Margaret Cotter-Lynch
Chapter 6
The Gender Genealogy of St. Mary of Egypt

Diane Watt and Clare Lees have suggested that we can productively see St. Mary of Egypt, as represented within the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, as genderqueer, transcending gender boundaries by simultaneously embodying both male and female identities.[1] This claim surprisingly places Mary of Egypt into a category with saints such as Pelagia and Thecla, who tradition tells us (miraculously) dressed as men in order to pursue a religious life not ordinarily open to women, and who contemporary critical conversations suggest should be considered through transgender theory. M. W. Bychowski has productively outlined parameters for discussing transgender saints, specifically saints who have historically been understood to transcend conventional and putatively essential gender boundaries.[2] I see here the convergence of two ideas: one, the gender fluidity in miraculous saints' narratives, always located in the distant past, even for their medieval audiences; and two, emerging contemporary understandings of gender as non-binary. This essay examines the ways in which grammatical and semantic gender markers are deployed in the Old English version of the story of St. Mary of Egypt and the Latin version that was likely its source, in order to demonstrate the genealogical relationship between texts and elucidate the ambiguities and complexities that cluster around the gendered representation of the saint. I argue that the multiple possibilities for configuring and representing gender offered by these medieval texts expand our modern possibilities for imagining the relationship between sanctity, sexuality, and gender. As Blake Gutt reminds us, "the theorization and discussion of non-normative gender is in evidence throughout recorded history."[3] We might learn about future possibilities for understanding gender in our current world by

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1 Diane Watt and Clare A. Lees, "Age and Desire in the Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt: A Queerer Time and Place?," in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sue Niebrzydowski (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 53–68.

2 M. W. Bychowski, "The Authentic Lives of Transgender Saints: *Imago Dei* and *Imitatio Christi* in the *Life* of Saint Marinos the Monk," in *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography*, ed. Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming 2020). I wish to thank the author for sharing this article with me before its publication.

3 Blake Gutt, "Transgender Genealogy in *Tristan de Nanteuil*," *Exemplaria* 30.2 (2018): 129–46. M. W. Bychowski, "Were there Transgender People in the Middle Ages?," *The Public Medievalist* (blog), November 1, 2018, https://www.publicmedievalist.com/transgender-middle-ages/.

reexamining articulations of gender from the past, since, upon reflection, these articulations don't function as we might have been trained to expect.

Mary of Egypt was one of the most popular saints of the medieval period, and her hagiography survives in multiple versions and languages. The Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is preserved in three eleventh-century manuscripts, only one of which, Cotton Julius E. vii, is complete (or nearly so, with two small lacunae). This manuscript contains the only extant full version of Aelfric's *Lives of the Saints*, but modern scholars agree that Mary of Egypt's *Life* was not translated by Aelfric, nor included by him in his collection, nor, quite likely, approved of by him. The Old English version of Mary's story is based upon a ninth-century Latin version by Paul of Naples, itself a translation of the sixth-century Greek version (controversially) attributed to Sophronius of Jerusalem.[4] A historical person called Mary of Egypt almost certainly did not exist; there is no evidence of a cult, and the *vita* in all of its versions bears the hallmarks of a compilation of popular hagiographic tropes, rather than an account derived from historical events. Nevertheless, the story of St. Mary of Egypt was quite popular across Europe in the Middle Ages, and it was translated into a number of vernacular languages.[5] The diffusion of her *vita* in various forms and translations thus provides an exemplary case of the ways in which hagiographies were written, rewritten, translated, and adapted to particular needs in particular times and places. In the case of the Latin and Old English texts, we see a subtle transformation in the ways gender is represented, even as the overarching stories are largely similar.

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4 Original Greek in 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 *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996). For a thorough account of the manuscript tradition for the Old English text, see the introduction to Hugh Magennis, *The Old English Life of Saint Mary of Egypt* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002). Magennis's edition includes both the Old English text and the CCLLatin source text. All quotations are taken from Magennis's edition of the Old English and Latin texts; modern English translations, except where noted, are his.

