The Struggle between Reason and Will in the *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca*

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ABSTRACT

The Struggle between Reason and Will in the Vida de Santa María Egipciaca
(Under the direction of Frank Domínguez)

Escorial III-K-4 contains a Spanish version of the Old French Vie de Sainte Marie l’Egyptienne (ms. B), the story of St. Mary of Egypt, a prostitute-turned penitent who is accepted into the Community of Saints. However, critics agree that the Spanish poem, Vida de Madona Santa María Egipciaqua is not just a translation, but an amplification that dramatizes further the character of Mary (Alvar 1967, 32-55; Cruz-Sáenz 115). This thesis studies the description of Mary of Egypt known as Vida de Madona Santa María Egipciaqua as an extreme expression of the conflict between the body and the will in order to find out what it tells us about the nature of the audience for which it was composed.
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Introduction

Escorial III-K-4 contains a Spanish version of the Old French *Vie de Sainte Marie l’Egyptienne* (ms. B), the story of St. Mary of Egypt, a prostitute-turned-penitent who is accepted into the Community of Saints. However, critics agree that the Spanish poem, *Vida de Madona Santa María Egipciaqua* is not just a translation, but an amplification that dramatizes further the character of Mary (Alvar 1967, 32-55; Schiavonne 115). This thesis studies the description of Mary of Egypt known as *Vida de Madona Santa María Egipciaqua* as an extreme expression of the conflict between the body and reason. More than other examples of lives of saints, *Vida* explores the same theme that Juan Ruiz seemingly satirizes in his prose sermon, *Intellecto tibi dabo* while looking, at the same time, at how the desire for God leads to the reformation of an extreme sinner in the pilgrimage of life. In so doing, it reveals much about the nature of the audience for which it was composed.

The thesis first examines the ways in which the *Vida* differs from other saintly *vitae*, disagreeing with Edith Wyschogrod’s discussion of conversion as “saintly self-emptying” in which a transcendent Other comes to fill the place of the self. I then examine Mary of Egypt’s dramatic physical deterioration as evidence of the transformation of her will, contrasting it with the description of her earlier self. Lastly, I draw on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection to show how Mary obliterates the impurities manifest in her life due to sin, as evidenced by her assumption into Heaven. I conclude that the *Vida*, which portrays a

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1 Manuscript B, or *Canonici Miscellaneous 74*, is a version which dates back to the early thirteenth century, conserved today in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.
prostitute-turned-penitent of great faith who transforms her will by re-channeling it in the
direction of salvation, thus bringing it under the control of reason, serves not only as an
entertaining tale but also as a didactic tool for the Church in the Middle Ages and beyond.

The saintly *vita* is the most prolific literary genre from the early Christian era through
the Middle Ages. These small biographies that tell entertaining tales about exemplary
figures for the purposes of exemplification and religious propaganda have existed from the
beginning of Christianity, many recounting the lives of martyrs who lived in the first few
centuries following the death of Christ. In the third century, however, a new type of *vita*
emerged that tells the life of the desert ascetic, and to which the life of St. Mary belongs. All of these saints practice *askesis*, or penance, in deserted places, and use solitude and
starvation as a means of gaining salvation. These Fathers of the Desert, as they are
commonly called, are also rewarded with a power in life that foreshadows the power they are
to have in the afterlife.

Paralleling the *vitas* of the Desert Fathers, we have narratives of the lives of holy
women (“Amma” Sara, Syncletica, Matrona, and Theodora, etc.), who are often referred to
as Desert Mothers, because their experiences are like those of the Desert Fathers. Although
the accounts of these early women ascetics are not as widely disseminated as the *vitas* of the
men, we do know that many of them come from wealthy families and are well-educated.
Like their male counterparts, they choose to abandon the material comforts and temptations

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2 For a discussion on the importance of hagiography in medieval religion, see Geary (1996) or Delehaye (1961).

3 The earliest *vitas* of this type appear in the collection known as St. Jerome’s (ca. 340-ca. 420) *Vitas patrum*,
which celebrates the lives of St. Malchus, St. Hilarion and St. Anthony, and is considered to truly inaugurate the
of a secular world in order to pursue a life of prayer and physical mortification in the desert. Nevertheless, a subgroup of these holy women, prostitutes-turned-penitents, because of their profession, represent the most dramatic contrast between the life of the body and the life of the spirit. Among their *vitas*, few have had greater impact or left more versions than the story of St. Mary of Egypt (ca 344-ca 421), whose *vita* recounts the life of a person who journeys physically and mentally from a life of sin to eternal life and sainthood by her extreme penance.

The facts of the story generally remain the same: Mary of Egypt leaves her parents’ house as a young girl to travel to Alexandria, where she lives as a prostitute before joining a group of pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, she is prevented by guards from entering the Christian temple and realizes that her sinful life eventually will lead to the death of her soul. Mary decides to repent and to convert when a statue of the Virgin Mary comes alive and instructs her to go into the desert. After many years of penance in the desert, she is discovered by a monk, who gives her communion and his blessing before going back to his monastery. Mary then dies, and her soul is lifted by angels into Heaven. The monk returns

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4 For more information on early female desert ascetics, see Swan (2001) or King (1983).


