

Abjection and The Life of Mary of Egypt

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Abstract: The seventh century Palestinian work entitled *The Life of Mary of Egypt* describes one among many ascetic lives of the saints. The story that it tells—that of a promiscuous woman converted to a life of renunciation—is not unique within the late ancient Christian context. Similar stories are told about Pelagia, Thais, Paesia, and Mary the niece of Abraham. Yet, *The Life of Mary of Egypt* is a text that explores this trope in an exaggerated, overwrought way, such that the characters in the text are almost caricatures. In this paper, I examine each of the major figures of the Greek version of the text in order to make an argument about gender, ascetic practice, and power in late ancient Christianity. I begin by considering the author of the text, using the preface and conclusion to advance an argument about the relationship between writing and world renunciation. Following this, I analyze Zosimas, Mary of Egypt (pre- and post-conversion), and the Virgin Mary. In each case, I begin by offering a close reading of the text. I then ask how this reading might relate to the theories of world-rejection offered by Geoffrey Galt Harpham and Julia Kristeva.

Keywords: Mary, Sophronios, ascetic, renunciation, women

The Life of Mary of Egypt is attributed to Sophronios, who was the Patriarch of Jerusalem from 634-638 CE.¹ However, his authorship is contested and remains uncertain.² Whether Sophronios is the author or not, the early seventh century dating and the Palestinian provenance of the text remain relatively certain.³ This places the text in a context of great upheaval, as during this time Palestine was often embroiled in military conflict.⁴ As a pilgrimage site it was also a multi-cultural

1 Higath Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 77

2 Maria Kouli, "Introduction to the Life of St Mary of Egypt," in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, Ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 66

3 Ibid

4 Hagith Sivan, *Palestine in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17

cosmopolitan area.⁵ The characterization of the region by Sivan seems apt: “From a collective Palestinian point-of-view late ancient Palestine was a periphery which was not a periphery, a space opened up by the displacement of the center.”⁶

The text enjoyed great popularity and was translated into Latin by the eighth century. Throughout the middle ages, translations, plays, poems, and various prose retellings of the story circulated in most of the European vernaculars.⁷ To this day, a Greek version of the story is used liturgically in the Greek Orthodox Church, and Mary plays an important role in popular devotions and religious life.⁸ Mary is, therefore, in some ways a “living figure” and any attempt to understand what her *vita* has to tell us about asceticism must use the text of her *vita* as a starting point, not an end point. This paper should therefore be seen as only the start of what would ideally be a much larger project.

Ascetic Practice

The Life of Mary of Egypt opens with a preface from the author, who presents himself (the masculine participle “gr̅fonti” in the opening paragraph attests to male authorship) as compelled to impart a story about the incredible works of God (œrga par̅doxa). To keep silent about such things would endanger the soul; to lie about them is forbidden by God.⁹ The veracity of the account is affirmed, in spite of its extraordinary elements, and those who doubt it because of the miracles are deemed

5 Ibid, 8

6 Ibid, 4

7 Eric Poppe and Bianca Ross, ed, *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, (Portland OR: Four Courts Press, 1996), xiii

8 Ibid, vii

9 Sophronios, “The Life of Mary of Egypt, the Former Harlot who in Blessed Manner Became an Ascetic in the Desert of the River Jordan,” trans. Marie Kouli, in in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, Ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 70

irrational and weak.¹⁰ Like many other aspects of *The Life of Mary of Egypt*, the preface is overwrought and the author's point is made, we might think, rather too forcefully. Some form of the word $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma$ appears in the opening paragraph four times; negated forms of either $\sigma\iota\gamma\epsilon\omega$ or $\sigma\iota\omega\pi\epsilon\omega$ appear three times.¹¹ Over and over again, the reader is implored to believe the story, even (and perhaps especially) its miraculous elements (which are mentioned with various words five times).¹² At the same time, the author attempts to establish his credibility, insisting that he cannot keep silent and maintaining that he has reported the story without any alterations.

