

Spring 2015

Subversion in Sand and Ink: A Study of the Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt

Darcy Egan

John Carroll University, degan13@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Egan, Darcy, "Subversion in Sand and Ink: A Study of the Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt" (2015).
Masters Essays. 3.
<https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/3>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Essays at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Essays by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact mchercourt@jcu.edu.

SUBVERSION IN SAND AND INK: A STUDY OF THE OLD ENGLISH *LIFE OF ST.*
MARY OF EGYPT

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of the Arts

By
Darcy Egan
2015

The essay of Darcy E. Egan is hereby accepted:

Advisor – Dr. Emily Butler

Date

I certify that this is the original document

Author – Darcy E. Egan

Date

Subversion in Sand and Ink: A Study of the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*

The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* was transmitted and translated widely in Europe, resulting in various iterations of the narrative. The story also found a niche in Old English; it is recorded in the Cotton Julius E.vii manuscript, which is a collection of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. The Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* garners particular interest not only for its presentation of the story, but for the context of its proliferation within medieval societies. Mary of Egypt is indeed a subversive figure, but the transmission of her narrative in Old English was also engendered by subversion, raising questions of scribal autonomy. In his preface to *Lives of Saints*, Ælfric gives strict orders to his scribes to copy exactly as they are told, so, the posthumous inclusion of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* would be a defiant act in itself. Studying the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is not simply plucking one iteration of the hagiography out of the larger context, but examining the multifaceted dynamics of subversion – both within scribal communities and the narrative itself.

For reasons I shall touch on later in this essay, the narrative evolved as it proliferated throughout different societies, but the earliest mention of Mary of Egypt occurred near the middle of the sixth century in the *Life of Kyriakos*, written by Cyril of Scythopolis. The classic account of Mary of Egypt's story, though, has been attributed to Sophronius, a patriarch of Jerusalem who lived from 560 to 638 (Fleiss 9). In the early ninth century, Paul the Deacon translated Sophronius's *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* into Latin in a close manner, preserving almost all of the original text and authorial statements (Fleiss 20). In addition to Paul the Deacon's *vita*, another anonymous Latin translation

survives in two manuscripts. The translator of this latter work does not preserve the original text to the same degree that Paul the Deacon does. The *Old English Life of St. Mary* was the first treatment of the text in a vernacular language, and the narrative circulated quickly in the West (26).¹ Such concern with close translation factors into the larger project of the subversion of Mary of Egypt, as I shall draw links between the subversive figure of Mary of Egypt and the subversion within the scribal communities that engendered the narrative's proliferation.

To examine this subversion, and to approach larger questions of its critical implications, one must first have a functional synopsis of the work in mind. As several redactions of the narrative have emerged in various languages and societies, I will summarize the plot points that are prevalent throughout most versions. In the narrative, Mary of Egypt spends seventeen years as a harlot, when she realizes the Virgin Mary's call to her. Upon hearing this call, she goes into the desert and leads a life of asceticism. After forty-seven years alone in the desert with limited sustenance, she encounters Zosimus, an older monk seeking the guidance of a desert father, the monastic ideal.² He mistakenly identifies her as the male figure he seeks, and then the two share a brief and prayer-filled encounter, after which Zosimus departs. When he returns in one year's time to give her communion as he promised, he finds her deceased body. Next to her corpse, he sees her name, which she had refused to divulge to him in their last encounter, written

¹ As the text circulated, Mary of Egypt even garnered some comparisons to the story of Mary Magdalene, as the stories touted similar models for repentance. In fact, as Benedicta Ward explains, even Honorius of Autun confused Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt (Ward 26). To learn more about the model of Mary Magdalene, with whom Mary of Egypt is often conflated, see Ward's "St. Mary Magdalene; the Biblical Model of Repentance," which appears in her larger work, *Harlots of the Desert*.

² The spelling of the name differs between various primary and critical sources; some sources note the man's name as "Zosimus," while others refer to him as "Zosimas." For the sake of clarity, in this essay, I shall use the "Zosimus" spelling.

in the desert sand. In reverence, he struggles to dig a grave for her body, when a lioness enters the scene, offering immense paws and physical strength to aid in excavation.

The lioness who appears to assist with Mary of Egypt's burial is not the only remarkable detail of her narrative; in addition to that, Mary of Egypt's agency and authorization, both through prayer and her name written in the sand, set her apart from the portrayals of other women saints. While most women saints' lives feature suffering and subservience as markers of spiritual strength, Mary of Egypt is portrayed with a sense of sexuality and agency. Moreover, when reading the text with the concept of authorization via signature in mind, the reader sees how the story addresses new complexities in the presentation of a saint's life. The source of the writing in the sand is undetermined, pointing to the macrocosmic issue of presenting – or, in some ways, authorizing – a life for consumption. This essay will examine the narrative of Mary of Egypt in Old English in order to assert her agency and subversive portrayal, particularly in contrast to other women saints of the period. In doing so, this essay will also address the subversion within scribal communities which engendered the narrative's inclusion and circulation.