6 The earliest and best-known written record of Mary’s life is a seventh-century Greek version attributed to Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. ca. 639). Sophronius’s version was based on multiple sources which included a sixth-century adaptation from *Life of St. Cyriacus* (d. 556) written by hagiographer St. Cyril of Scythopolis. It has been published as *Vita Mariae Aegyptae in Migne, Patrologia Graeca (PG)* 87:3697-726. There are three different Latin translations, all based on the Greek text. Two of the Latin versions are anonymous but the third, and most famous, dates back to the eighth century and has been attributed to Paul the Deacon of Naples (*PL* 73, 671-90). The popularity of the legend of St. Mary of Egypt throughout the Middle Ages is evidenced by numerous prose redactions in English, Celtic, Dutch, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and various Eastern languages (Schiavonne de Cruz-Saenz 17-18). By the end of the fourteenth century, there are eight Old French and one Spanish manuscripts in Castilian that contain rhymed versions of her *vita*.

7 Most versions of the *Vida* emphasize Mary of Egypt’s lustful behavior and her tendency to seduce men for pleasure unlike other prostitutes who sought monetary compensation for their services. For more on traditional definitions of prostitution in the Middle Ages, see Karras (1996).
only to find her body and buries it with the aid of a lion, symbolic of Christ, and whose presence affirms Mary of Egypt’s sanctification.

The life of Mary of Egypt exists in many Latin and vernacular versions. All follow this plot in general terms. Two, however, depart from this structure in the amount of space they devote to the life of the saint before conversion. These are the Vie de Sainte Marie l’Égyptienne and its translation or adaptation, the Vida de Santa Madona María Egipciaqua.

The Vida de Santa Madona María Egipciaqua

In his two-volume study of the Vida de Santa Madona María Egipciaqua, Manuel Alvar claims that this particular rhymed version was probably first translated from the rhymed French Vie de Sainte Marie l’Égyptienne into Castilian in the early thirteenth-century and copied by an Aragonese scribe in the late fourteenth century. Both the French and Spanish versions conceive of Mary as a more powerful character and a significant portion of the text in both poems is dedicated to the description of her sinful, pre-conversion youth. The Vida in particular, however, further amplifies this section.

When we compare the rhymed Vida to the two Castilian prose versions from the fourteenth century (the prose Vida de Santa María Egipciaca [ms. h-III-22] derived from Paul the Deacon’s Vita Sanctae Pelagiae, Meretricis and the Estoria de Santa María Egipciaca [ms. h-III-22] derived from an anonymous French source), we see that both of these prose versions tend to cast the monk Zosimas or Gozimás, as he is called in the Spanish

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8 The Vida is based not on one single version of the Old French poem but rather on a number of versions. I will be citing from Alvar’s critical edition, published in Poemas hagiográficos de carácter juglaresco (1967). Alvar’s textual comparison and analysis of the Old French and Spanish versions suggests that the Vida is most similar to ms. B (Schiavone de Cruz-Sáenz 22-23). For a comparison of the Old French versions, see Dembowski, (1977).
poem, as the protagonist, while assigning a secondary role to Mary. In fact, the *Vita* dedicates the first six chapters to a description of Gozimás in which he is presented as a characteristically austere, albeit overly pious, monastic saint whose life is defined by self-deprivation and self-degradation. Thompson and Walsh argue that the Gozimás narrative serves as a counterbalance to Mary of Egypt’s legend of licentiousness and, in terms of its medieval audience, “would have provided consolation for the dutiful, untainted monks and holy persons whose entire lives had been the willful denial of all that pertained to the world and flesh” (17).

The prose versions of the story treat Mary’s early life in less than three of twenty seven chapters while the poems dedicate a quarter of the text to a description of her sinful life. This comes to approximately 360 of 1451 lines in the Spanish *Vida* which describes in ample detail her early life leading up to her journey to Jerusalem. The conclusion is that the Castilian poem, more so than the prose versions or even the *Vie*, contrasts Mary’s life prior to conversion with the life of this prostitute-turned-penitent after conversion and, in so doing, creates a more effective example of the effects of repentance and forgiveness for its audience.

Although the *Vida* follows the traditional model of penitence advocated by the *vitae patrum*, it implicitly challenges the common medieval conception of women as weak with its portrayal of Mary of Egypt whose inordinate desire is merely re-channeled in an effort to achieve sanctification. Recent studies concerning saintly prostitutes have centered on the incongruity of associating sanctity with prostitutes, particularly when the Church viewed