The inclusion of a preface such as this, laying out the author's purpose and re-iterating the truth of the contents of the story, is not in itself particularly striking. Many other hagiographic texts include a preface or prologue that does precisely this.¹³ Rather it is the repetitive, emphatic insistence that it would be wrong to disbelieve this text on the basis of its miraculous character that stands out.¹⁴ It raises questions of what is at stake in this account—particularly in its miraculous details—and why the author feels compelled to write it. Some further insight into these questions might be gleaned from the concluding paragraph, in which the

10 Ibid, 70

11 Sophronios, *Bioj Mariaj Aiguptiaj Thj Apo Etairiawn Osioj Askhashj Kata Thn Erhmon Ton Iordanon*, in J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* 87 (Pg. 87), 3697

12 Ibid, 3607

13 Derek Kruger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 34-35

14 A cursory examination of the prologues and prefaces to the vitae included in the following collections suggests that while most make one or two references to the truth of the narrative they introduce, they do not make their case as repeatedly or as forcefully as in *The Life of Mary of Egypt*: Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, ed, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Mary-Alice Talbot, ed, *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996); Vincent L. Wimbush, ed. *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). This is by no means exhaustive or conclusive, but it does suggest that this is an aspect of the preface to which it is well-worth paying attention.

author again speaks to us in the first person. Here, he supposes that it is possible that he is not the first to have written a vita for Mary of Egypt, although he has never come across one before.¹⁵ While he admits that his style might not be as “magnificent” (μεγαλοπρεπῆσι) as the writers whom he supposes might exist, he claims that he “nevertheless... wrote this story to the best of [his] ability, desiring to prefer nothing but the truth.”¹⁶ He prays that God might reward him for writing the story by causing it to benefit his readers. What is more, he asks that this benefit extend to the one who commanded that this work be handed down in writing.¹⁷ He continues his prayer, asking for mercy and that he and his readers might glorify and honor God.¹⁸

The prologue and conclusion, while not telling us very much about the life of the author, do provide us with valuable data about the author and his own renunciatory practices. Derek Kruger argues that, “the prologues and epilogues of saints' lives permitted authors to model the core values expressed in the body of their text.”¹⁹ Another way of getting at this might be to think in terms of mimesis, since as Geoffrey Harpham suggests, “the text is an imitation.”²⁰ By this he does not simply mean that texts imitate other texts or that *The Life of Mary of Egypt* borrows from other vitae (although there is little question that it does²¹), but rather he

15 Sophronios, 93

16 Ibid, 93

17 Ibid, 93

18 Ibid, 93

19 Krueger (2004), 95

20 Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13

21 Linda Coon argues persuasively that *The Life of Mary of Egypt* draws heavily from Jerome's *Life of Paulus*. Linda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 92-94

means that by writing of other selves the hagiographic author imitates them and constructs himself ascetically.²² The reader, i.e. the interpreter, in turn engages in a project of ascetic self-construction.²³ We can see this at play in the prologue and conclusion of *The Life of Mary of Egypt*. The author is constructing a self that must resist keeping silent, tending to disbelieve (and exhorting others to do the same), and desiring any reward other than the benefit of his readers. Ultimately, he hopes that this self will be counted as worthy along with Mary. Virginia Burrus is thus exactly right in her insight that the author “begins by continuing Mary’s act of self-inscription. Her confession is Zosimas’s confession but it is also his own. It awaits reappropriation by each new reader.”²⁴

Father Zosimas: The Male Ascetic

I turn now to the character of Zosimas, with whom the author opens the narrative.²⁵ In terms of the structure of the narrative, he functions as the protagonist. Despite the title *The Life of Mary of Egypt*, it seems to me that the narrative is more about Zosimas than it is about Mary.²⁶ The narrative opens with a description of Zosimas, a brief history of his life and of the events that led up to his encounter with Mary. Throughout the text, the story we receive is from his perspective, although it is a perspective filtered down to us by the intervening

22 I use the masculine pronoun not because there is conclusive evidence that no late ancient hagiographies were ever composed by women, but because most hagiographic authors were male, and in the case of the particular text in question there is evidence for male authorship.