After being previously denied knowledge of Mary of Egypt's name, her witness, Zosimus, finds her name written in the sand beside her body. As the narrator explains:

ƿa se ealda ƿa stafas rædde, ƿa sohte he ærest hwa hi write, forƿan heo sylf ær sæde ƿæt heo næfre naht hwilces ne leornode. Swaƿeah, he on ƿam swiðe wynsumigende geseah ƿæt he hire naman wiste (“When the old man read those letters, he first wondered who had written them, since she herself had said previously that she never learned such a

thing. However, he realized, with much rejoicing, that he knew her name”) (ll. 899-902).³

In this moment of discovery, questions of authorization emerge. Mary makes some decisions in the presentation of her own body and identity, but did she write her own name in the sand? If she did write her own name, where did she acquire literacy? In her interactions with Zosimus, Mary of Egypt had admitted her lack of traditional literacy, which could involve both reading and writing language, as well as the oral transmission of speech. She explains, *ne ic stæfcyste witodlice ne leornode ne þæra nanum ne hlyste þe þa smeadon and readdon. Ac Godes word is cucu and scearp, innan lærende þis mennisce andgyt* (“I never learned letters or listened to those who studied and read. But God’s word is alive and sharp, and teaches this human understanding from within”) (ll. 695-8). Here, she acknowledges her own lack of traditional literacy, but she also promotes an innate spiritual understanding and an animate holy source. So, the narrative suggests that there is a possibility that Mary of Egypt did in fact write her own name in the sand, perhaps through a divine source.

With this, we see that the act of writing her name a microcosmic representation of the *Life*’s portrayal of a woman and her chronology within the space of the narrative, as signing one’s name often serves as a marker of agency and identity. In this line of questioning, the act of subversion extends beyond the lived experience of Mary of Egypt to her presentation within a hagiographical account and the subsequent proliferation of said narrative. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is not complicit with existing hagiographical tropes, but undermines their didactic function, challenging prominent medieval conceptions of time and gender. When reading this particular hagiographical account, the

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

modern reader must consider both the subversive nature of the narrative and its immediate impact on audiences, but also the subversion within the scribal culture that engendered the proliferation of the text. Rather than file the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* away with the larger hagiographical genre, we must consider how it subverts this categorization, and in turn, reconsider the autonomy of scribal culture.

From the earliest origins of the *Life* to its medieval redactions, the figure of Mary of Egypt evolves, most likely to reflect the predominant social morality of the time. Still, Mary is a radical saint from the outset. She resists the confines of categorization at every turn. As Fleiss and Pepin explain, Mary of Egypt

is neither of nobility, nor a wife, nor mother, nor virgin, nor educated, nor enclosed in a monastery, nor exactly a prostitute. From the time of Sophronius to the twelfth century and beyond, Mary of Egypt is a strong-willed, passionate, non-conforming and autonomous woman. (40)

Mary of Egypt offers an example of a holy life outside of the simplistic categorization of the typical medieval hagiographical account. Medieval Christians flocked to stories of conversion and repentance and, as Ruth Mazo Karras explains, “Saints who had been sinners embodied the message that confession, contrition, and penance could wipe away the worst of sins, and saints who had been prostitutes embodied it most dramatically” (3). The prostitute saints offer a thrilling story of conversion from the depth of sin to the height of God’s grace. Though I shall assert that Mary of Egypt pushes this prostitute identification further, subverting both genre and gender, this alignment with prostitute

saints gives a basic sense of what the assigned genre typically accomplished.⁴ Within her story, as in the stories of other prostitute saints, Mary of Egypt represents dramatic sin followed by holy asceticism.

Mary of Egypt certainly offers an example of the depth of sin and the height of a holy life, but these peaks and pits are grounded in an ever-changing narrative, making this discussion all the more dynamic. As the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* was disseminated into different languages and societies, the narrative evolved, acquiring greater sexual posturing. To understand these changes, one must look to the medieval society itself. According to Karras, hagiographical accounts offer a glimpse into a society's practices and expectations, as they were constructed to remedy some perceived societal ailment. She explains, "Any medieval text can construct medieval society for a modern audience, but hagiographical texts, because of their great currency, constructed it for many medieval people as well" (Karras 4). As modern readers, we acknowledge that saintly narratives can give us an idea of medieval societies, but we must also acknowledge the role of these narratives within their immediate medieval context.

Hagiographical accounts aim to instruct their contemporary audience about a particular moral topic; the writers use the story of a saint's conversion to promote a particular idea of just behavior. When reading hagiographical accounts, one must keep these aims in mind; the writer did not necessarily intend to portray an accurate historical sense of the saint's life, but to *instruct* its contemporary readers of the narrative about proper moral behavior. While their lack of historical accuracy may initially frustrate

⁴ For more information about prostitution and female sexuality in medieval society, see Ruth Mazo Karras's "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend."

modern readers, Karras shows that these accounts can actually be more helpful, as they give modern readers a sense of the society's understanding of various behaviors.

For instance, in her work, Karras seeks to understand medieval concepts of female sexuality and prostitution by examining the lives of different prostitute saints such as Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. In her discussion, Karras differentiates between modern definitions of prostitution, where there is a financial exchange for sexual acts, and the medieval definition, which served as more of an umbrella term for acts of unmarried sexuality, including those acts which involved financial exchange (5-6). Jane Stevenson corroborates Karras's view, writing, "Mary's triumph over years of being tormented by the images of her past is actually a testimony to her perseverance, and also an index of how seriously the kind of sins which she had committed were treated by contemporary Christian writers" (26). Both Karras and Stevenson substantiate an interpretation in which hagiographies serve as an index for the contemporary social morality, rather than an accurate biographical account of a particular saint. In turn, when exploring the lives of prostitute saints like Mary of Egypt, one must take these shifts in definition into consideration, particularly as many modern interpretations of subversive gender hinge on these concepts.