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9 From now on, references to Mary without a qualifier are to Mary of Egypt and all subsequent references to the monk, known as Zosimas in the Latin version, will be Gozimás.
unrestrained sexuality as a sin. Inordinate desire is synonymous with St. Augustine of Hippo’s term “libido” as translated by Thomas Williams (1993) and conveys unchecked, bad or misguided will. Women, who represented the passions of the flesh and who were perceived as essentially sexual, were considered to be the root of all evil and sin. As a result, the concept of a sanctified prostitute has been paradoxical for modern critics, many of whom consider the sanctity of medieval prostitutes such as Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, Thaïs, Pelagia and Mary, niece of Abraham, possible only when they had completely obliterated their erotic side through asceticism and the denial of their sexuality and femininity (Ruth Mazo Karras 1990). Regardless of the extent of their atonement, Gillian Cloke (1995) explains that most of the prostitutes-turned-penitents were still considered responsible for corrupting the souls of others. Furthermore, Virginia Burrus (2004) argues that these prostitutes-turned-penitents of ancient hagiography remain unrepentant harlots, even when they become “holy,” and suggests that conversion resembles seduction due to its nature as a conquest of one person by either another [hu]man or God. Most recently, critics have tried to separate the phallus (power) from the penis and allowed for the possibility of women attaining the power of the phallus, but only when both men and women quelled the urges of their sexualized bodies and became androgynes. However, since the ideal was the male body, for women, this involved the added step of women turning into men (Boyarin).

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10 Patricia Cox Miller (2003) rejects the tendency to interpret the harlot-saint story as a morality tale and argues instead that the harlot-saint is a grotesque character who reflects early Christian attempts to define female holiness; Lynda Coon (1997) examines the ways in which the incongruous harlot-saint association was possible due to radical self-abnegation and a life of extreme asceticism on the part of the penitent prostitutes;

11 Vern L. Bullough (1973) explains that many of the medieval misogynist views stem from the early Church Fathers who conceived of women as evil because their sexuality was a continual temptation to the men around them, and who believed that women needed to be kept subordinate so as not to pose a threat to society.
Whatever the continuing assessment of the problems raised for modern critics by the sanctity of prostitutes, all early accounts of the process of becoming a saint depict the yearnings of sex as one of the first things that the saint must overcome on his way to sanctity. Specifically, the temptation of the flesh must yield before the saint can hollow out his interior space so that it may be filled by a transcendent Other.\textsuperscript{12} However, this yielding of the interior space ascribed to a person prior to conversion is often defined in medieval narratives by a gap that points to the prior sinful life in very few words. This gap disappears in the French \textit{Vie} and more so in the Castilian \textit{Vida}.

As stated before, the early part of Mary of Egypt’s story fills less than three of the twenty seven chapters in Paul the Deacon’s eighth-century Latin version of the tale and is further reduced in the medieval Latin prose versions and their vernacular translations. For example, the text of the medieval translation of the \textit{Flos sanctorum} known as ms. 8 of the library Menéndez Pelayo (\textit{La leyenda de los santos} 2000) was written mostly for monastic consumption and further reduces the description of Mary’s sinful, pre-conversion youth to a mere three lines, emphasizing her post-conversion experience and the role of Gozimás.

Contrary to this, the didactic nature of the tale is greatly emphasized in the French and Castilian poetic versions of the legend, making the willful (and very histrionic) behavior of the young Mary have ample expression so that it contrasts, both in character and extent, to the saint’s willful behavior in the desert.\textsuperscript{13} This change allows us to better interpret the story of Mary as a battle between Reason and Will.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Edith Wyschogrod (1990, 33) refers to this process as “self-emptying” which Christian saints undergo as part of an attempt to be at the disposal of the transcendent Other.

\textsuperscript{13} For more information on will, see \textit{New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia}, <http://www.newadvent.org>.

\textsuperscript{14} I capitalize Reason and Will when referring the faculties of the soul in theology but not in reference to Mary’s will or reason.
According to Catholic theology, Will may be defined as the faculty of choice, or the appetite for Good in general. St. Thomas Aquinas posits that sin has its origin in the Will when this “rational appetite” deviates from Reason, or divine moral law. Furthermore, he defines an act as good or evil based upon its end. As a young prostitute, Mary’s will is not tempered with reason, and she lives her lascivious life without thinking of the consequences it may have for herself or for others in the future. Following her conversion at the temple, however, Mary’s will is transformed, and she learns to re-channel her desire. In doing so, there is a reestablishment of reason, and Mary’s “rational appetite” is able to gain control over her “lower appetites” as she seeks salvation.\footnote{For a more extensive discussion on appetite and will according the Christian philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, see Gilson (1956).}

In order to represent Mary of Egypt’s pre-conversion and post-conversion will, the Vida constructs an image that is contrary to the fundamental value ascribed to woman in the Middle Ages as chattel or object, with a special propensity to sin. This image is often characterized by the two common false etymologies associated with woman: *mulier* (< *mollis*, softness) and *femina* (*fe + minus* or lack of faith).\footnote{The false etymology can be traced to St. Isidore of Seville (ca 560-ca 636) who claims that the Latin *mulier* is derived from *mollities*, or softness (Etymologiae, XI.2.17-18). In the late twelfth century, French chaplain Andreas Capellanus advances this false etymology when he uses the metaphor of melting wax and accuses women of being soft and easily impressionable (De amore et amoris remedio). The propagation of the false etymology *femina* (*fe + minus* or lack of faith) by the church throughout the Middle Ages culminated in the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches) by German theologians Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger around 1487. This authoritative work was used as a guide for the persecution, torture and execution of witches during the Inquisition and serves as a written record of the popular derivation of *femina* from *fe minus*. The *Malleus Maleficarum* is most likely the first published account of this misogynist etymology.}

Mary is neither soft nor lacking in faith, but an extreme example of how human reason and will can be reunited before death. Perhaps the unusualness of the story is that, while saintly desire has been characterized as desire on behalf of another (or of the Other),...
Mary of Egypt’s desire is for the wholeness of herself, a fact that the Spanish poem pointedly makes by describing her life both prior to and after conversion, and to her immediate assumption into Heaven upon death. Mary recognizes that sin separates her from God, and that she must obliterate this sin in order to earn salvation, but unlike other ascetics who allow the Other to take over as they undergo mortification of the flesh, Mary successfully redirects her will while avoiding a complete annihilation of the self.