23 Harpham (1987), 43

24 Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 145

25 A likely translation for his name is something akin to “viable, able to persist” or “able to survive/live.”

26 This is only the case when we look at “the text” apart from its afterlives. From at least the ninth century onwards, when the text is read, interpreted, re-produced and re-membered, it really is primarily “about Mary.”

layers (the monks Zosimas told, who passed the story down to the author).²⁷ We read about Mary because her story is, in some sense, useful to Zosimas, who acts as the primary agent in the story. This is not to say that Mary is not important to the narrative or is not a central figure. Rather, it is to emphasize that we only get to her because Zosimas deemed her story to be of value. It is therefore essential to look closely at his character. Not only does he provide a point of comparison for the figure of Mary, but also his desires drive the way in which she is constructed.

So, who is this monk from the desert? He is a member of a cenobitic community who has “pursued every kind of ascetic practice and entirely mastered self-discipline.”²⁸ As a result of the severity of his practices, he is able to subdue his flesh, and he becomes a distinguished (ἐπίσημος) and well-respected teacher. In addition to inventing some of his own ascetic practices, he devoted himself to prayer and the study of the scriptures.²⁹ Because of Zosimas’s success in his ascetic practices, he is said to have received divine visions from God. It seems that he is a man of considerable *auctoritas*. Zosimas “lived in the monasteries from youth,” and “from infancy was brought up in accordance with monastic principles.”³⁰ He was given to the monastery as an infant, when he was “still in the arms of his mother/father;” at the time of the narration, he is described as an old man (γέρων), so it seems he has been engaged in his ascetic “wrestling match” for a considerable length of time.³¹ (One might ask how secluded the monastery was, whether Zosimas

27 Sophronios, 93

28 Ibid, 71

29 Ibid, 71

30 Ibid, 72

31 Some variants read mhtrkîn and some read patrikîn.

had ever ventured outside of its walls, whether female pilgrims stopped by this monastery on their travels through the Holy Land, etc. The point of such questions would be to ask the entirely unanswerable question, “Besides his mother, had Zosimas ever seen a woman before he met Mary?” This is a fascinating, but unfortunately unsolvable line of inquiry.)

However, Zosimas is plagued with a problem. Perfect renunciation is, of course, impossible, but Zosimas is disturbed by thoughts that he has obtained perfection.³² He believes that he no longer needs anybody else’s teaching and asks himself, “Is there a monk on earth who can teach me anything new, or who has the power to help me in any form of ascetic discipline that I do not know or have never practiced? Is there any man among those leading a contemplative life in the desert who surpasses me in ascetic practice or spiritual contemplation?”³³ And with this we find the first sin or desire that Zosimas must resist: pride or self-satisfaction. As noted above, Zosimas’s needs drive the narrative, which most certainly holds in this case. The need to overcome and resist this pride is what drives the story along: An angel appears, tells Zosimas to travel to a new monastery because there is no human (anqropoj; Kouli’s translation reads “man”) on earth who is perfect. Zosimas obeys, and while he learns much and is edified at the monastery while intensifying his actions, his desire to overcome his pride remains unfulfilled.³⁴ Indeed, as we shall see, he is only able to achieve this overcoming through the emergence of a stranger—Mary of Egypt—who, through her confession, enables Zosimas to

32 Sophronios, 72

33 Ibid, 72

34 Ibid, 73

recognize his own foreignness and to both turn further inward and immerse himself deeper into community in order to come to terms with his own abjection and his own desires.