5 Old and Middle French versions are collected in Peter F. Dembowski, *La Vie De Sainte Marie L'égyptienne: Versions en ancien et en Moyen Français* (Geneva: Droz, 1977). Latin and Spanish poetic versions can be found translated in Ronald E. Pepin and Hugh Feiss, *Saint Mary of Egypt: Three Medieval Lives in Verse* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005). A Portuguese version is discussed in Ana Maria Machado, "Memory, Identity, and Women's Representation in the Portuguese Reception of *Vitae Patrum*: Winning a Name," in *Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of Medieval European Holy Women*, ed. Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 135–64.

The extant Latin version of the *vita* that most closely resembles the probable source text for the Old English translation is found in the Cotton-Corpus Legendary (CCL).[6] This collection of saints' lives was likely compiled in late ninth- or early tenth-century Flanders, and made its way to England by the late tenth century, where it apparently enjoyed quite wide popularity and liturgical use. The CCL was the primary source for Aelfric's *Lives of the Saints* – although, while Mary of Egypt is present in the CCL, her *Life* is notably absent from Aelfric's collection. The CCL contains the Latin version of Mary's *Life* attributed to Paul of Naples, but with perhaps some textual variants from the exact source text for the Old English version.[7] It is ultimately impossible to know, however, from the extant evidence, how much of the variation between the Old English and CCL versions of the hagiography can be attributed to a putative now-lost Latin source-text for the Old English, versus the innovation of the Old English translator. Regardless of exact source, however, it is useful to note the clear differences in the designation of gender in the extant Latin and Old English texts. As my argument will show, some of these variations, I believe, are intrinsic in the different possibilities for gendered representation in the two languages, and therefore likely point toward differences between the Old English and original Latin source-texts.

Part of this adaptation between languages, then, also involves the refiguration of gender: where it is designated, where it is not, in what ways, and why. In the extant ninth- and tenth-century versions of her *vita*, the gender and sexuality of St. Mary of Egypt are continuously refigured in ways that challenge modern binary categorizations. Gender simultaneity – the simultaneous embodiment of both male and female characteristics and identities – provides a useful framework for considering the distinctions made around sexuality, gender, and embodiment as represented in the Latin and Old English stories. In addition, examining the figuration of gender in these texts also helps to elucidate the relationships between the texts themselves, telling us something of textual as well as gender genealogies.

To clarify what I mean when I call Mary of Egypt genderqueer, and how that is situated in relationship to a variety of ways of talking about gender in both the medieval and modern worlds, I will start with some distinctions. I am not referring to the concept of teleological gender change between binary poles, as when

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6 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 13, 30–35.

7 As Magennis notes, "What is striking about the evidence of the Old English version is that where it contrasts with existing copies of C-C, or indeed with C, it generally preserves what must have been original readings." Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 35.

particularly holy women are referred to as "becoming male."[8] Nor, indeed, am I talking about genderlessness, as when Joyce Salisbury calls St. Pelagia "an asexual eunuch for Christ."[9] I also make a distinction between Mary's version of genderqueer and what many have termed the ecclesiastical "third gender," defined by chastity for both sexes.[10] Rather, I posit a reformulation and recombination of traditional gender categories, not toward teleological gender transformation, or eradication, but rather a syncretic conceptualization of gender that embraces simultaneity. I am not claiming that Mary ceases to be female and becomes male – thus switching positions in a still-intact binary hierarchical sex/gender system – but rather positing a both–and position that calls into question the very categories of male and female, mixing them up without eradicating genderedness. Mary of Egypt's status as genderqueer is thus in close conversation with Jack Halberstam's assertion that we understand trans* in the inclusive sense, "organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance."[11] Mary is, I argue, simultaneously male and female, and as such instantiates an apophasis of gender, in which the truth of God, beyond all human understanding, incorporates a reconceptualization of gender categories beyond what we can know in this world.

Catherine Keller's apophatic conception of gender, as traced through reference to later medieval mystical texts, is useful here in explaining Mary's status as genderqueer. Keller posits that the innate unspeakability of God – the inability, that is, of human language or understanding to fully encompass God in any form, including the incarnation of Christ – means that every human expression of gender, being simultaneously incarnate and spoken, is itself incomplete in its expression of the divine. Gender as we understand and express it is a human and bodily category, and thus necessarily insufficient, in theological terms.