As I have said, from the start, Mary of Egypt is different from the Desert Fathers and Mothers of her time who leave behind the material comforts of the urban world for a life of extreme asceticism in the desert. Granted, they all seek reunification with God, are tempted, and have to battle with the Devil. But the Desert Fathers and Mothers are undergoing a process in which they gradually reduce their will to the obedience of God and many of them show a desire to lead lives of penance from early youth. Mary, on the other hand, enters the desert only after her sins are so great that she is physically blocked by a divine force when she tries to enter the temple and realizes that she must expiate her sins by extreme acts of penance. Moreover, while the Desert Fathers and Mothers are pursuing a life of renunciation in which self-abnegation plays a major role, Mary recognizes the need to obliterate the sin in her life rather than obliterating her self and leaving space for the Other. In doing so, she avoids “a total emptying without replenishment” of the soul which occurs in other saints when they forgo self-interest claims completely (Wyschogrod 33-34). Mary is thus able to continue to exert her will while she rids herself of this curse.

The process that is contained in very abbreviated form in the different versions of the Latin vita and its continuations becomes central to the both the Vie and the Vida. However, the Vida amplifies it by further highlighting Mary’s young life in Egypt where she is an
extremely beautiful but willful girl at odds with her parents. As a child, she chooses evil over good and spurns her parents who become greatly distressed by her disobedience. The narrator tells us that “Mientras que fue en mancebía, / dexó bondad e priso follía” (85-86). The term “mancebía” is synonymous with “juventud” or “niñez” in Spanish, and here we see how Mary rejects goodness at an exceptionally young age. The term “mançeba” is also used to denote a servant and, more telling, a prostitute, whose whorehouse was known as a “mançebía,” and thus foreshadows Mary’s decision to pursue a life of sinfulness and personal pleasure. Her decision to seek out “follía,” translated as a life of sin or craziness, contrasts to her later decision to seek out a life of goodness and controlled asceticism. Mary’s youth is therefore the condition that leads her to choose a life that is characterized as lustful and lecherous: “tanto fue plena de luxuria / que non entendie otra curia” (87-88); “Porque era tanto bella e genta, / mucho fiaba en su juventa” (89-90). She is unaware or perhaps unconscious of the potential consequences of her behavior:

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tanto amaba fer placers,
que non ha cura d’otros aberes,
mas despender e desbaldir
que nol membraba de morir;
a sus parientes se daba,
a todos homnes se baldonaba. (91-96)
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The term “baldonaba” is the equivalent of “whored” and reflects Mary’s willingness to give herself freely (in a sexual context) to the men, even those of her family. In doing so, she goes beyond the traditional definition of prostitution as a simple transaction in which a woman trades sex for money.

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17 See Juan Manuel’s Libro de los estados, for example, where he says: “son en grant peligro los fíjos de los grandes señores si les mengua buen consejo quando salen de la moçedat et entran en la mançebía” (Manuel 391).
At twelve, “Pues que xii anyos houo de edat, / con todos faze su voluntat” (127-28), Mary enters her “moçedat.” It is the age when women can marry, when knowledge manifests itself in right thinking, but also the age when unbridled will or “voluntat” takes over. Although her mother begs Mary to behave and her father promises to give her a good husband if she turns from her evil ways, Mary refuses. Instead, she flees to Alexandria to pursue a life of lasciviousness:

E después le vino acordar
que dexasse su linatge
pora más ser ssu voluntad,
hir sse querie de la çibdat. (131-34)

This flight of women from the countryside or to another city was recognized in the Middle Ages as a flight into prostitution, since women had little chance of gaining a living otherwise.

When she arrives in the port city of Alexandria, Mary lives with the local prostitutes, and is soon seducing the men of the city:

Ella los recibié de volonter
porque fiziessen su plazer;
a pora fer todo su viçio,
los mantiene a grant deliçio. (161-64)

Her extravagance is conveyed in the following description of her luxurious attire:

Brial de xamit sse vistie,
manto erminyo cobrié,
Nunqua calçaba outras çapatas,,
sino de cordobán entrettalladas,

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18 It is at the age of twelve when Jesus first impresses the teachers at the temple in Jerusalem with his wisdom when he explains his call, or mission, and declares himself to be son of God. Berceo refers to this incident involving the adolescent Christ in *Loores de Nuestra Señora*: “Quand’ fue de doce años, maguer niño de días, / ya iva voceando las sus derechurías; / concludié los maestros, solvié las profecías, / non osavan ant’ Él decir sobejanías” (42).