Excursus: Social Location of Zosimas and Mary

Who is Mary of Egypt? Where did she come from and what is her social location? How does her position differ from that of Zosimas? I ask these questions, not because I am trying to get back to some “historical Mary” or “historical Zosimas,” but in order to understand the roles that they play in this text more clearly. In a society in which there are clearly distinct divisions in terms of race, sex, and class, it is important to ask how these categories are used to construct the characters that populate our discursive realm. So, before going any further, I want to stop and raise questions of gender, race, class, etc., and explore how the answers to these questions might differ for Mary and Zosimas.

We know very little about Zosimas’s background in terms of class and race: these things are never mentioned in the text. We do know, however, that Zosimas is male and a priest; he is well educated and familiar with scriptures. The fact that his race and his family’s class are not mentioned does not mean that they are not being employed to construct the figure of Zosimas. That is to say, because they are not mentioned, the readers likely imagine him as belonging to a “neutral” or “universal” category. This is significant because it heightens the contrast with Mary of Egypt and sets Zosimas up to be read as a character who acts and is an agent—through him we encounter Mary. He is a construction of the author, but as a universal and neutral character he constructs Mary.

On the other hand, the text tells us much about Mary. She is described as having a “black body.” Most recent interpreters read this as indicating Mary’s asceticism rather than her race. She is black because she has been wandering around in the desert naked for forty-seven years, and as a result now has a very good tan. While this reading of the text does not strike me as implausible, I do not see any reason to prefer it to the more straightforward reading of the text as commenting on Mary as not only a woman, but also a racial other. Her blackness, as well as her femaleness, becomes a tool with which to think. Mary thus embodies all the anxieties that those in the center—whose position is assumed to be the “neutral” or “universal” position—have about the dark and threatening peripheries in which people must be identified by their gender, race, or class.

These anxieties come into their fullest expression around the issue of Mary’s femaleness, which is rather forcefully made to be her most defining characteristic. While the fact that she is black is mentioned once, the fact that her body—as a female body—is particularly sinful and shameful is mentioned time and time again in the text. Christianity (and, arguably, all axial age religions) has, in general, a deep ambivalence about women, and frequently more misogynistic attitudes have prevailed. As Alice-Mary Talbot points out, even though male and female were created in image of God according to Genesis, there is “neither male nor female” in Christ, according to Paul. And although the Virgin Mary is honored in Byzantine, Christian theology and practice has frequently focused on the facts that in the Biblical texts Eve sinned first, women are commanded to be subordinate, and Jesus

had male disciples.³⁵ In a context in which these sorts of interpretations dominate, it is hardly surprising that that we find a text like *The Life of Mary* in which even a holy woman who possesses power and knowledge is a symbol of such deep anxieties.

There are a few other points worth mentioning when discussing women's sanctity in late antiquity. This will throw into sharper relief what it is that Mary of Egypt represents and will also help us to understand her and her role in the late ancient context. To begin with, after the "era of martyrdom," the number of women who were considered to be saints and who were viewed as Holy drastically declined. For example, in the *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, a liturgical calendar with short hagiographies, there were fifty-five women from third and early fourth centuries, fourteen women from later fourth and fifth centuries, four from the sixth and seventh centuries, and eight from the eighth and ninth centuries. In contrast, there were sixty-four male saints from this last period along with similarly high numbers for the other centuries.³⁶ It is also worth noting that consecrated offices for women (widow, deaconess, consecrated lay virgin) began to disappear in the early to mid-fifth century. And in general, there were more monks than nuns, and more opportunities for monks to adopt the sort of solitary, rigorously ascetic lifestyle that tended to result in "canonization," whatever that might mean for this period. Cenobiticism was more acceptable for women—convents were cloistered and

35 Alice-Mary Talbot, "General Introduction" in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, Ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), x

36 *Ibid*, xii

contemplative—and while this sort of lifestyle was certainly believed to be “honorable” for women, it did not earn them sainthood.³⁷

