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# Review of A Critical Edition of the Legend of Mary Magdalena from Caxton's Golden Legende of 1483

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Although Mary Magdalene is a character from the New Testament, as is often the case, a rich body of extra-scriptural legendary material, producing several widely divergent strands of medieval *vitae*, grew up around her figure. For example, Mary Magdalene often came to be identified with other women appearing in the gospels, most notably, Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Christ characterized as having chosen “the better part” because she chose to listen to his preaching rather than to help her sister with meal preparations (Luke 10:38–42). Some traditions relate that, after Christ’s ascension, she was forced into a rudderless boat with Martha,

Lazarus, Marcella, and St. Maximin and, through God's providence, was carried to the shores of Marseilles, where she and her companions preached, performed miracles, and, finally, converted its pagan rulers. Later, she is supposed to have quit the active ministry and retired to the wilderness of Sainte-Baume, where she lived in penance and contemplation for the last thirty years of her life. In this, her story resembles very much that of St. Mary of Egypt, also a converted prostitute. These traditions explain why, in the West, Mary Magdalene became one of the most important examples, and, indeed, symbols of the contemplative life.

Those interested in mysticism, then, will be pleased to know that David Mycoff has produced a scholarly critical edition of a very important document in the Magdalene dossier, the *vita* found in Caxton's *Golden Legende*, which has been widely available until now only in an old diplomatic edition by Frederick S. Ellis. [See N. F. Blake, *William Caxton: A Bibliographical Guide* (New York: Garland, 1985), B46.2–B46.3.] Mycoff takes as his copy text the *vita* found in the last edition of *The Golden Legende* produced during Caxton's lifetime, that found in the Hunterian Collection of Glasgow University (S.T.C. 24873). Against this, he collates the nine other editions of *The Golden Legende* produced during the years 1483–1527, before the Reformation effectively destroyed its popularity.

Caxton states that he based his legendary on three major sources: "a legende in frensshe another in latyn & the thyrd in englysshe." Modern scholars agree that these sources were the very influential *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, Jehen de Vignay's *Legende dorée*, and the English *Gilte Legende*. Thus, Caxton's legendary is both stylistically popular and representative of mainstream hagiographical traditions in the West. Mycoff's research on the Magdalene legend basically supports earlier scholarship on Caxton's indebtedness to his sources: on the whole, he reports, Caxton follows the French version rather than the English or the Latin; however, "he frequently uses vocabulary and phrasing from [the *Gilte Legende*] in passages otherwise modeled closely on the French" (p. 39).

Mycoff, however, goes beyond simply offering a critical edition of the *vita*. In a thorough introduction, he offers a typology of Magdalene legends and discusses their development and transmission in various medieval Latin and English versions. Indebted to Victor Saxer's *Le Culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident des origines à la fin du moyen âge* (2 vols. Auxerre-Paris, 1959), his introduction both offers a convenient overview of Saxer's work and advances it with respect to our understanding of the contributions of Vincent of Beauvais and the vernacular works produced after him. Moreover, Mycoff also provides a critical edition of Caxton's life of St. Mary of Egypt, which helps underscore the debt of Magdalene's *vita* to that of her

sister-saint, and a transcription of the *vitae* of both Marys from Jehan de Vignay's *Legende dorée*. The book should, then, become a valuable research tool for those studying the legend and cult of Mary Magdalene in the late Middle Ages.

In his introduction, Mycoff promises to use his study as “a focus for the study of wider issues” in hagiography. Indeed, the Magdalene legend and its textual history are certainly excellent examples of the richness and complexity that can be found in legendary traditions. The editor's full and carefully written explanatory notes help us to see this complexity in its appropriate context; and his comments about the methodology of medieval hagiographers (see pp. 10–11) are a good starting point for anyone who wishes to acquaint herself with this genre, for they remind us again that hagiographers were not critical historians but pious literary artists, who believed that their proper task was to exploit their sources creatively for as much edification as possible. The long and varied history of the Magdalene legend suggests just how much edification could be coaxed out of a few short Biblical passages.

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