19 Throughout late Antiquity and into the early Middle Ages, while clothing was an indicator of status and wealth, many religious writers still accused women of adorning themselves with beautiful clothing and/or jewelry as a way to tempt men and denounced them as seductresses. For more information on clothing as language, see Clark (1993).
pintadas eran con oro e con plata, 
cuerdas de sseda con que las ata” (239-44)
The *Vida* remarks on the luxury of her dress. She is dressed in “xamit” (silk tunic),
“erninyo” (ermine shawl) and shoes made of “cordobán” (fine goatskin) painted with gold 
and silver decorations. This ornamentation reflects her greed as well as being symbolic of 
the corruption of her soul. In addition, it creates a dramatic contrast to the description of 
Mary in the desert following her conversion and life of penance in which she is described as 
a naked, emaciated figure who wears neither clothes, nor shoes, nor jewels of any kind. 
Whereas before Mary’s apparel reflected her life of lasciviousness and bad will, her post-
conversion nudity represents the transformation of her will and her successful attempt to re-
channel her desire. When she enters the desert, we are told that,

Sus çapatas e todos sus panyos  
bien le duraron siete anyos.  
Después andido quarenta anyos  
desnuda va e sin panyos.  
Por grant viento e grant friura  
desnuda va sin vestidura. (714-19)

Mary no longer needs to be clothed with worldly apparel because she has re-channeled her 
desire and now seeks salvation rather than personal pleasure. This ties in to the Biblical 
notion that one who is naked on earth should yearn for heavenly clothing which stems from 
the eternal abode prepared by God’s divine hands:

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a 
building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. 
Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 
because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are 
in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be 
unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal 
may be swallowed up by life (*NIV*, 2 Cor. 5.1-4)
Before Mary converts, however, her behavior is characterized by inordinate desire and the pleasure she derives from seducing the men in the poem. Andrew Beresford argues that in terms of the medieval understanding of sexuality, Mary of Egypt’s unrestrained sexual prowess is much more reprehensible than the behavior of a conventional prostitute (Beresford, 1997 47). He also notes that a licentious woman like Mary would have posed a real threat to medieval society because she is responsible for the corruption of her soul as well as the souls of others. In fact, the *Vida* shows how men lose their lives while constantly fighting over her. In one episode, we learn of a man who gets killed in a sword fight:

“dábanse grandes espadas: / la sangre que d’ellos sallía / por medio de la cal corría” (177-80), and we find out that she does not care: “El que vençie dentrol cogié, / el que murie pocol’ dolié / […] / ella más de un riso non darié” (185-89, 190). Self-absorbed and completely immersed in a life of sinful pleasure, Mary hardly acknowledges that she has caused both the corruption of men’s souls as well as their death.

Mary of Egypt is also characterized as a sexual predator when she decides to leave Alexandria and head to Jerusalem with a group of pilgrims. Because she has no money to pay for the journey, she offers her body in exchange for currency. The passengers do not seem to accept her offer, but let her on the boat after she pleads with them to take her to Jerusalem. After they embark, none of the passengers approach Mary for sexual favors. Instead, she seduces them as they sail through the night, although she no longer needs to offer her body as currency. The narrator describes the scene on the ship:

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20 During the Middle Ages, there was a commonly held belief that men needed an outlet for their sexual drives because a build-up of sexual tension might lead to a dangerous explosion which could harm society. Prostitution was therefore justified by many religious as well as secular officials as an institution that helped to maintain order and stability in society and to keep this sexual tension in balance. For a more in-depth discussion of medieval concepts of prostitution, see Karras (1996).

21 As Alvar (1970) points out in his critical edition, use of the term “cal” to mean “calle” or street dates back to 1212 (195).
más de dormir non a y nada,  
porque María es aparellada.  
Primeramente los va tentando,  
después, los va abracando,  
E luego s’ va con ellos echando,  
a grant sabor los va besando. (367-72)

Her behavior again demonstrates that she is indulging in sexual activities for personal  
pleasure rather than economic profit, becoming an active spreader of evil. It is not without  
meaning that in Christian symbolism the boat often symbolizes the church, so the scene can  
be interpreted allegorically as the corruption of the Good by Evil. However, the Vida also  
uses the scene in the boat and her willful actions upon reaching the Holy City to increase the  
tension leading to the final conversion experience:22 “‘A mi mester me tornaré, / que yo  
bien me gobernaré’” (411-12).

Just as she declares, Mary returns to her old “mester,” or activities, and unlike the  
other pilgrims who have come seeking purification and salvation, she continues her life of  
lechery: “Mas non dexó hi de pecar, / ante començo de peorar” (415-16). Her will is still  
directed towards personal pleasure but this changes abruptly when she tries to go into the  
church with the other pilgrims.

Mary’s freedom and independence are thwarted by guards who impede her entrance  
to the holy place with their swords. She realizes that her sin has led not only to her exclusion  
from the temple but to a symbolic death in life. Her immediate recognition of the body as the  
root of this sin is reflected in the manner in which she first exhibits her frustration. Mary  
tears at her hair and beats her chest in anger, confessing that she is full of evil and lust: “‘Tan  
só plena de malvezat, / de luxuria e de maldat’” (466-67). She even fears that God may have  
forsaken her: “‘que non puedo al templo entrar / ni oso a Dios me reclamar’” (466-69). Her

22 For more information on the boat or the ship as a symbol in art and literature, see Schnier (1953),  
conversion, then, is based partly on the realization that she can no longer satisfy her desires. Just like St. Paul, who falls off the horse prior to his conversion, Mary encounters a physical barrier that triggers her repentance and conversion, but the basis of that conversion is still desire. Mary of Egypt’s situation seems hopeless. She is angry because she has experienced rejection for the first time.