Understanding this allows us to better situate Mary and her life. She fits into a category—that of solitary eremitic asceticism—that is generally reserved for men.³⁸ She is stepping outside the boundaries of normal female holiness, so we must ask what this means, what it represents and how gender relates to her ascetic practice. In the end, we will see that in order to overcome herself—and herself as female and a former harlot—Mary must undertake an ascetic discipline that is far more rigorous than that which men (and other women) tended to follow. This is not to say that Mary is unique: she is a specific type of figure, a repentant prostitute turned ascetic whose life points to the way that asceticism, desire, and resistance are gendered. To most fully understand what this means, it is essential that we realize that both Zosimas and Mary are constructed by the author, and that Mary especially is not an agent but a tool that the author is using to entertain thoughts about renunciation, confession, gender, and asceticism.

Finally, it is important to consider Mary's class prior to becoming an emaciated nun. We know that she was a prostitute, and that in antiquity prostitutes were often slaves. This does not definitively mean that she was a slave of course, but certainly if we adopt a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion, we might wonder whether or not her leaving home at the age of twelve was entirely voluntary. Whether she is a slave or not, Mary was likely not wealthy. She tells Zosimas that she did not accept

37 Ibid, xi

38 Benedicta Ward, *Hatlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 3

money for her sexual favors. Instead, she lived by begging and spinning coarse flax.³⁹ However, she also tells him that she misses wine and meat, which might suggest a higher income and social class⁴⁰. Or, perhaps her clients bought these things for her? Alternatively, perhaps Mary was a member of the class of hetaerae, who provided entertainment and sexual favors at symposia.⁴¹ These conflicting and unclear accounts of Mary's class are mostly relevant in the ways that they position Mary as a particular type of female: one who, as we shall see, is dangerous because she arouses “unnatural desires” that ought to be avoided.

Mary the Harlot

Before her conversion, Mary is essentially portrayed as the embodiment of all that is evil and shameful.⁴² She apparently cares about nothing besides satisfying her own sexual desires and has no qualms about her role as a very public woman.⁴³ When Mary begins to tell Zosimas her story, she warns him that she has been (and is still) “shameful (αἰσκунη),” “the chosen of the devil (ἐκλογÁj toà diabòlou),” and to be avoided like a snake.⁴⁴ Mary begins her account of her life with the fact that she left home when she was twelve, rejecting her love for her family. At this point, she “threw herself entirely and insatiably into the lust of sexual intercourse” for seventeen years.⁴⁵ During this period, as we noted above, she lived by begging and

39 Sophronios, 80

40 Ibid, 85

41 Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 45

42 Sophronios, 80

43 Ibid, 80

44 PG 87, 3709

45 Sophronios, 80

spinning flax.⁴⁶ That language that is used to describe Mary's behavior during this time is particularly revealing. She describes herself as having been a “public temptation to licentiousness” who engages in behavior that ought to be unthinkable for any self-respecting woman in late antiquity.⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ She flirted with men to make them laugh, used obscene words, and was not afraid to rush out shamelessly into a group of men in public.⁴⁹ Through this provocative behavior, Mary is able to use her body to buy herself passage to Jerusalem—a city to which she desires to go—so that she can engage in sexual acts with the sailors and pilgrims who are on their way there for the feast of the Holy Cross.⁵⁰

Once on her way to Jerusalem, Mary “forces wretched men” to engage in shameful, sinful sexual acts “against their will” (mÁqšlontaj).⁵¹ The utter depravity of her behavior is emphasized again and again: she taught those miserable men all “[kinds] of licentiousness, speakable or unspeakable” and her chief occupation while at sea seems to have been “ensnaring souls.”⁵² While many of the men with whom Mary is engaging in her illicit activities are sailors and not pilgrims, the obvious implication here is that Mary is leading Christian men astray, condemning their souls to the fires of hell by her actions. By having Mary seduce them “against their will,” these Christian travellers are absolved of their responsibility. They were not in control of the situation—rather, they were victims of Mary's insatiable sexual desire.

