

BOOK REVIEW

Mary Magdalene Understood. Jane Schaberg with Melanie Johnson-Debaufre. New York: Continuum, 2006; 174 pages; ISBN 0-8264-1899-6; \$12.95US (paper).

In this version "for non-specialist readers" of her much longer and more thoroughly documented *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, Schaberg offers a useful overview of the intellectual challenges involved in interpreting representations of Mary Magdalene. She divides her material according to source, beginning with a helpful overview of the legends of Mary popular in culture, her centrality in gnostic texts, especially the Gospel of Mary, and evidence of the erasure of this centrality in New Testament texts. Throughout, Schaberg illustrates the profound importance of these representations to a feminist perspective on early Church history, Christian theology, and the ideological construction of the spiritual and sexual identities of Christian women.

However, a key methodological tool in her earlier work is the orientation of the study around the imagined presence of Virginia Woolf as a "guide and companion for...thinking back through the Magdalene" (45). This strategy creates a few problems. Relatively minor is the annoying intrusion of an essentially personal fantasy into a scholarly work. The 2006 version benefits from the omission of this long introductory section, although Woolf is summoned intermittently here as well. However, in many ways the implicit intent to build a three-dimensional psychological and spiritual portrait of Mary as a historical person creates a similar flaw. A more serious flaw is evidence.

Apart from her scriptural and classical primary sources, Woolf's are the earliest works to which Schaberg refers. Assessment of Schaberg's scholarship is made difficult because neither the 2002 nor 2006 version of this study contains an index or a list of sources. A reader must troll through footnotes and/or endnotes for documentation. The author seems to rely heavily on like-minded, contemporary feminist commentaries, such as those of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Judith Plaskow, among others. Schaberg seems unaware of important early feminist attempts to politicize representations of Mary, such as Anna Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art* series (1860). As a result, the reader is given the mistaken impression that this area of study is relatively new rather than part of a longstanding feminist project.

Schaberg's personal, mystical attempt to present and commune with a "real"

Mary is at odds with the historiographic method used to trace her in texts that have been repeatedly rewritten over time. The result is a diffuse and disjointed study that could have benefitted greatly from the more disciplined style of Elaine Pagels who also intends her work on the early Church for the general reader. Mieke Bal's trilogy on the Book of Judges, although heavily informed by narratological theory, offers a model of historiographic analysis of the figures of Deborah and Jael that Schaberg would have done well to examine.

The "Questions and Resources for Discussion" section indicates that this volume is aimed primarily at students in introductory Women's Studies or Religious Studies courses and, secondarily, at a general reader with no academic background. As such, it serves its purpose, providing an intriguing orientation to a fundamental issue in feminist thinking on the historical place of women in Christianity.

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