In Alexandria, she was in control and essentially free to sin, but desire of the body has consequences which she only discovers in Jerusalem. The Holy City represents a new world which she is prevented from entering, and she must therefore re-channel her desire if she is to survive and achieve salvation. As she looks upon a statue of the Virgin Mary, she realizes there is a way out of her predicament. She begs the Virgin Mother to intercede on her behalf saying,

“En tu fijo metré mi creyença,
tornar me quiero a penitençia;
tornar me quiero al mío senyor,
a tú metré por fiador.
Toda mi vida lo serviré,
jamás d’El nom’ partiré.” (505-10)

This is quite a contrast to Mary’s character upon arriving in Jerusalem when she declares: “A mi mester me tornaré” (411). Rather than returning to her old activities, she now promises to turn to penitence and to the Lord. And instead of attempting to be fully independent, as she does when she announces, “que yo bien me gobernaré” (412), Mary vows to serve God and never part from Him. She promises to leave her life of sin and do whatever is necessary to be forgiven: “‘e siempre auré repitença / mas faré grave penitencia’” (513-14).

Mary of Egypt’s conversion follows a pattern that was increasingly popular in the early Middle Ages: she converts because of the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Following

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23 For a more detailed discussion of the evolution of Mariology, see Thurston (2005).
her conversion, Mary of Egypt hears a voice which directs her to pass by the monastery “sant Johán (635), where she can receive communion before she crosses the river Jordan and enters into the desert where she will be able to expiate her sins. While other ascetics turn their will over to God and pursue a life of extreme penitence and obliteration of the self, Mary of Egypt re-channels her will with the goal of salvation in mind. As an active participant in her sanctification process, she successfully eradicates the sin from her life without obliterating her self. Other famous prostitutes-turned-penitents such as Pelagia, Thaís and Mary (niece of Abraham) were led to repent by men who took on roles as their spiritual advisors and, through their counsel, they achieved salvation.  

Traditionally, male religious mentors have played a key role in mediating the salvation of women, especially in the case of harlots living entrenched in sin. Their intervention is based on an implicit belief that these weak-willed women are so consumed by sin that they are not capable of escaping from their lives of licentiousness. However, Mary of Egypt, unlike other harlots who do penance in small, enclosed spaces such as grottos or cells, does penitence in the desert like the Fathers of the Desert. Mary of Egypt willfully neglects her spirit as she confesses to the Virgin Mary:

“Tú ameste siempre castidat,  
e yo luxuria e malveztad.  
El Diablo fue tu enemigo,  
el fue mi senyor e amigo.” (537-40)

Thus, as she enters a period of penitence, Mary of Egypt will not only have to battle with the devil as is customary for desert ascetics, but also will have to eradicate years worth of sin.

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24 For more on the lives of these women, see Ward (1987) and Waddell (1998).

25 For more on the role of men in conversion of prostitutes-turned-penitents, see Karras (1990).
Metamorphosis: Mortification and Penance on the Road to Sanctity

The metamorphosis that Mary undergoes in the desert seems all the more extreme when we consider the emphasis the poem makes on her physical description in the beginning of the Vida. During her seven sinful years in Alexandria, Mary of Egypt enjoys unparalleled adolescent splendor, “después no nasció tan bella; / nin reina nin condesa / non viestes otra tal como vésta” (210-12). The poem depicts her round ears, white like “leche d’ovejas” (214), her dark black eyes and her cheeks: “la faz tenié colorada, / como la rosa cuando es granada” (217-18). The narrator also refers to her healthy breasts: “De sus tetiellas bien es sana / tales son como maçana” (223-24) and concludes:

En buena forma fue tajada,
nin era gorda nin muy delgada;
nin era luenga nin era corta,
mas de mesura bona. (227-30)

The description of Mary’s penance in the desert and its effects on her body counterpoints the earlier description we have just quoted:

Toda se mudó d’otra figura,
qua non ha panyos nin vestidura.
Perdió las carnes e la color,
que eran blancas como la flor. (720-23)

Colors like white (which typically symbolizes purity) and pink or rosy (which are synonymous with health) are no longer used to describe Mary. Instead, her body is portrayed in dark colors, especially black, reminiscent of her sunburned, dried out and

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26 As Claudio da Soller (2005) says in his dissertation, these descriptions parallel those found in other works such as Libro de buen amor, although in the Vida, beauty is associated with sexual love and therefore carries a negative connotation (36). For more information on physical descriptions of women in medieval Spanish literature, see García Velasco (2000).