46 Ibid, 80

47 Ibid, 80

48 Cooper (1996), 63

49 Sophronios, 81

50 Ibid, 81

51 Ibid, 81; and PG 87, 3711

52 Sophonios, 81

What does Mary, the harlot of Egypt, represent in the context of the narrative? Perhaps most simply and obviously, she is a locus for all of men's anxieties about women: her presence in public and the desires that she arouses in those who encounter her are brought into focus and made the subject of discourses about her sin and shamefulness. On Mary's shoulders, the burden for men's inability to overcome their own desires and their own sexual impulses is placed. All the discomfort that the male author of the text feels about women is incarnated in the character of Mary.

Conversion: The Virgin Mary and Mary of Egypt

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Mary follows the crowds of people to church but finds that she is unable to gain entry.⁵³ After trying several times, only to be pushed back from the door by a supernatural force, Mary adjourns to the courtyard where there is an icon of the Virgin Mary.⁵⁴ Mary has a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she is able to recognize her own sinfulness and failings and makes a commitment to renounce the world if the Virgin Mary will intercede to allow Mary to look at the cross in the church.⁵⁵ Mary then "received the fire of faith" and made her way to the church.⁵⁶

The role of the Virgin Mary here is of particular interest. In all the other lives of female saints who spent time as prostitutes or harlots, the key figure in the conversion of the prostitute is a monk or an ascetic priest.⁵⁷ A human male usually

53 Ibid, 82

54 Ibid, 82

55 Ibid, 83-84

56 Ibid, 84

57 See Ward, 1987, for translations of these other hagiographies.

plays the role of the Virgin Mary as the figure instrumental in turning the prostitute into a saint. Why the difference in this case? We could speculate that Mary might attempt to seduce any male who attempted to convert her at this point in the story, so it was necessary for her conversion experience to center around a virgin woman. The Virgin Mary is described as “all-holy,” “chaste,” “pure,” “undefiled,” and a “Virgin Lady.”⁵⁸ So far she represents—both in the fact that she is a mother and that she maintains her virginity and chasteness—the perfect contrast to Mary. In many ways, they function as exact opposites—the virgin mother being without sin and the promiscuous woman without a family reveling in her sin. Perhaps, then, in a way that no male ever could, the Virgin Mary functions as a stranger who can reveal to Mary her own shame and abjection.

According to Kristeva, the object is that which is excluded from the subject.⁵⁹ It is neither subject nor object; it is that within the human being which causes revulsion.⁶⁰ For instance, Kristeva offers the examples of a corpse and of food that a child finds particularly distasteful.⁶¹ In both cases, a sense of horror and revulsion accompanies the experience of the encounter, and it forces the subject to come to terms with herself and her desires as a separate individual from her parents (as in the case of the child eating a disgusting food) or the rest of the human community (as in the case of the corpse).⁶² This act of coming to terms with oneself as an individual necessitates a process of excluding aspects of the self as reviled, shameful,

58 Sophronios, 83

59 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3

60 *Ibid*, 3

61 *Ibid*, 4-6

62 *Ibid*, 4-6

or abject (although these terms are not perfectly interchangeable).⁶³ This is, “a primal gesture by which the subject separates itself from that which is borderless, undifferentiated or chaotic. Shame is the partner of desire in this movement, which gives rise to both the bounded subject and its excluded abject.”⁶⁴

In the case of Mary's conversion, she herself is the abject, the excluded, the reviled. She is unable to enter into the church, the “body of Christ.” She is the “jettisoned, the radically excluded.”⁶⁵ Therefore, her conversion must be, as we will see, a rejection of herself. However, she can only come to see herself as abject through a radical intrusion, a radical appearance of another who is diametrically opposed to her—in this case, the Virgin Mary.⁶⁶ According to Kristeva, the foreigner's appearance occurs when there is a consciousness of difference—that is, in the encounter with the Virgin Mary.⁶⁷ The foreigner—or the stranger—is otherworldly, aloof, and distant. Thus, the Virgin Mary is ideal in some sense for provoking this turn inward, this kenosis rather, to borrow a term from Karen Armstrong.^{68 69}