For Mary of Egypt, the issue might not have been prostitution as we now define it, but indiscriminate sexuality. In many redactions of her narrative, Mary of Egypt receives male lovers free of charge, simply to fulfill her carnal desires. Mary of Egypt recounts her past to Zosimus:

*Ne forleas ic na minne fæmnhad for æniges mannes gyfum oþþe ic
witodlice ahtes onfenge fram ænigum þe me aht gyfan woldon, ac ic wæs*

*swiðe onæled mid þære hatheornhysse þæs synlustes, þæt ic gewilnode
buton ceape þæt hi me þe mænigfealdlicor to geurnon, to þy þæt ic þe eð
mihte gefyllan þa scyldfullan gewilnunga mines forligeres. (ll. 373-9)*

(Nor did I lose my virginity at all for any man's gift or in fact that I might receive anything from people who wished to give me gifts, but I was very much on fire with the passion of desire for sin, so that I desired that men might rush to me in greater numbers without fee, my purpose being to satisfy more easily the shameful desires of my sexual vice.)

In this recounting, Mary of Egypt makes it a point to clarify that she does not embrace vice for profit; instead, she has sex to fulfill her own carnal desires. Keeping her summary of the prostitution narrative concise, Burrus writes that Mary of Egypt is “a woman who enjoys sex too much to reduce it to an economic transaction” (129). Mary of Egypt openly recounts her erotic past without renouncing her actions or sexual identity, and without using financial exchange as a justification for sexual encounters. She does not engage in sexual activity in a passive manner, nor does she participate for financial need; in the narrative, her “lust is pure, then, no mere means to an end but an end in itself: what she desires is to desire, without limits, transgressing all bounds” (Burrus 150). The notion of desire certainly complicates an audience's reception of Mary of Egypt's sexuality, as there is seemingly no justifiable excuse or room for sympathy in her envelopment in vice; she acts to fulfill her desires, not to meet the requirements of various power structures. According to Karras, this detail remained in translations and retellings of the narrative in the early Middle Ages (9).

In the fifteenth century, however, the institutionalization of prostitution made this previously unquestioned detail unrealistic to fifteenth-century readers (Karras 9). At this point in history, the narrative shifts to accommodate contemporary societal concerns, namely the Christian concern with sexuality, not to mention the potential for a merger of financial and sexual vices. In this hagiographical framework, women who found enjoyment in sexuality amounted to prostitutes (Karras 32). Within the space of the narratives of prostitute saints, readers would find a representation of female sexuality, though it was a negative one. By adapting the story to enhance the erotic and add the contemporary accuracy of the financial exchanges of prostitution, the redactors reveal the constructed or imposed medieval view of women's sexuality and its sinful nature. In essence, the hagiographical genre reflects a society's response to its own moral status more so than the actual details of a particular saint's life. So, in reading the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, one must acknowledge this interpretive context. The reader must ask not only what happens in the narrative, but how and why it was framed in a particular way. Fitting with a changing society, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* evolves for a Christian audience with particular concerns about the nature of sin in their contemporary world.

With this fundamental understanding of the origin of Mary of Egypt's life and the social significance of its evolution in mind, I turn my critical focus to the assertion that the narrative of Mary of Egypt opposes genre, or simple categorization. In terms of Mary of Egypt's narrative, subversion is not achieved through a single means; rather, her narrative is a site of challenging chronology, sexuality, and language and literacy practices.

Mary of Egypt does not simply resist categorization in one aspect of her figure or narrative; rather, her narrative seems to nuance the act of subversion, challenging norms at every level, including that of chronology. As Burrus explains, “The initial figure of forty-seven years marking her desert sojourn has, seemingly, been attracted to the figure of seventeen years marking her time of lust. The time in the Lady’s desert thus doubles, repeats, and reinterprets the time in the city of the men” (152). For Burrus, the city and desert oppose one another, beyond the obvious differences in landscape and population. The desert is a place of contemplation, a place where one can seek the monastic ideal.

In contrast, the city is a place of temptation that is governed by men, both in politics and commerce. When Mary of Egypt recounts her sins, she places them in the city. She explains to Zosimus,

*and swa mænige dagas swa ic ær þære rode symbelnysse on þære ceastre
wunode mid lichaman fullicum weorcum me gemængde, and eac wyrsum.
Næs ic na genihtsumigende on þam geongum ðe on þære sæ mid me oððe
on þam siðfæte hæmdon, ac ic ec swilce mænga ælðeodige and
ceastergewarena on þa dæda minra scylda gegaderigende and beswicende
besmat. (ll. 445-51)*

(And as many days as I was in the city before the feast of the cross, I took part in impure bodily acts, and even worse. No, I was not content with the young men with whom I had had sex on the sea or on the journey, but I also polluted the same way in the works of my misdeeds, many foreigners and townsfolk whom I had gathered together and seduced.)

Here, the location of Mary of Egypt's sins figures into her reflection. The city is a place of foreign faces and polluted morality. Stevenson contributes a medieval physiological approach to this spatial division, as she explains the pervasive medieval belief that women's bodies were "softer, wetter, and more porous" than men's (38). From a purely physiological standpoint, the desert conditions would dry the body, limiting or diminishing its feminine quality, thus reinforcing the notion of the desert as a place of reflection or asceticism. The temptations of the city are far removed from the dutiful contemplation of the desert, but this removal is not limited to physical distance; the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* writer uses time to sharpen this spatial contrast.