27 Soller (2005) finds that desirable features such as these also serve as physiological indicators of youth, health, and fertility (16).
shriveled up skin. For instance, her exquisite little mouth “era empeleçida, / e derredor muy
denegrida” (730-31) and her formerly smooth skin is portrayed similarly: “La faz muy negra
e arrugada” (732). Her breasts, normally associated with fertility, are depicted as dried-up
and useless now: “En sus pechos non abiá tetas, / como yo cuido, eran secas” (738-39). And
when the monk Gozimás comes upon her later on, he believes she might be an apparition
because she hardly resembles a woman anymore:28

Non es cubierta d’otro vestido,
mas de cabello que le es creçido;
sus crines albas como las nieves
d’essas se cubre fasta los piedes.
Non abié otro vestimientto;
cuando aquell erzié el viento,
deyuso pareçió la carne quemada
del sol e de la helada. (952-59)

It is now her long, snow-white hair, rather than a silk shawl, that reaches to her feet and
covers her body. This description of Mary’s naked, sun-burnt body reflects the extent to
which she has literally shed her former life of sin. Medieval artistic representations of St.
Mary of Egypt depict her as she is portrayed in the Vida, with unusually long white hair and
an emaciated body,29 and three loaves of bread as attributes, which serve as a reminder of her
years of fasting.30 They create an image of a woman whose metamorphosis seems to rival
that of the other male ascetics living in the desert.31

for recent discussions of the role of ghosts in the Middle Ages: Gozimás fears that she might be an unfriendly
ghost.

29 See Appendix A for illustrations of Mary of Magdalen whose story has long been conflated with that of
Mary, the Egyptian prostitute-turned-penitent. In medieval art, Mary Magdalen is often depicted as naked with
long hair, attributes which belong to Mary of Egypt. See Jansen, 2000.

30 In her discussion of monastic fasting, Rebecca Lester (1995) explains that, unlike modern day anorexics
whose goal is thinness, religious women in the Middle Ages fasted in an attempt to unite themselves with Christ
and emulate his suffering. The loaves of bread are also an attribute in other iconographies such as that of St.
Anthony, father of monasticism, who gave part of his food to the needy and fasted during his years of penitence
in the desert.
However, although many of the early Desert Fathers mortify their senses and detach from family ties, because they believe that the flesh fights against the spirit, these ascetics also seek a form of self-obliteration.\(^{32}\) In Mary of Egypt’s case, however, she experiences not a complete annihilation of the self but rather an obliteration of the sin manifest in her body.

According to Connie Scarborough, Mary’s attempts to eradicate sin are better understood in terms of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection.\(^{33}\) Kristeva believes that we reject what is foreign to ourselves as we construct borders between the self and the other.\(^{34}\) This rejection is embodied in a concept called abjection. The abject is that which we loath, what we attempt to expel from our bodies, what seems improper or unclean to us, and what does not respect boundaries. Although we may spend a lifetime attempting to expel the abject from our selves, Kristeva argues that we can never fully banish what is abject because it always lingers, albeit in the periphery of our existence. For Mary of Egypt, the abject relates directly to the sexual sins, which she commits with her body in her youth.

Scarborough, however, claims that Mary understands that it will be neither sufficient nor possible to obliterate the sin from her body as atonement for her previous sins. She explains, “Since the abject insists on the subject’s necessary relation to death and corporeality, Mary realizes that the denial of her bodily well-being has still not allowed her to

\(^{31}\) For a more detailed discussion of desert asceticism, see Rolt-Wheeler (1913).

\(^{32}\) The elimination of the self as a way to achieve union with God is seen throughout the New Testament, especially in the writings of St. Paul who spoke of Christ living in him: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (NIV, Gal. 2.20).

\(^{33}\) Scarborough’s article incorporates Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1982).

\(^{34}\) For more in-depth discussion on the concept of abjection, see McAfee (2004).
escape its ultimate destiny” (17). Nevertheless, I believe that Mary is less concerned with escaping this ultimate destiny and more concerned with the possibility of being saved. After all, she recognizes that she is a mortal being but she also recognizes the need for a life of penance and self-mortification as a way to redeem her previous life and escape the destiny of death without salvation. In fact, her implicit assumption into Heaven at the end of the poem confirms that she has indeed managed to obliterate the impurity in her body, thus fully banishing the abject in her life.

Scarborough further argues that Mary experiences the abject yet again when she encounters the monk, Gozimás, and “feels compelled to confess her former conduct, that is, her former relationship to her body, and, with this confession, admit to the repressed, admit that her present denial of bodily comfort and necessities is but another unstable identity she has adopted” (16). Again, I disagree because according to the Vida, there is no indication that Mary of Egypt feels compelled to confess her sins to Gozimás. In fact, it is the monk who questions her because, although frightened, he is curious about her apparent holiness after having seen her levitate. He pleads with her, “Por Dios, que me digas tu vida. / Dímela en confessión / que Dios te faga vero perdón” (1141-43). It is at his request, that Mary confesses her sins to the holy man not because she experiences abjection but because she recognizes that it is necessary if she wants to receive communion. Her actions indicate that she is clearly aware of the need for a priest’s blessing to complete her atonement and achieve salvation and sanctification.

