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Magdalena. A Fable of Immortality. Beatriz Escalante. Trans. Jay Miskowiec. Minneapolis: Aliform Publishing, 2002. 126 pp. ISBN 0-9707652-2-3. \$12.95

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Mexican author Beatriz Escalante has written a fable of feminine ambition in which the central figure, an alchemist and sorceress, ultimately realizes her full intellectual potential. However, she accomplishes this only through suppressing all the emotions that are traditionally associated with femininity: empathy, tenderness, affection, abnegation and sensuality. Magdalena is an orphan: because her mother died giving birth, she provokes unnatural repugnance in her father who abandons her. After being sold to an Arab alchemist by relatives at the symbolic, liminal age of thirteen, Magdalena becomes his apprentice in the occult arts. When the Arab dies, Magdalena turns his search for a way to convert base metals to gold into something far greater: the quest for immortality.

María Magdalena is named for the penitent sinner of the New Testament, witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. She is thus the first initiate into the mystery of His immortality. Magdalena's name also alludes to the path she has chosen in a society which defines gender roles for women according to the Marianist dichotomy: virgin/mother or whore. But she violates this duality by insisting on a mode of self-definition that eludes the patriarchal standard.

Magdalena's pursuit of immortality challenges Eleazar, the man of science; and Thomas, the archetypal Church father who seeks to control all knowledge and access to eternal life. Here the text alludes to Sor Juana's neo-Platonist explorations in the *Primero Sueño*, presenting an alternative to the tragedy of Sor Juana's eventual intellectual defeat. Instead of submitting to the dictates of a Church establishment governed by Scholastic thought and, like Sor Juana, renouncing her pursuit of knowledge, the sorceress blithely sidesteps the agents of the Church sent to hunt her by Father Thomas. Rumors of Magdalena's success in compounding the secret elixir of immortality enrage "the good father," not least because she has escaped established rhetorical boundaries: "for the first time, the name of a woman went from mouth to mouth without being linked to the topic of infidelity or adultery" (108).

The text alludes, as well, to other genres and traditions: biblical and Borgesian parables, alchemical treatises, fairy tales, and contemporary feminist fiction. Throughout the story there is a struggle between unicity and multiplicity: villagers and side-show freaks alike long to stand apart from their neighbors and fellows. Multiplied and duplicated images echo Borges's fascination with simulacra: the Arab alchemist whose vast life experience "made one think of the biography of not one old man but several" (16); the endlessly repeated, identical alchemical essays; the duplicate laboratory, and the Janus-like "double man" whose diaphragm is the final, catalyzing ingredient to Magdalena's elixir. In finding the key to immortality, the twice-born Magdalena seeks to escape repetition--temporal duplication--but it is through simulation that she ultimately usurps the work of the Arab alchemist, of science and of the Church.

Escalante's *Magdalena* owes an additional debt to Carmen Boullosa's *La Milagrosa*, the central figure of which is also a mystical figure in combat with a villainous patriarchy. *La Milagrosa* is obsessed with maintaining unicity of intellect, spirit and body amid the disintegrating forces that assail her. Her figurative death and rebirth as a carnal woman halfway through Boullosa's novella are accompanied by the loss of her unique powers, and very possibly her own death. Conversely, Magdalena's desire for occult knowledge proves stronger than her need for human companionship: she ends up triumphant in her scientific quest, but alone and loveless. Some readers may conclude that this is the inevitably tragic outcome of the modern woman's dilemma, but it is tempting to wonder, as Sor Juana did, whether the possession of ultimate knowledge wouldn't, after all, be worth the price of isolation.

Despite a few syntactical oddities yielded by Jay Miskowiec's translation from the Spanish, Beatriz Escalante's muted, oblique novella is appealing: an alchemical text laden with symbols, laced with interlocking images, curiously unresolved.