Within the *Life*, the chronology wobbles; distribution of time is unclear and, at times, improbable. Even as Mary of Egypt repeats the outline of her life, time remains unclear. In considering issues of time within the narrative, one must note that the significance of time is not limited to actual social or biological realities; instead, the chronology likely reflects theories of numerology. Mary of Egypt's chronology divides her time among the various conventional female estates – virgin, harlot, and recluse. Her 47 years of life fall into categories, and despite their likely inaccuracy, are "explicitly mentioned by Mary herself" (Lees 61). In reviewing the breakdown of her life, the reader can see that these periods of time are "oddly symmetrical and probably symbolic" (Lees 61). Here, time works to balance the estates, leveling a period of sin with a period of redemption, but also emulates the ascetic ministry of Christ. For Mary of Egypt, "with her childlessness, and old age, and gender ambiguity, the conventional female life cycle is irrelevant" (Lees 60). Still, while the life cycle is perhaps biologically or socially irrelevant, the use of time within the narrative is certainly relevant in linking Mary of

Egypt to Christ through numerology, undercutting gendered life cycles, and, in enacting narrative subversion.

The issue of time extends beyond Mary of Egypt's inconsistencies or inaccuracy in depicting numbers of years. In playing with time sequences, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* subverts the hierarchical structures associated with heterosexuality. To examine the wobbly chronology of the narrative, Clare A. Lees and Diane Watt strike a balance between queer theory and feminist criticism, which they term a queer feminist collaboration. In Lees and Watt's reading, as a middle-aged saint, Mary of Egypt complicates the discussion of sexuality and the physical body. For Mary of Egypt, age does not dictate sexuality. Unlike the traditional story of conversion from harlot to saint, Mary of Egypt does not have a great deal of sex during youth – a time when society would expect a woman to be a virgin – and then repent for her misdeeds. Mary of Egypt still embraces sexuality in the desert in her middle and old age (Lees 60).

In her narrative, Mary of Egypt betrays the medieval model of time. At the time of the narrative, marking age by estate would have been an established convention. The average woman would move through the three estates: virgin or maid, wife and widow (Lees 60). Mary of Egypt breaks away from life cycles; rather than advancing from virgin to wife to widow, Mary of Egypt moves from harlot to ascetic. The narrative's numerology undercuts existing heterosexual time and life cycles. The number of years for each phase of Mary of Egypt's life might be biologically or historically inaccurate, but the writer's insistence on marking specific lengths of time carries significance. Mary of Egypt spends seventeen years as a harlot and another seventeen years in the desert, facing

temptation (Lees and Watt 61). In allotting years in this manner, the writer uses time to balance periods of sin and penance.

Taking the transcendence of time one step further, Mary of Egypt does not just defy traditional life cycles, but she is actually *beyond* age. There appear to be two asymmetrical, if not oppositional, models of aging within the narrative: the heterosexual or normative model enacted with Zosimus and the queer model enacted by Mary of Egypt. As the narrative positions these two figures as points of comparison, the reader can see how Mary of Egypt operates outside the normative model of chronology. Within the narrative, Mary's age would categorize her as old, but still, the writer avoids this phrasing. At 52, Zosimus is exhausted by age – an “ealdan witan,” or old man (*Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt* l. 299). He moves through the traditional stations of aging, from childhood in the monastery to his entrance into the narrative at 52 as a monk. Mary of Egypt, on the other hand, seems to transcend age. She is never described as old. Within the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, chronological time constructs serve as a platform to differentiate or elevate the subject above established heterosexual formulations.

In fact, Lees and Watts claim that through this numerology, Mary of Egypt becomes Christ, or at least becomes Christlike. In this reading, Mary of Egypt's temptation in the desert and other life events mirror the experience of Christ. Like Christ, Mary of Egypt faces temptation in the desert, walks on water, tastes but does not consume the food given to her, and has the word of God within her (Lees 61). Here, the time span serves to not only abstract her from the traditional heterosexual chronology and life cycle of women, but to reinforce her symbolic link to Christ, who spent 40 days in the desert. Her life mirrors the liturgical time of Christ as after her conversion, Mary of

Egypt, like Christ, crosses the River Jordan at sunset (Lees 62). Mary of Egypt exists outside normative chronology and symbolically in the same timing as Christ.

As established, through her harlotry at a young age, Mary of Egypt challenges heterosexual life cycles, but this role of harlot is, in itself, a subversive position. Burrus contends that “holy” and “harlot” are not mutually exclusive states; in fact, in many ways, seduction can be both sexual and spiritual. Her position stands in contrast to the critical temptation to view the hypersexualized woman as a microcosm of the carnal desire that must be converted to divine love in all people (Burrus 130). In Burrus’s view, this conversion from desire to the divine misconstrues sexuality and spirituality as mutually exclusive. Burrus asks, “For what is conversion itself, if not a form of seduction – a conquest matched by an acquiescence to conquest, whether by a man or a God?” (131). Both spirituality and sexuality involve a sense of seduction, of the individual giving him- or herself over to a higher power, be it desire or the deity, which links the two states. Mary of Egypt’s harlotry does not operate in opposition to her spirituality, but in tandem with it.