It is important to note that this turn inward and rejection is precisely what Harpham calls the “cultural element in culture.”⁷⁰ The interplay between foreigner, self, abject, and desire is a creative force—and, we shall see, it brings with it a

63 Ibid, 9

64 Ibid, 15

65 Ibid, 11

66 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 33

67 Kristeva, 1

68 Ibid, 58

69 Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (New York, Anchor Books, 2007), 101

70 Harpham (1987), xv

power, knowledge, and authority. In this case, Mary's encounter with and rejection of herself creates a new self, which is essential to the progress of the narrative, because this action is what ultimately allows Zosimas to have some resolution.⁷¹

Before getting into the discussion of the confession and the encounter with Zosimas, I want to speak to the point that Mary's asceticism is not only a rejection of the world, but also a rejection herself—both as a desiring being and as a woman. Her ascetic practice is so strict that Zosimas does not realize that she is female until she tells him (granted, he was chasing her so he did not see her from the front, but even so, the reader is lead to assume that Mary's ascetic practice has been so severe as to cause her to lose those elements of her figure such as breasts, shapely hips, etc. that would identify her as female).⁷² In early Christianity, the idea that in order to be holy a woman must be “made male” is fairly common, so this physical transformation of Mary should not be surprising.⁷³ However, her androgynous figure and taking on of masculine qualities as a sign of increasing holiness must also be read as a self-rejection.

This self-denial also takes the form of attempting to overcome what are described as “irrational desires.”⁷⁴ These desires include not only sexual cravings, but also desires for meat and wine, hunger and thirst, and desires for “lascivious songs,” which are described as “demonic.”⁷⁵ In her struggles with these desires, Mary is protected by the Virgin of Mary—the foreigner or stranger who inspired this

71 On these points, see Harpham (1987), 67-82

72 Sophronios, 77

73 Elizabeth Castelli, “I will Make Mary Male: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29-49

74 Sophronios, 85

75 Ibid, 85

self-rejection. Mary's overcoming of herself can thus only take place in the presence of strangeness or difference that draws her away from herself. In a final rejection of all that she was before, Mary has moved from living in public in the city to the desert, where she is unseen.⁷⁶

This rejection of herself is not without consequences. As a result of her practice, Mary comes to possess special knowledge and power. For instance, she knows Zosimas' name and that he is a priest before he has a chance to tell her.⁷⁷ She also knows the rituals of the monastery where Zosimas lives and has an impressive knowledge of scripture despite being illiterate, never hearing scripture, and never having met anyone who could teach her.^{78 79} (This reflects not only on Mary's holiness and power, but also on the perceived power of scripture itself). Additionally she is able to levitate, which terrifies Zosimas who again wonders if she might be a demon.⁸⁰ Towards the end of her life, Mary walks on water—again being portrayed in Christological terms.⁸¹

Confession: Mary as Holy and the Encounter with Zosimas

When Zosimas first sees Mary—our first encounter with her as readers of the text—he does not know what to make of her. He first imagines that he has seen a demon, but when the figure in the distance does not disappear after he prays and

76 Mary inhabits the region of the Judean desert in which habitation totally declines; it is the “utter desert” usually only inhabited during Lent. John Binns describes it as “uninhabitable, even for the experienced desert dweller.” Therefore, even though a desert does not provide the same protection as a house, by living in a place that others find uninhabitable Mary has become a private woman. (John Binns “Introduction” in *Cyril of Skythopolis' Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, ed. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991, xxxiii.)

