together abyde' (501–2). The stomacher pulls the Gallant's belly in enough for doublet and hose to meet. The Gallant also draws attention to the careful curation of his facial hair: 'I woll, or even, be shavyn for to seme yyng' (503). Coletti and Pugh both consider the Gallant to be mocking fashionable men who 'projected false images of high status' through their dress.[44] The Gallant nips in, wears prosthetic sleeves, and manipulates facial hair in a way that anticipates how today's drag kings use binders, 'pack' underwear, and apply hair and make-up to their faces and bodies to exaggerate masculine attributes.[45] Meredith Heller notes that the aim is not to create realistic or convincing impersonations, but 'to theatrically cultivate recognizable identity attributes'.[46]

The cultivation of costume and facial hair in support of theatrical pretence was a key part of early theatre traditions, where even male actors playing patriarchs made their characters recognizable by wearing fake beards atop their real ones.[47] Yet only certain characters, like the Gallant, comment on the techniques that produce this effect. Those that do make this theatrical labour and body manipulation visible tend to be characters audiences are expected to laugh at or morally reject, suggesting that what Katie Horowitz calls a 'presumption of gender inauthenticity' is intended.[48] For example, in the Digby play this theatrical performance register is only used for the Gallant, tyrants, and some of the diabolical authorities. Neither Mary nor Lechery self-describe in this way, even though they are frequently described as such by others. The Gallant's theatrically and prosthetically amplified persona therefore stresses the unreliability of these signifiers. Moreover, the Gallant's focus on his costume hints that he can't authentically perform the masculine cultural ideals he aspires to. His 'stomacher' (501) and shaving 'to seme yyng' (503) indicate he is older and more overweight than he would like.[49] Both the drag act and Digby Gallant generate moments where the pretence is acknowledged between the audience and the performers. Halberstam notes the pleasurable potential of such shared recognition in acts where masculine attributes are layered in such a way that audiences can enjoy 'the dyke masculinities that peek through', while other performances deliberately use reveals to break the gender illusions they have constructed.[50] Rather than constructing a convincing, unremarkable imitation of masculinity, the Gallant reminds us that they are not a man but a Vice trying to play a man and, furthermore, playing a man less competently than Lechery performs femininity.

In addition to exaggerated costume, the Gallant's speech exhibits an exaggerated male sexuality. Again, comparison with king acts can provide insights: Kathryn Rosenfield observes that kings often 'adopt an aggressively hetero male sexuality, as when performers flirt lasciviously with femmes in the audience.'[51] In drag, parodies of male sleaze are designed to appeal to a female audience — and in *Mary Magdalene*, the Gallant performs this role for Mary. His 'aggressively hetero male sexuality' is admitted in his voracious appetite for women of all classes. Yet even this assertion of heterosexual experience is muddled by the fact that it, too, seems false. Both costume and courtship are insincere: the Gallant longs for private conversation with 'sum praty tasppysstere', even while wearing another lady's love token (495–9). He reduces these desired women to mere body parts: 'With here agen the her I love mych pleyyng' (47). At first glance, this seems consistent with the heteronormative bias of wider medieval obscenity: the Gallant uses sex references to bolster his masculine credentials.[52] Yet his coarse admission also points to a potential lack. Omitting the penis, the phrase 'hair against the hair' suggests the Gallant and his partner are anatomically similar, and recalls the kind of euphemism Allen-Goss observes in condemnations of sex acts between 'women who joust shield to shield'.[53] Erik Wade and Pugh show that references to sex acts between male-presenting antagonists are a fairly common aspect of their characterization (including in this play).[54] It is therefore not a great stretch to consider whether 'hair against hair' might be a rare example of sex between women being referenced in early drama. Just as the Gallant's body-manipulating wardrobe suggests that clothes do not, in fact, make a man, so his boast about his sexual appetite hints at other forms of desire.

The Gallant's courtship/harassment of Mary further satirizes the performance of courtly love and the men who subscribe to it. Findon remarks on the anomaly of 'courtly love language spoken in a tavern', and this mismatch between performance and location forms much of the scene's comedy.[55] The Gallant begins with a sexualized compliment that jars with Mary's courteous language:

> A, dere dewchesse, my daysyys iee!
> Splendaunt of colour, most of femynyté!
> Your sofreyn colourrys, set wyth synseryté!
> Consedere my love into yower alye,
> Or ellys I am smet wyth peynnes of perplexité. (515–19)

Perhaps having witnessed Lechery's success, the Gallant attempts to reproduce Mary and Lechery's love language, calling Mary 'my hertys hele' (521) and commenting on her beauty. But his is a cruder version of Lechery's courteous address.