For Mary of Egypt, the role of harlot actually ensures a singular spiritual connection through her promiscuity. In denying a connection to a single man, she allows for a singular devotion to God. In coupling physically with many partners, she essentially couples intimately with no one. No individual man is able to receive her whole being – she reserves the gift of her whole self for God. Burrus explains, “Egyptian Mary nakedly exposes the secret of seduction as a ‘free gift’ that radically disrupts the claims of the masculinist economy of sexuality as production and consumption” (156). Mary of Egypt is not a prostitute, but a promiscuous woman; in giving herself freely to men, she

disallows the established system of male-controlled exchanges. The narrative does not support the established binary of sexuality and holiness, as Mary of Egypt expresses her devotion *through* acts of sexuality.

While Mary of Egypt does transcend heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexual exchange, one must note that this transcendence does not strip her of her identification as a woman. Initially, Zosimus mistakenly identifies Mary of Egypt as the male figure of spiritual perfection that he seeks in the desert; soon after, though, he recognizes his error. Mary of Egypt might allow for fluidity across gender norms, but it is critical that she identifies as a woman, and more importantly, as a woman who can present spiritual perfection as a desert father could. The writer chronicles Zosimus's sighting of Mary:

*Ða eac witodlice se ende his gebedes wæs gefylled, he þa his eagan
bewende and þær soðlice man geseah westweardes on þæt westen efstan,
and witodlice þæt wæs wifman þæt þær gesewen wæs. Swiðe sweartes
lichaman heo wæs for þære sunnan hæto, and þa locas hire heafdes
wæron swa white swa wull and þa na sidðran þonne oþ þone swuran. (ll.
212-18)*

(And when he finished the end of his prayer, he then turned his eyes and really saw there a human being traveling westwards in the desert, and it was actually a woman that appeared there. She was intensely black in her body due to the sun's heat, and the hair on her head was as white as wool and no longer than down to her neck.)

For a moment, Zosimus cannot identify Mary of Egypt's figure because her skin has become quite dark after many years in the sun's heat. Zosimus identifies Mary as a "human being," or in some translations, a man; regardless, she is not immediately perceived as a woman. At first glance, she is potentially male, a physical form able to fulfill the role of the desert father. This initial misidentification, and subsequent proper identification, are crucial in configuring Mary of Egypt's position as a subversive figure. The passage does not make Mary a male figure, but instead establishes her as a female figure who can accomplish typically male spiritual tasks. Her figure commands some degree of authority, but she does not need to be male to hold this power.

Moments later in the narrative, Mary of Egypt's figure is uncovered quite literally. As Zosimus recognizes that the figure does not belong to a male desert father as he had assumed, Mary of Egypt explains that he should not look upon her: *ic ne mæg me þe geswutelian and ongeanweardes þe gewenden, forþon ic oem wifhades mann and eallunga lichamlicum wæfelsum bereafod, swa swa þu sylf gesihst, and þa sceame mines lichaman hæbbende unoferwrigene* ("I cannot show myself and turn towards you, for I am a person of the female sex, and am completely without bodily clothing, as you yourself see, and I have the shame of my body uncovered") (ll. 252-56). Here, Mary of Egypt might express shame at her physical body, particularly as it relates to her status as female, but it is important that she does in fact identify in this way. In a narrative which at times allows Mary of Egypt to transcend the bounds of gender, her feminine form remains at the forefront. When Zosimus grants Mary his cloak, *Heo þa þæs onfeng and hire lichaman oferwreah, and gegyrede hire be þam dæle þe heo mæst mihte and mæst neod wæs to beheligenne* ("She accepted it [his cloak] and put it over her body, and

dressed the parts of herself that she was most able to and which there was the most need to cover”) (ll. 268-70). In determining which parts of her body “there was most need to conceal,” Mary of Egypt recognizes the power of her sexualized feminine form, as not all parts of her body are fit for Zosimus’s sight (*Passing* 139). Mary of Egypt is a sexualized figure who presents herself as a woman, then disavows the potential limitations of her gendered identity.

The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is a challenging piece of hagiography in which one woman undercuts both time and gender, but larger studies of medieval manuscripts show that the act of including or sharing this narrative was a subversive act in itself. The text appears in fragments in two manuscripts, but in its whole form only in the Cotton Julius E.vii manuscript, which is a collection of Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*. Despite the inclusion of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* within this larger Ælfrician project, it is clear that Ælfric did not author the work. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, both in form and content, stands apart from Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*. Critics today respond to these issues with varying approaches, often electing to focus more exclusively on form or content. To give a full explanation of the distinctions between the *Life* and Ælfric’s *Lives*, I will present these varied critical approaches, beginning with a focus on linguistics or form, and moving to a focus on content. In addressing differences between other hagiographies in Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints* and the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, some critics take a particular interest in the language of the text itself, examining issues of grammar and theories of translation. Andy Orchard takes such an approach, examining the prose of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* in relation to that of Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*. While Ælfric freely summarizes and plays with the Latin structures of his source material, the Mary of Egypt writer takes a more literal

approach to his own sources. Orchard asserts that the vestiges of Latin within the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* suggest that the author of the Old English text was not slavish or inexperienced, as some have argued previously.⁵ Orchard asserts that to be un-*lfrician* is not to be unworthy, and modern readers should take a more sympathetic approach to this writer (34).