77 Sophronios, 77

78 Ibid, 85

79 Ibid, 87

80 Ibid, 79

81 Ibid, 89

makes the sign of the cross, Zosimas determines that it is not a demon.⁸² He is not sure what sort of creature it is, but he is filled with pleasure upon seeing it, perhaps thinking that it is a holy desert father, such as he had hoped to meet.⁸³ It is at this point that we are told that Mary's body is black; her hair, which is short and is "white as wool," is also mentioned, invoking both a masculine image and Christological imagery from Revelation.⁸⁴ Also, when Zosimas first sees Mary she is naked (a state of clothing that is perhaps appropriate for a prostitute, but not typically a female saint). This is a source of shame for her now; when Zosimas catches up to her, she asks for his cloak so that she can cover "her feminine weakness."⁸⁵

All this points to fact that Mary herself has become the stranger, the foreigner. She is different, otherworldly, and invokes a sense of fear or terror in Zosimas. As a woman in the desert, she is still abject and excluded from the community, but now, "the abject is edged with the sublime."⁸⁶ Zosimas responds to this stranger by running towards it, overcome with desire to know it (which we know, of course, is a way of exercising power over it). Once he catches up with Mary, Zosimas desires to hear her confess; he wants to know everything about her.⁸⁷ He argues that since God allowed him to find Mary, God must want her to tell him her life's story, which he later describes, in all its titillating and provocative details, as

82 Ibid, 76

83 Ibid, 75

84 Ibid, 75. On men's and women's hairstyles, see Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 56-60.

85 Sophronios, 77

86 Kristeva (1980), 54

87 Sophronios, 78

“beneficial.”⁸⁸ His desire to know Mary continues after they part ways when he is consumed by thoughts of when he will see her again.⁸⁹ Virginia Burrus' characterization of Zosimas seems accurate: he is “an ascetic who is seduced without ceasing to be an ascetic” (conversely, Mary is a seducer who becomes an ascetic without ceasing to seduce).⁹⁰

Throughout the narrative, Zosimas is continually engaged in trying to overcome himself and his desires. However, he is unable to achieve this overcoming. He cannot make himself Other and separate himself from himself to overcome the Other-ed self until he meets an Other: Mary.⁹¹ As the “stranger,” it is she that stirs up a new desire within him; through listening to her tell her story, he is able to recognize and confront his own strangeness and to see that if he is going to make progress in his ascetic life he must exclude his pride and set aside those shameful aspects of himself. That is to say, he finally furthers his ascetic struggle, and as Mary relates her confession, Zosimas too confesses: He confesses to his thoughts of perfection, to his desires, to his human-ness. Thus Mary, in her interactions with Zosimas, takes on the role that the Virgin Mary played for her. However, she is only able to do this through an intensification of the ascetic way of life. In order to achieve holiness and overcome herself, she must go far beyond what is required for men.

Conclusion

88 Ibid, 78-79

89 Ibid, 90

90 Burrus (2008), 146

91 Harpahan (1984), 124

What, then, does this story tell us about asceticism and *contemptus mundi*? On the one hand, it serves to confirm Harpham's insights about the relationship between desire and resistance as what moves culture, narrative, life, and writing forward. Secondly, through the incorporation of a Kristevan interpretation, we are able to say something important about the role that difference and otherness plays in prompting ascetic behaviors. The stranger, the different, the other—these make human beings uncomfortable, prompt the turn to the otherworldly, and force the confrontation with the self. And it is the division and overcoming of the self that lies at the heart of asceticism. Finally, Mary's life shows us how asceticism is gendered. First, it is men who have historically created ascetic women. Men, throughout the story are the agents engaged in projects of self-construction. Secondly, Mary's asceticism must necessarily be intensified, because as a woman she has to overcome herself on multiple fronts while Zosimas and the author of our text do not. As I noted at the outset of this paper, this look at the text is necessarily only a preliminary investigation of the *Life of Mary*. Any attempt to make sense of her life would necessarily involve a study of afterlives and reception history, and I regret that I lack the time and space to do that at present.

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