He places an intense, uncomfortable focus on Mary's body, which increases as their discourse continues: 'Your person, itt is so womanly, / I can nat refreyn me, swete lelly' (521). Where Lechery enquired after Mary's emotional well-being and demanded nothing but Mary's accepting her service, the Gallant makes everything about his personal 'peynes of perplexite' (519) and remains oblivious to the negative effect of his words. The Gallant projects his own desire and emotion *at* Mary, whereas Lechery invited Mary to share emotion *with* her, and in response, gained Mary's trust and desire.

Mary's response to this sudden love declaration — 'Why, syr, wene ye that I were a kelle? [whore]' (520) — marks the Gallant's language as untimely, unsuitable, and inauthentic. Puncturing her suitor's florid praise, Mary calls out the transgressive nature of his request (albeit with a little irony, given her later hagiographical reputation). Compared with her enthusiastic replies to Lechery, Mary's replies to the Gallant are blunt, suggesting a desire to shut down his love language: 'What cause that ye love me so soddenly?' (523). This immediate rejection further undermines his earlier claims of sexual prowess. Although Mary does admit love for the Gallant by the scene's end, this likely only happens because she is drunk on the wine ordered by Lechery, after the drinking of which Mary admits 'My love in yow gynnyt to close' (539). The Gallant's acknowledgement of the dangers of drinking without eating suggests Mary's apparently rapid change from rebuke to acquiescence is due to wine on an empty stomach (541). Lechery, by contrast, managed to accomplish her seduction of Mary sober, suggesting that Mary is more attracted to certain types of queer performance than others. The Gallant's role in this play is therefore little greater than the role of the wine: he is a form of useful prosthesis used by Lechery to complete her conquest.[56] Through Lechery's efforts, the fall comes before Pride.

In plotting Mary's downfall, Satan orders six malignant spirits to enter her 'be the labor of Lechery' (432). When Mary falls, these spirits enter her body, causing Jesus to act as exorcist-midwife.[57] Yet this does not remove all queer influences from the play, or from Mary's character. Her redemption is marked by a close relationship with another woman: the Queen of Marseilles. Like Mary, the Queen is also the aristocratic object of a masculine lust she does not really seem to reciprocate, but her emerging love for Mary becomes increasingly evident.[58] The Queen's response to her husband's love speeches is similar to Mary's language to the Gallant: genteel, proper, even cold. Her speeches about Mary, however, echo the effusive language Mary first uses about Lechery, and later about Jesus: 'O demur Maudlyn, my bodyys sustynauns!' (1902). The saint herself now harnesses the high theatricality we saw in Mary's interactions with Luxuria and the Gallant.

Her prayers destroy the pagan temple and her orchestrated nocturnal entry into the royal bedchamber leaves the Queen miraculously pregnant, troubling hetero-patriarchal ideas of lineage. In the second half of the play, Mary therefore becomes Lechery's negative image. Where Lechery's tongue persuaded Mary to sin, Mary's preaching brings about a conversion consolidated in a child conceived and later delivered through Mary's interference with the spiritual and sexual lives of a married couple.

'a desire / i did not plan / to reckon with'

The Digby *Mary Magdalene*'s biblical, hagiographical, and allegorical characters therefore support a performance register which, like the Queen's womb, provides a fertile space for queer relationships. This article's reading of Lechery and Mary's lesbian-like courtship paves the way for a consideration of how female audience members might also have desired female characters *as* women. Medieval anti-theatrical concerns about plays generating desire in male audience members for the male performers playing women have been well-documented.[59] Might queer — or indeed, straight — women look at Lechery and Mary with the same desire articulated by their onstage lovers?[60] Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler suggest that a cross-dressing character 'results in queer moments which cannot entirely be undone by the ultimate return of culturally sanctioned sexual and status arrangements … The queerness of these moments was certainly not lost on the plays' medieval audiences, even if the reading of these dramas as "queer" is, of necessity, a modern one'.[61] Meanwhile, studies of modern drag acts frequently comment on how desire generated by the performances can challenge audience members' assumptions about their own sexuality.[62] Rosenfield notes the unsettling effect of this kind of gendered play (for example, when straight women find themselves attracted to someone female-bodied and lesbians find themselves attracted to masculinity).[63] In a poem written in response to a drag king performance, Ann Tweedy articulates her confusion at the generation of desire by a masculinity she was not used to desiring:

> from the depths of a desire
> i did not plan
> to reckon with, i hear
> the outline of a lie
> ….
> i was a changed woman

> though i had imagined
> cross dressing was a game.[64]

The poem charts the effects drag and other gender-bending performances can have on spectators. Mary Magdalene acted as a type of medieval 'everywoman': providing a more plausible role model than the Virgin and acting as versatile patron for a baffling array of occupations.[65] Perhaps Mary's expansive construction might also leave space for queer female playgoers to find a point of identification, too. The Digby play certainly places significant emphasis on the act of looking at other women with desire. While some of this comes from men, Lechery is subject to Mary's devoted gaze, and Mary becomes an object of desire for Lechery, the Gallant, and the Marseilles Queen. Given how often we see women viewing women with desire, it would be naïve to assume these women characters only generated desire in male spectators.

With their ability to be re-performed, plays are particularly well-suited for the kinds of 'erotic reading' described in Lara Farina's methodology for approaching lesbian history.[66] Reading — or directing — a play with sensitivity to eroticism expands our understanding of possible narratives the tavern scene is telling. What might a queer staging look like for this play and, in particular, this scene? Other stagings of early drama that draw on drag settings may provide inspiration. Simon Godwin's 2017 *Twelfth Night* staged the Elephant Inn, where Sebastian searches for Antonio, as a drag club.[67] This setting made visible a homoerotic interpretation of Antonio's feelings for Sebastian which began in queer scholarship and is now so commonplace in modern productions it seems to have been adopted as canon.[68] As a director and devisor of feminist medieval performances in my own artistic practice, I would seize the opportunity to stage a moment of queer touch between early drama and lesbian drag culture in performing the *Mary Magdalene* tavern scene:

> *Here takyt Mary hur wey to Jherusalem wyth Luxsurya, and they shal resort to a tavernere.*
> *The tavern has a wide selection of dubious quality wine, and an over–representation of female clientele.*
> *While Lechery gets the drinks, Mary looks, and looks, and looks.*
> *In the centre of the bar, a small stage. As the stage lights intensify, the room grows quiet. Into the spotlight, steps a figure dressed in a silk sash and outrageous sleeves. Their doublet and hose match perfectly.*
> *Mary squeezes Lechery's fingers as the act begins.*[69]

Notes

1 'The "ranting tyrant" was the superstar of the early English stage. Characters like Herod, Pilate, and Caesar were dressed in the most lavish costumes, assigned the longest and most elaborate speeches, and often supplied the actors who brought them to life with a substantial wage'. Heather S. Mitchell-Buck, 'Tyrants, Tudors, and the Digby "Mary Magdalen"', *Comparative Drama* 48.3 (2014), 241–59, 241, https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2014.0020.

2 *The Digby Mary Magdalene Play*, ed. Theresa Coletti (Kalamazoo, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrxk12h. All subsequent quotations of the play reference this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line numbers.

3 Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Bungay, 1961), 275–92. More recent camp theorists criticize Sontag's exclusion of the queer foundations of 'camp', and produce more focused studies of camp as queer praxis. See Elly-Jean Nielsen, 'Lesbian Camp: An Unearthing', *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 20.1 (2016), 116–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1046040, and Ann Pellegrini, 'After Sontag: Notes on Camp', in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggarty and Molly McGarry (Oxford, 2007), 168–93, https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470690864.ch9. Pellegrini argues that Sontag's depoliticized version of camp underestimates how it operates in specific historical moments as a form of queer protest against hostile social orders.

4 For example, Erik Wade's reading of the racist queering of the play's devils demonstrates how the play constructs gender and race through costume, prosthetics, action, and language. See 'Ower Felaws Blake: Blackface, Race, and Muslim Conversion in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*', *Exemplaria* 31.1 (2019), 22-45, https://doi.org/10.1080/10412573.2019.1555287.