In terms of form, *Mary of Egypt* poses a challenge to traditional categorizations of genre. When read in relation to *lfric's Lives of Saints*, each of which tends to have a tightly controlled narrative structure, this problem of categorization becomes even more prominent. In his *Lives of Saints*, *lfric* abridges longer narratives, adding his own commentary. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* writer strays from *lfric's* practice of summary and commentary, instead retaining the direct speech of the original text (Magennis 101). *lfric* expresses his authority to comment upon the lives of saints, and enforces this authority through his presentation of the hagiographical accounts, as he does not emphasize conversion and repentance as major themes. Rather than present developing saints who might struggle with their beliefs, *lfric* narrates from the vantage point of attained salvation (Magennis 103). His saints are resolute in their faith and convictions. In contrast to the divine certainty within *lfric's Lives*, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* presents two individuals – Zosimus and Mary of Egypt – who engage in the process of spiritual development.

While Zosimus and Mary of Egypt exemplify monastic considerations and would align with *lfric's Lives* – which were written at the request of a pair of lay patrons and

⁵ For a closer reading of linguistics, namely the preservation of Latin doublets in the *Life*, see Andy Orchard's "Rhetoric and Style in the Old English *Mary of Egypt*."

intended for a monastic readership – in this regard, this link does not discount the larger discrepancies between the projects and their methodologies. Even in speaking to a monastic audience, Ælfric and the *Life* writer have different conceptions of monasticism in mind. Ælfric does not present the stories of desert fathers within his *Lives* and views the life of the monastery as communal, and very much in conversation with the larger population. For the *Life* writer, however, monasticism is a life of singular asceticism (Magennis 107). Ælfric, and much of late Anglo-Saxon England, would have been uncomfortable with this eremitical ideal, as independent spirituality posed a threat to the ordered Christian hierarchies (Magennis 107). The practice of the desert father – or in this case, desert mother – did not fit the period’s endorsed mold for monastic life.

Continuing this subversive or counter-cultural presentation of monasticism, the *Life* writer reassigns roles of authority, granting a woman the spiritual power traditionally entrusted to men. Ælfric is uncomfortable with the notion of a woman usurping men’s authority in spiritual matters, but the *Life* writer readily grants Mary of Egypt the position of desert mother, one who has greater spiritual knowledge than her male counterpart, Zosimus (Magennis 106-7). During their first encounter, Mary calls Zosimus by his name, and *Ða gegrap Zosimus swilðlic ege and fyrhtu witodlice, forþan þe he gehyrde þæt heo be his naman næmnede hine, þone ðe heo næfre ær ne geseah ne næfre forsecgan ne gehyrde, buton þæt he swutellice ongeat þæt heo mid þære godcundan foresceawunge onliht wæs* (“Then a deep fear and dread seized Zosimus, because he heard that she called him by his name, whom she had never previously seen or heard of, except that he recognized that she had been enlightened with godly foresight”) (ll. 261-65). In this moment, Mary holds the upper hand, as she knows Zosimus’s name, but can

withhold her own. After this interaction, Zosimus recognizes her authority and follows Mary's instructions, a power dynamic which is not seen in any of Ælfric's *Lives*. Even in addressing the same monastic audience, Ælfric and the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* writer have fundamentally different approaches and aims. When read in comparison, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is pointedly un-Ælfrician in its linguistic usage, portrayal of the relationship between gender and power, and presentation of the conversion process.

Based on these contrasts, one must consider just how the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* made it into the Cotton Julius E.vii manuscript. Ælfric held a great deal of power in deciding which texts to include and how to translate them. There is a distinct style of commentary in the *Lives*. For Magennis, the inclusion of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is a site of "dilution" of Ælfric's message and authority (112). In his preface, Ælfric gives his scribes his last words – orders to copy correctly from the exemplar, without addition. He concludes his preface: *Ic bidde nu on Godes naman, gif hwa þas boc awritan wille, þæt he hi wel gerihte be þær na mare betwux ne sette þonne we awendon. Vale in Domino* ("I pray now in the name of God, if anyone wishes to copy this book, that he correct it well according to the exemplar; and place within it no more than we have translated. Farewell in the Lord") (144). Here, he makes his intent and authority as compiler clear; no scribe should add any texts not found within the exemplar. By including the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, Ælfric's scribes disobey his final command, breaking away from both his vision and his means to implement this vision.

These questions of scribal autonomy, and perhaps even the trope of giving orders to a scribe, runs throughout medieval literature, from the unnamed Old English writers who included prefaces to their works to known authors, like Chaucer. In his *Chaucers*

Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Sciveyn, Chaucer addresses his scribe, Adam Pinkhurst. In the poem, Chaucer refers to his forthcoming poems *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, fitting the time frame of Pinkhurst's work as a scrivener in London. In examining this poem, Alexandra Gillespie cites two potential alternative interpretative approaches. Her proposal is not a means to discredit the historical reading of Adam Pinkhurst's capacity as scribe, but to "refocus attention on Adam Sciveyn as a literary text, one that describes Chaucer's relationship with his hopeless or hapless scribe Adam in ways that demand a variety of critical as well as paleographical and historical approaches" (Gillespie 272). Gillespie's reading of *Chaucers Wordes* explores the possibility that the poet looks to an imagined future reproduction of his work, raising lively discussion about the role of author and audience in the task of making meaning of a literary text (278). We can look to Chaucer's poem – and Gillespie's study – as a methodological or theoretical framework for the nature of scribal directives and disobedience. In doing so, we expand our query beyond the historical perspective on the work, which is indeed important in itself, to the larger theoretical and literary questions involved.⁶ Certainty of a historical truth need not silence exciting conversations about the responsibility of making meaning in a literary text.

