

*The Gospel According to the Novelist: Religious Scripture and Contemporary Fiction*, by Magdalena Mączyńska

New Directions in Religion and Literature | London: Bloomsbury, 2015 | 152 pages | ISBN: 978-1-350-02844-9 (hardcover) \$94.00 | ISBN: 978-1-780-93623-9 (softcover) \$39.95

Magdalena Mączyńska's study of modern literary rewritings of the gospels is an astonishingly comprehensive survey for a book whose main text runs to only 110 pages, or 144 including the notes. She manages to discuss most of the significant hypertexts from Robert Graves's *King Jesus* (1946) to Naomi Alderman's *The Liar's Gospel* (2012), as well as some precursors. (The only major omission I noted was Vincento Leñero's *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán* [1979], a remarkable Marxist modern-dress reiteration of the gospel story, transferred to 1970s Mexico, which is as critical of institutional Christianity and as comical as any of the novels which *are* explored here.)

The author begins by defining her interest as lying not in religion as a literary theme nor in narratives which set out to revitalize the canonical stories by supplying historical reconstructions or transferring the plots to a modern setting. Rather her concern is with novels that are scriptural rewritings which



explore the boundary between religious and literary discourses. She selects the term *scriptural metafiction* (drawing on Linda Hutcheon's account of *historiographic metafiction*) to describe works which deconstruct scriptural material and at the same time provide their own versions of gospel events. The origins of the modern trajectory are traced back to Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* and Renan's *La Vie de Jésus* as writers make more and more explicit the man-made character of the original gospels. Successive sections explore the atheist hermeneutics of suspicion evidenced in José Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*; the alternative (feminist) viewpoint provided by such gospel rewritings as Michèle Roberts's *The Wild Girl* and Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*; the "hidden years" gospel material supplied by a range of works from Nicolas Notovitch's *La vie inconnue de Jésus* to Christopher Moore's *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff*; the postmodern or postsecular rewritings which emphasize the multiplicity of possible perspectives (for example Nino Ricci's *Testament*); and finally more carnivalesque reworkings exploiting the science fiction genre of time travel, such as Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man* and Gore Vidal's *Live from Golgotha*. In the case of Vidal's reworking, the resultant narrative serves to illustrate Baudrillard's argument that "the simulacrum obscures not an underlying reality, but rather its absence." Chapter 4 reviews the inscription of sensational scholarly textual and archaeological research in a range of works, culminating in Michael Faber's *Fire Gospel* and taking in (inevitably) the impact of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. One of the most interesting sections examines Gabriel Meyer's *The Gospel of Joseph*. With its multi-layered combination of fictive documentary archive and a plot line involving a scholar commissioned by the former DDR to deliver a propaganda coup demolishing Christianity, it offers an exposition of the fluctuations in the meanings and values of sacred texts and the opportunities for political and ideological manipulation.

Inevitably there are critical lacunae. There are no bibliographical references for the mentioned study by Robert Cousland dealing with Saramago's novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (31–32). Despite devoting much space proportionately to novels dealing with Judas Iscariot, there is no mention of either of the two main scholarly surveys of the subject, Kim Paffenroth's *Judas, Images of the Lost Disciple* (2001) or Susan Gubar's *Judas: A Biography* (2009). In the section covering Naomi Alderman's *The Liar's Gospel*, the novelist's stress on the power of the storyteller to manipulate her subject and to tell lies is not balanced by any mention of the evidence from

two centuries of folkloric studies on the faithfulness of oral transmission in its preservation of tradition. In the study as a whole, there needs to be more recognition of the fact that every rewriting, including Vidal's lampoon, depends on the stability of an at least notional hypotext, even if that hypotext is (in the case of the canonical gospels) pluritextual. This might have provided a fruitful extension to the author's very useful short account of the history of gospel harmonies.

Mączyńska's Conclusion (107–10) is a little brief, especially as it starts with an excursion into yet another field, that of the pious expansion found in the phenomenally successful *Left Behind* series and *The Jesus Chronicles*, albeit as a foil to the other material surveyed in the book. Upholding the value of scriptural metafiction as a way of exposing the abuses engendered by modern capitalism and forms of patriarchal oppression, but above all as a way of resisting the "fetishization of canonical biblical texts," the study hints at a horizon in which the hermeneutical skepticism on display in the works discussed has "far-reaching philosophical and political implications." Presumably that demands another volume. For now, though, we have an indispensable resumé of the territory occupied by radical fictional rewritings of gospel material.

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