5 For a history of medieval queer theory and the expansive definitions of identities held under the term 'queer', see Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger's introduction to *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2001), xi–xxiv.

6 Jeffery G. Stoyanoff, 'Introduction: Queer and Trans Issues in Medieval Drama', *Early Theatre* 27.2 (2024), 9–22, https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.2.5841.

7 See Judith M. Bennett, '"Lesbian-Like" and the Social History of Lesbianisms', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9.1–2 (2000), 1–24. I also discuss this term later in this essay.

8 Tison Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama: Sex in the Subjunctive* (Toronto, 2021), 66–8, https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487538866.

9 Ibid, 67.

10 See Sheila "Dragon Fly" Koenig, 'Walk Like a Man', *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.3–4 (2003), 145–59, 150, https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v43n03_09: 'Drag king performance takes and exploits markers of "masculinity" to the point that these markers become visible as constructions'. Pugh also uses the drag queen as a critical model: 'Although the term *drag queen* is anachronistic for considering the staging of sixteenth-century Scottish drama … it captures the gendered excess recognizable as a standard enactment of camp' (*On the Queerness of Early English Drama*, 159).
11 Coletti, note to *The Digby Mary Magdalene Play* at 304.
12 See Philip Butterworth, *Staging Conventions in Medieval Theatre* (Cambridge, 2014), 91–108, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139058582.
13 I am grateful to the editors of *Early Theatre* for this helpful suggestion.
14 Charlotte Spivack, 'Feminine vs. Masculine in English Morality Drama', *Fifteenth Century Studies* 13 (1988), 137–44.
15 Garrett P.J. Epp, 'Ecce Homo', in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger (Minneapolis, 2001), 236–51, 237.
16 See Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2004), 157, https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812201642: 'the [king's] amorous repartee with Luxuria epitomizes the menacing workings of masculine desire masquerading as courtesy'.
17 Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Cambridge, 2004), 55–6, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781846154706, and Pamela Sheingorn, 'The Bodily Embrace or Embracing the Body: Gesture and Gender in Late Medieval Culture', in *The Stage as Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Alan E. Knight (Cambridge, 1997), 51–89, 82.
18 See 'A fyne serpent made with a virgyn face, and yolowe heare upon her head' in the *Gwreans an Bys*. The female-faced serpent is found in the Norwich Grocers' Play, Chester cycle, and *Ordinalia*, as well as in four plays from mainland Europe. See Lynette R. Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), 69, https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511519697, and Daisy Black, 'The Time of the Tree: Returning to Eden after the Fall in the Cornish *Creation of the World*', *Medieval Feminist Forum* 50.1 (2014), 61–89 https://doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.1979.
19 Noreen Giffney, Michelle M. Sauer, and Diane Watt, 'Introduction', in *Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Giffney, Sauer, and Watt (Basingstoke, 2011), 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117198_1.
20 Ibid, 3.
21 Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham NC, 1999), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn2m8, and Valerie Traub,

'The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography', in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Giffney, Sauer, and Watt, 21–34, 25, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117198_2.

22 Judith M. Bennett, 'Remembering Elizabeth Etchingham and Agnes Oxenbridge', in *The Lesbian Premodern*, ed. Giffney, Sauer, and Watt, 131–43, 139, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117198_10: '"Lesbian-like" gets us past this not-knowing by refusing to privilege sexual behaviors in defining lesbians, past or present'.

23 This despite the fact that we persistently use methods and terminologies that are themselves decidedly anachronistic to analyze early theatre forms. On the anachronistic terminologies of theatre history and the representational nature of medieval performance, see Butterworth, *Staging Conventions,* 1–22, 91–108.

24 Lucy Allen-Goss, *Female Desire in Chaucer's* Legend of Good Women *and Middle English Romance* (Woodbridge, 2020), 4–6, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv105bc1z. Giffney, Sauer, and Watt also emphasize 'reading, rereading, resistant reading' ('Introduction', 3).

25 Theresa Coletti, '"Curtesy Doth It Yow Lere": The Sociology of Transgression in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*', *English Literary History* 71.1 (2004), 1–28, 5, https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2004.0012: 'Mary Magdalene is vulnerable to temptation because her father has already constructed her as a feminine object of courtly desire'.