With Gillespie's reading of *Chaucers Wordes* in mind, I return to the presence of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* within the Cotton Julius E.vii manuscript, home of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. Mary of Egypt's narrative was likely a late addition to the manuscript, as it is not listed on the table of contents, thus breaking Ælfric's direct orders to copy strictly

⁶ We must also note the complications that arise when dealing with such subversion in an Old English text lacking a known writer. In this particular instance, Ælfric stands alone as the only known writer, the man directing the reproduction of various saints' lives, excluding Mary of Egypt.

from the exemplar, without addition (Szarmach 143). An act of disobedience – a subversion – engendered the inclusion of this subversive narrative within the manuscript. To expand further on this argument, the un-*Ælfrician* quality of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is not just a marker of departure from one particular translator or compiler, but a bold differentiation from the hagiographical genre at large, as *Ælfric* was such an important name in this field. To be un-*Ælfrician*, and to be so to the degree of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* writer, was to subvert the established conventions of the genre.⁷

Likewise, the larger implications of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* challenge the traditional rhetorical purpose of the form. As established by Karras, hagiographical accounts often reflect the concerns of their contemporary societies more so than biographical accuracy. For instance, the lives of prostitute saints serve as a response to the society's concern with female sexuality. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* also poses a challenge to the contemporary society. While at the outset this narrative seems to align with the prostitute saint stories which call on repentance from the evils of sexuality, there is a more complex dynamic at work. Unlike other prostitute saints, Mary of Egypt speaks of her exultation in giving freely of her erotic body. In essence, she introduces another option into the existing binary system, where sexuality is evil and purity is good. Lees and Watts assert,

In offering a model of female asceticism in the desert that is a model for male asceticism – the desert father is a desert mother – Mary empowers other religious to explore desires that reside, perhaps, across and within

⁷ For more critical context of *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, see *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts*, edited by Paul Szarmach.

genders and across age and mortality too. The resistance of the *Life* to represent Mary in terms of conventional medieval understandings of female ages, stages and life cycles and the attendant queer numerology are absolutely germane to this point. (64)

In denying quick categorization, Mary of Egypt also denies the binary treatment of conversion, insisting on the existence of varied and dynamic paths to penance and salvation. As Mary of Egypt proves, asceticism need not be limited solely to men of a certain age; instead, the concept can extend to individuals regardless of age, gender, and other characteristics.

The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* offers different models for salvation, though her story does include the traditional hagiographical tropes of sin and conversion. Often, hagiographical accounts present the saint's conversion from the depth of sin to a life of holy asceticism. In presenting this condensed story of conversion, the authors attempt to construct an applicable path for other believers who, by definition, seek penance for their own sins. In the case of Mary of Egypt, however, this logic is problematic. Mary of Egypt was indeed a sinner, a promiscuous woman who acted on her carnal desires, and her repentance does not follow traditional models. As Benedicta Ward explains, her story is not just a "dramatic tale of lust turned into love;" the narrative is

clearly packed with intricate symbols, the most important of which is the contrast of the good, self-satisfied monk who relies for salvation on his own works, with Mary the sinful woman who receives the simple gift of salvation from Christ without any acts, self-exploration, sacraments or prayers, but only because of her great need. (33)

While other hagiographical accounts emphasize repentance, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* shows a reformed prostitute who still does not reject sexuality. Though she does not retract her past sinful deeds and the sexuality from which they stemmed as the typical saint might, she receives God's grace.

With this reading of Mary of Egypt in mind, one can turn to ponder larger questions about the narrative's reception and implications, both for its intended immediate audience of medieval readers and for the twenty-first century reader, who seeks knowledge about the inner workings of medieval societies, and who raises similar questions about the intersections of sexuality and faith. Mary of Egypt's narrative is a site of subversion. Her gender is as unstable as her chronology, and her sins are bold. According to Paul E. Szarmach, the challenge of the narrative "startles the audience, forcing it to consider the boundaries of what the holy might be and how it might be obtained" (164). The average reader might find Mary of Egypt's sins bold, perhaps too bold to be relatable, but the narrative would act as a call to consider established ideas of holiness.

The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* functions under the guise of the genre of hagiography, under the auspices that it will present a dramatic yet feasible tale of redemption from sin, when, in fact, the narrative actually subverts this very categorization. The narrative challenges expectations of women's sexuality and the notion of public moral instruction by offering the example of Mary of Egypt, who embraces the erotic and refuses categorization. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* offers readers – particularly modern readers – the opportunity to reconsider issues of gender and representation within medieval hagiographies. While readers likely approach such a text

with preconceived notions of medieval gender and spirituality in mind, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* acts as a point of destabilization for these more conventional readings.

For a modern reader, the challenge is to rescue the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* from being filed away with other hagiographical accounts. Other saints' lives use a familiar template of sin and redemption to instruct an audience about proper moral behaviors, but the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* writer is not complicit with these tropes, nor with their intent. As this narrative proliferated throughout medieval society, with various redactions and translations, we must ask whether such acceptance of the *Life* indicates an implicit acceptance of the project's subversion or progressive task.

