

Anya Wilkening
Undergraduate Research Award Submission
Research Strategy Essay

My paper “There’s Something About Mary,” explored the biblical, historical, and musical contexts surrounding and informing the character of Mary Magdalen as portrayed in the fifteenth century German passion play “Ludus Mariae Magdalenae in gaudio.” The interdisciplinary nature of this study mandated use of varied and numerous sources. Fondren Library was integral in helping me to gain the perspectives necessary to conceptualize a multifaceted reading of this work, not only of the character of Mary Magdalen, but also of her evolution from sinner to penitent. I am grateful to Fondren Library for providing the resources, primary and secondary texts, as well as the environment necessary to inform and frame this project.

In selecting a topic for MUSI 422: Music of the Renaissance, I was drawn to the area of early feminist studies, regarding the musical and dramatic portrayal of females in a demonstrably patriarchal society. The character of Mary Magdalen lends itself to such an analysis; portrayals of Mary abound, and she is presented both as a deviant from and conformer to normative female behavior. My professor, who is an expert on the subject of Mary Magdalen (and who has recently edited a collection of essays on her, entitled *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture: Conflicted Roles*), guided me to the *Magdalenspiel* (a play about Mary Magdalen) found in the *Erlauer Spiel*. It was at this point that Fondren initially proved to be invaluable; the interlibrary loan system rapidly tracked down a copy of this largely unknown work; I could immediately delve into the music and text.

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After gaining a general understanding of the musical drama itself, including characters, plot, and musical examples, I began to research the history and permutations of the depiction of Mary Magdalen. The Fondren Collection itself provided an abundance of resources; I was able to amass information from a scriptural and feminist point of view. The thoughtful research guides compiled and maintained by the Fondren librarians (specifically Religious Studies, Women's Studies, and Theatre) aided me in my search, steering me towards authors whose work would prove essential to bolstering and supporting my argument that Mary, as depicted in *Ludus Mariae Magdalenae in gaudio* could be understood as a character that represented the complexity of feminine roles. Texts such as Theresa Colleti's *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints*, which utilizes an English religious drama to examine the negotiation of the tensions surrounding the Magdalenian identity, was not only a source of information on Mary herself, but also a guide to approaching this often-contradictory, complex figure. Though Colleti's work was far more detailed than my term paper, the structure of her research shaped my own; I was able to draw clear parallels between the Digby play that she examines and "Ludus Mariae Magdalenae in gaudio." Alison Finlay, in her book titled *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama*, provided general information about religious dramas as a genre, as well as thought provoking, feminist interpretations of these plays. These areas of research, far outside my usual purview of musical interpretation, provided varied lenses through which to examine different aspects (the music, the characters, the dialogue, and the plot) of this *Magdalenspiel*. Access to texts from varied disciplines was essential to this project. To review a complete

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list of the works I consulted, each of which was found via the Fondren library, please see the bibliography included in “There’s Something About Mary.”

I was, of course, chiefly interested in the role of the music throughout “Ludus Mariae Magdalene in gaudio.” Over the course of the play, the audience sees Mary evolve from a salacious, sinful woman to a penitential one who embraces piety. Musically, the first stage is represented through the use of secular songs sung in the vernacular. Post-conversion, however, Mary only sings religious chant. In order to better understand these styles, and the implications they held for audience members contemporary to when this was written, I turned to resources found through JSTOR, which provides access to (for instance) *Speculum*, a journal entirely devoted to Medieval studies, the Grove Dictionary of Music, an online encyclopedia that provides comprehensive information, including biographies and articles, on music and musicians, as well as books found both in Fondren’s collection and sourced using the interlibrary loan system. These tools, available via the resources at Fondren, enabled me to analyze the secular songs and compare them to similar examples; for example, I looked to the tradition of the *Meistersingers* (specifically their use of bar form) and its connection to some of Mary’s songs in order to better understand the popular, secular nature of these tunes. Similarly, I examined the chant quoted in “Ludus Mariae Magdalene in gaudio.” Though the music itself is not written in the play (rather, textual incipits are provided), I was able to find (through the use of the Cantus database as well as different antiphoners) the musical contour, allowing me to examine the changes in Mary’s means of expression through song.

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It is my intention to continue with this project in order to better understand the feminist readings of this character, providing a different lens through which to view these religious musical dramas. I anticipate that I will continue to consult different sources from heterogeneous disciplines, including Julia Kristeva's philosophical work on the feminine voice, Virginia Burrus' studies of the sexual implications of the lives and stories of other saints, and begin writing about the objectification of the female body on stage (potentially examined first through Laura Mulvey's body of work on feminist cinematic studies). I am confident that I will be able to access primary and secondary texts through Fondren Library in support of my research; the vast amount of information available (from different disciplines and authors, in diverse formats, etc.) sparks intellectual curiosity leading to new avenues of thought and consideration. I am grateful to Fondren Library for providing the materials and resources, as well as the contemplative environment, necessary to foster not only my musicological interests, but also my proficiency as a researcher.