26 Allen-Goss, *Female Desire*, 15.

27 Pugh asks of a different incident of allegorical-human pairing in Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre*, 'do [the audience] see a lesbian subtext to these pairings, do they look beyond the surface of costuming to see a gay male subtext, do they see both at once, or do they see none at all?' This question applies to some extent to all romantic relationships represented on the medieval stage. However, when it comes to the Digby play, there is little need to look beyond costume. The scene between Lechery and Mary can be read as a scene between two women, or between two men, but what it can't easily be read as is straight. See Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama*, 166.

28 Allen-Goss, *Female Desire*, 5.

29 Normington, *Gender*, 106 and Joanne Findon, 'Napping in the Arbour in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* Play', *Early Theatre* 9.2 (2006), 35–55, 38, https://doi.org/10.12745/et.9.2.728.

30 'Mary Magdalene', l. 550: 'Pryde, callyd Coriosté, to hure is ful laudabyll'.

31 Susannah Milner, 'Flesh and Food: The Function of Female Asceticism in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*', *Philological Quarterly* 73.4 (1994), 385–401, 391: 'his speeches are ripe with verbal excess, and Davidson characterizes him with "self-seeking pride and unrestrained indulgence in one's appetites"'.

32 For an overview of drag king history and tropes see Donna Jean Troka, Jean Bobby Noble, and Kathleen Lebesco, 'Introduction', *The Drag King Anthology*, special edition of *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.3–4 (2003), 1–12.

33 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, 1988), 232, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478002703. Seeking to differentiate drag from impersonation acts by pointing back to the 'breeches' roles of the early modern and Restoration stages can overlook the fact that the theatrical parody of masculinity was also an important aspect of these roles. See the scenes where Sylvia learns to perform as a man in George Farquhar's 1706 play *The Recruiting Officer*, 3.2.

34 See Katie Horowitz, 'The Trouble with "Queerness": Drag and the Making of Two Cultures', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38.2 (2013), 303–26, https://doi.org/10.1086/667199; Leila J. Rupp, Verta Taylor, and Eve Ilana Shapiro, 'Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes', *Sexualities* 13.3 (2010), 275–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709352725; and Dino Willox, 'Whose Drag Is It Anyway? Drag Kings and Monarchy in the UK', *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.3–4 (2003), 263–84, https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v43n03_16.

35 Willox, 'Whose Drag', 150.

36 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 234.

37 In some cases, quite literally. Butterworth describes in *Staging Conventions*, 113, how 'Smaller items of attire such as *berdes* (beards), *heares* and *chuellers* (wigs and vizards), *vesernes* and *visors* (masks) could equally provide the necessary visual dynamic to symbolise the *personage*, and it is perhaps worth focussing on these contributory accoutrements of the players' attitude in attempts to identify the nature of *agreed pretence*, or theatrical contact, between player and spectator'.

38 Del LaGrace Volcano and Jack Halberstam, *The Drag King Book* (London, 1999), 16. This is a relatively recent development. See for example the contrast between Michelle M. Sauer's 2011 encyclopaedia definition of drag kings as 'women who perform as men' with Baker A. Rogers's 2021 one: 'In the 2020s, drag kinging is performed by cis women, trans men, nonbinary trans people, and sometimes cis men and trans women'. Michelle M. Sauer, 'Drag Kings', in *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World*, ed. Mary Strang, Carol Oyster, and Jane Sloan (London, 2011), 4.425–6, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995962.n225, and Baker A. Rogers, 'Drag Kings', in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*, ed. Abbie Goldberg and Genny Beemyn (London, 2021), 2.203–7, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544393858.n71.

39 Normington, *Gender*, 58 and 'Wisdom', in *Two Moral Interludes: The Pride of Life and Wisdom*, ed. David N. Klausner (Kalamazoo, 2008), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1z3hm9h. Subsequent citations reference this edition.

40 Coletti, '"Curtesy"', 7–8.

41 See also Normington, *Gender*, 62–3, on theatricality and transvestism: 'Transvestism increases the sense of gender as an artificial construction created through the repetition of culturally assigned gestures and movements. This sense of artificiality emphasises the status of theatre as a manipulated and created art'.