Further, when focusing on the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* as a narrative with a subversive treatment of female sexuality, we must also explore the implications of this treatment. The narrative might present a subversive figure, but for a contemporary audience, this view of sexuality might still not be a positive or sympathetic one. Within this scope, how can an audience read Mary of Egypt's sexuality and subversion? What kind of power or agency does Mary of Egypt hold within the hegemonic framework of hagiographical accounts? While Burrus certainly does not intend to romanticize rape, prostitution, or incest in the lives of the holy harlots, she admits, "I cannot deny the seductive allure of that sexiest of saints, the holy whore – a figure who cannot easily be dislodged from scenes or scenarios configurable as prostitution, rape, or incest, as it happens" (155). The "sexiest of saints" find themselves deeply embedded in hyper-sexualized motifs, in ways that challenge readings of women's authority and identity. To categorize seduction as a feminine power seems to flirt with anti-feminist language or

context, as the seductress figures into twenty-first century masculine views of women's sexuality where women use sex as a lure or tool of manipulation.

There are certainly issues of authority to unpack within the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* and other harlot hagiographies. Upon reading the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, the text seems to call upon the audience – particularly a modern audience – to reexamine their own conceptions of gender and sainthood in medieval hagiographies. Further, the text reaffirms the presence of subversion at all levels of textual production, from the portrayals of time and authority in the narrative itself to the scribal disobedience which engendered its proliferation. As Paul Szarmach explains, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* “will challenge and expand our horizon of expectations for saints’ lives as well as for Anglo-Saxon literature and culture generally. It will subvert intellectually whatever our understanding and experience of the genre of female saints’ lives may have been” (141). Szarmach argues that the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* holds tremendous potential as a site of destabilization, challenging readers to reconsider notions of hagiography, literature, and, on a larger scale, the culture in which this text proliferated.

Following Szarmach's assertion, I return to the relationship between the subversion of the scribal culture and the subversion of the text itself. We cannot separate the text from its transmission. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is certainly subversive on its own, but we would not even have access to this text without the work of disobedient scribes, who saw this text as fit for dissemination. Such disobedience implies some critical rationale; in disobeying Ælfric's expressed wishes, the scribes took a risk and must have seen something critically worthy in the narrative. In this way, the act of disobedience reinforces the call for modern reinterpretation of the text. Readers must

examine why a scribe would take the risk of disseminating such a narrative. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* certainly pushes against conventional ideas of gender and faith in medieval societies, and the scribe who decided to proliferate the text likely saw the benefit of promulgating such a risky text.

The narrative stands apart from □lfrician Lives, and medieval Lives in general – and a modern reader will likely see some connections between the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* and more current works. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* anticipates what would fall under the modern notion of performativity. Mary of Egypt is not simply a saint, woman, or elder, amongst other depictions; rather, she actively performs each role, challenging their intersections in a way that supports her own agency and personality. Particularly in the scene where Zosimus finds Mary of Egypt's name written in the sand, performativity is evident. Like Zosimus, readers must consider how her name appeared in that spot, especially after her claims of illiteracy. Did some divine power write the name? Or, did Mary of Egypt write her own name in the sand? In literary criticism, the act of signing one's name generates lively discussion about performativity, about constructing identity through the written word.

To dismiss such critical dimensions in the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* would be to do a great disservice not only to the text and its author, but to the disobedient scribal community which ensured its proliferation. In this instance, readers cannot separate text from transmission; the two meet in a larger, richer comprehension of the act of subversion. By classifying the narrative as a text rich with subversion, I assert that the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* offers an alternate model of reading, not a complete disavowal

of existing genre conventions and social roles. In this model, readers consider how the narrative anticipates modern discussions, particularly surrounding the performativity of various categorizations. The narrative functions with an understanding of the conventions of saintly Lives, but challenges these ideas and ideals. The *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* does not destroy existing understandings of medieval works; rather, it shakes the foundation of modern ideas about medieval texts and societies. Accordingly, readers should not group the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* into the larger genre; instead, they should enter a deeper engagement with the narrative and its related scribal disobedience.

Works Cited

- lfric. "Old English Preface to his *Lives of Saints*." *Old and Middle English c. 890-c. 1450: An Anthology*. Ed. Elaine Treharne. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2010. 143-5. Print.
- Burrus, Virginia. "Secrets of Seduction: The Lives of Holy Harlots." *The Sex Lives of Saints*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 128-59. Print.
- Fleiss, Hugh and Ronald Pepin. "The Story of Mary of Egypt and the Texts." *Saint Mary of Egypt: Three Medieval Lives in Verse*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005. 1-52. Print.
- Gillespie, Alexandra. "Reading Chaucer's Words to Adam." *The Chaucer Review* 42. 3 (2008): 269-83. *Project Muse*. Web. 11 June 2014.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval England." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1.1 (1990): 3-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 March 2014.
- Lavery, Simon. "The Story of Mary the Egyptian in Medieval England." *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*. Eds. Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross. Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1996. 113-48. Print.
- Lees, Clare A. and Diane Watt. "Age and Desire in the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*: A Queerer Time and Place?" *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Sue Niebrzydowski. New York: D. S. Brewer, 2011. 53-67. Print.
- Magennis, Hugh. "St Mary of Egypt and □lfric: Unlikely Bedfellows in Cotton Julius E.vii?" *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*. Eds. Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross. Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1996. 99-112. Print.

Orchard, Andy. "Rhetoric and Style in the Old English Mary of Egypt." *Old English Newsletter* 33 (2005). 31-55. Print.

Szarmach, Paul E. "More Genre Trouble: The Life of Mary of Egypt." *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*. Ed. Paul E. Szarmach. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 140-164. Print.

Ward, Benedicta. *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987. 26-56. Print.