Gozimás, who is aware that Mary needs his blessing, at first is awed by her apparent holiness and cannot perform his traditional duties as a priest. During their first encounter we witness an unusual example of gender role reversal that rarely occurs in medieval literature: a
holy man falls prostrate before a woman. The episode tells us that Mary’s faith surpasses that of her holy male counterpart. Nevertheless, the power that she has over Gozimás in the *Vida* is not that of feminine will over the masculine will but rather divine will over human will. Mary has allowed God to act through her although this is not a result of “saintly self-emptying” but of her recognition of the need to obliterate the sin in her body. At times, she even seems to derive pleasure from this self-inflicted pain as when she incurs wounds from stepping on thorns in the desert:

Los pieses eran quebrajados
[...]  
mas non le fallía hi res:
cuand’ huna espina le firía,
de sus pecados uno perdía;
e mucho era ella gozosa
porque sufrié tan dura cosa. (746-54)

Here, Mary of Egypt is essentially reenacting Christ’s Passion by spilling her blood on the sand, thus providing an example of *imitatio Christi* for the medieval audience (Beresford, 2000 99). Further evidence of the transformation of her will includes Mary’s levitation and walking on water as well as her prediction that Gozimás will not be able to return within one year’s time because of poor health.

Mary’s desire for sanctification and wholeness is evident until the end of her life. She knows when she is close to death so she asks Gozimás to bring her communion and when he returns from the monastery, he fulfills her request: “la carn’ comió, la sangre bebió. / Cuando

35 If we were to exclude the countless instances of men bowing down to pray or prostrating themselves at the feet of the Virgin to beg forgiveness or intercession, I believe this is one of the only episodes in Medieval literature where a male figure bows humbly before a female. For examples related to the Virgin as Co-Redeemer, see Alfonso X’s *Cantigas de Santa María* or Gonzalo de Berceo’s *Milagros de Nuestra Señora.*

36 Saints throughout the ages have sought to follow Christ, some by imitating the physical suffering he endured and others by seeking to emulate his life and exercise self-discipline. Many of these ideas culminate with the publication of *Imitatio Christi,* a book of spiritual meditations written in the fifteenth century by Thomas à Kempis (1379-1471).
María fue comulgada, / alegre fue e bien pagada” (1272-74). When she lies down to die in the desert, she commends herself to God and then,

El alma es de ella sallida,
los ángeles la han recebida;
los ángeles la van levando
tan dulce son que van cantando. (1333-36)

The angels that accompany Mary’s soul to heaven are indicative of the success her penance as they carry her to her place in the Community of Saints.

Conclusion

St. Mary of Egypt’s Vida has been deemed one of the most pervasive legends of the Middle Ages (Maier 424), and it remains an extraordinarily popular hagiographic tale. This work’s appeal stems not only from its inherently dramatic nature but also from its ability to function as a didactic tool. In the introduction to the poem, the narrator addresses the audience by saying that “Todos aquellos que a Dios amarán / estas palabras escucharán” (7-8) and suggests that “grant gualardón end’ reçibirán,” in effect, promising that those who love God and listen to Mary’s story will be rewarded in the end. This invocation also serves as a reminder to the audience that there is no sin “tan grande ni tan orrible, / que Dios non le faga perdón / por pentença ho por confession” (30-32). The Vida captivates audiences because of the same reasons that the Magdalen is popular on the medieval stage. Both versions of the story rely on stark contrasts between the life of a beautiful young prostitute, characterized by her licentiousness and sexual greed, and her post-conversion image. Mary of Egypt, however, more than the Magdalen, represents a woman of great faith who succeeds in transforming her will by re-channeling it in the direction of salvation, thus bringing it under the control of reason. Although critics such as Wyschogrod argue that saints undergo a
process that ends with the loss of self and Scarborough claims that Mary never manages to obliterates the abject, I would argue that her assumption and subsequent sanctification is achieved by redirecting desire while reflecting the successful eradication of the sin and impurities manifest in her body.

The success of the *Vida* depends as much on the medieval audience’s titillation in hearing of Mary of Egypt’s years as a prostitute as on her harsh asceticism in the desert. After all, the legend’s appeal is that it promotes the message that even the most reprobate sinners who seem furthest from God’s grace can achieve salvation and membership in the Community of Saints.
On the left, we have a fourteenth-century representation of Mary Magdalene receiving communion which resembles an earlier portrayal (late 12th or early 13th century) of Mary of Egypt, also receiving communion from the monk, Gozimás. In both works, the women are depicted as naked figures, covered by extremely long white hair.

Symbol of Hope. Fresco attributed to Cenni di Francesco de ser Cenni from the Church of S. Trinita, Florence, 14th century.

The fifteenth-century statue on the left is a typical representation of Mary of Egypt with her long hair that covers her entire body and her attributes, the three loaves of bread. The work on the right depicts her assumption into heaven and portrays her as completely nude except for her long hair.

This depiction of Mary of Egypt from 1516 emphasizes her emaciated, animal-like body which has been exposed to the elements and her long hair that covers her body (*Flos sanctorum. Zaragoza: Jorge Cocci, 1516, R-23859*).
Again, we have two ca. fourteenth-century depictions of Mary Magdalene’s levitation which resemble those of Mary of Egypt’s assumption into heaven. In both, she is covered with body-length hair and guided by angels.
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