42 Daisy Black, 'Commanding Un-Empty Space: Silence, Stillness and Scopic Authority in the York *Christ Before Herod*' in *Gender: Places, Spaces and Thresholds*, ed. Victoria Blud, Diane Heath, and Einat Klafter (London, 2019), 237–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9b2tw8.22, and, forthcoming, 'The Governor, the Wife and the Cock-Blocking Constable: Spatial Policing and Heterosexual Parody in the York Pageant *The Dream of Pilate's Wife*', in *Queer Textures of the Past (5th to 16th Centuries)*, ed. David Carrillo-Rangel and Kate Maxwell (Kalamazoo, 2025).

43 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 238.

44 Coletti, '"Curtesy"', 8; Pugh, *On the Queerness*, 28.

45 On the elaborate process of costuming for a drag king performance, see Rogers, 'Drag Kings', 204.

46 Meredith Heller, 'Drag Performativity', in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*, ed. Abbie Goldberg and Genny Beemyn (London, 2021), 2.208–10, 208, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544393858.n72.

47 Butterworth, *Staging Conventions*, 113–14.

48 Horowitz, 'The Trouble with "Queerness"', 308.

49 While drag queens tend to depict white, wealthy, straight, able-bodied cultural ideals, drag kings play with a wider range of masculinities, including less privileged classes, ages, body types, and ethnic identities. Horowitz, 'The Trouble with "Queerness"', 307.

50 See Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 261; Justine Egner and Patricia Maloney, '"It Has No Color, It Has No Gender, It's Gender Bending": Gender and Sexuality Fluidity and Subversiveness in Drag Performance', *Journal of Homosexuality* 63.7 (2016), 875–903, 881, https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1116345; and Heller, 'Drag Performativity', 209.

51 Kathryn Rosenfeld, 'Drag King Magic: Performing/Becoming the Other', *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.3–4 (2003), 201–19, 205–6, https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v43n03_13.

52 See Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 2016), 25, https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812292688: 'While sexual body parts and normative heterosexual sex are … more publicly acceptable in the Middle Ages than in the modern West,

other forms of sexuality are subjected to a censorship so profound they are rarely, if ever, visible'.

53 Allen-Goss, *Female Desire*, 14.

54 Wade, 'Ower Felaws Blake', 30 and Pugh, *On the Queerness*, 60, 95–120.

55 Findon, 'Napping in the Arbour', 38.

56 See Allen-Goss, *Female Desire*, 2: 'A prosthetic both supplements and announces a pre-existing lack, taking the place of what is missing and simultaneously acting as an ever–visible reminder of that lack, by its difference from the substance it replaces. The problem of incompleteness, of prosthetic desire and absent masculine body parts, haunts the imaginary of female desire from Eve onwards'.

57 Milner, 'Flesh and Food', 393, calls this 'an explicitly physical image with which to identify Mary's conversion'.

58 Like Flesh, the King of Marseilles ends his tyrant speech with a description of his Queen, whom he describes in language which suggests a similar excess of lust: 'Whan I loke on this lady, I am losty as the lyon' ('Mary Magdalene', 944).

59 Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama*, 14 and Normington, *Gender*, 60–3.

60 See Epp, 'Ecce Homo', 238–40, on plays as sites of desire for queer audience members.

61 Robert L.A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, 'Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Cross-dressing in Medieval Drama', *New Literary History* 28.2 (1997), 319–344, 320, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.1997.0017.

62 Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro, 'Drag Queens and Drag Kings', 289.

63 Rosenfeld, 'Drag King Magic', 204–8.

64 Ann Tweedy, 'A Voice from the Audience', *Journal of Homosexuality* 43.3–4 (2003), 189–90, 1–4 and 17–19, https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v43n03_11.

65 Normington, *Gender*, 103.

66 Lara Farina, 'Lesbian History and Erotic Reading', in *The Lesbian Premodern,* ed. Giffney, Sauer, and Watt, 49–60, 49, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117198_4: 'To read erotically is to be moved by a text. It requires that the reader feel, emotionally and physically, a written work's affective pull. To read erotically is also, then, to become *implicated* in sexualized relations performed by and with reading material'.

67 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, dir. Simon Godwin, National Theatre, 3 March 2017.

68 Joseph Pequigney, 'The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*', *English Literary Renaissance* 22.2 (1992), 201–21, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1992.tb01038.x.

69 Daisy Black, unpublished directing notes from a workshop on the Digby *Mary Magdalene* at the University of Wolverhampton, 18 February 2022.