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8 The scholarly literature on this common patristic trope is vast. See, for instance, L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Kerstin Aspegren, *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1990); Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Womanchrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, Ca. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

9 Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 103.

10 Jo Ann McNamara, "Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours," in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 199–209.

11 Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 4.

Therefore, she claims, "What is at stake is ultimately irreducible to the shape of gender or to the rights of those gendered or ungendered or transgendered in one way or another. And yet in all of those contours of embodiment, all those carnalities in which the incarnation lives in the body of Christ, we have walked the edge of the unspeakable."[12] Similarly, Brian McGrath Davis claims, "Translated for a specific analysis of gender, I am suggesting that an apophatic sensibility shows us that we must always be recreating what we mean by gender, always theoretically and practically working to undo the genders we perform, never accepting any form of bodily signification as either accurate or complete."[13] Mary of Egypt's gender, then, as expressed in the Old English *vita*, might be read as indicative of a theology of gender that undermines any number of established binaries. As Victoria Blud writes in her introduction to a book that includes discussion of the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*, "The unspeakable is a mode that queers the apophatic, the divine and transcendent, that recalls and even foregrounds their relation to the flesh."[14] Queerness, in its essence, is about moving beyond binary systems. Thus, as we will see with the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, the undoing of gender is intimately connected to the undoing of a network of distinctions and hierarchies, among them whore/saint, age/youth, religious/lay, now/then. As Jack Halberstam has explored, the ways in which human conceptions of time have historically been constructed around reproduction and generations mean that queerness also disrupts linear temporality.[15] This, too, is evident in Mary's *Life*, as cyclical liturgical time and linear chronological time, linked to human capability (for instance, the time it takes Zosimas, as opposed to Mary, to walk a physical distance) are likewise repeatedly disrupted.

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12 Catherine Keller, "The Apophasis of Gender: A Fourfold Unsaying of Feminist Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76.4 (2008): 905–33 at 912.

13 Brian McGrath Davis, "Apophatic Theology and Masculinities," *CrossCurrents* 61.4 (2011): 502–14 at 511.

14 Victoria Blud, *The Unspeakable, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval Literature, 1000–1400* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 11. For a discussion of the relationship between the apophatic and "transsexual" bodies, see Sigridur Gudmarsdottir, "Feminist Theology and the Sensible Unsaying of Mysticism," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 273–85.

15 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). For an application of these ideas to specifically medieval examples, see Blake Gutt, "Transgender Genealogy." The relationship between transgender and history/chronology is also explored in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* special issue on *Trans*historicities*, ed. Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici. 5.4 (November, 2018).

I am far from the first to consider Mary of Egypt's story from the perspective of gender.[16] I will therefore limit my intervention here to a consideration of how and why we might consider Mary of Egypt as genderqueer, and what it might tell us not only about Mary but also about gender and queerness, to think about the story in this way. To accomplish this, we will compare the representation of Mary's gender identity in the Old English version of the text and the ninth-century Latin version believed to be its source. In so doing, I draw a distinction between the representation of Mary's sexuality (central to discussions of her as a "holy harlot") and her gender, which is variously figured as ambiguous, problematic, and/or irrelevant in Zosimas's interactions with her. I perceive four different possibilities for the gendered representation of Mary's transformation over her years in the desert: her aged body, as encountered by Zosimas, can be figured as gendered female, gendered male, genderless, or genderqueer. Thinking through early medieval figurations of these categories can then shed light on future possibilities for our modern notions of sexuality and gender.

In both the Latin and Old English versions of Mary's *vita*, the outline of the story is as follows: Zosimas, an exemplary monk who has been cloistered since boyhood, goes into the desert for forty days in observance of a Lenten ritual. While there, he encounters a figure of indeterminate gender, who turns out to be St. Mary of Egypt. After repeated urging by Zosimas, Mary recounts her story of sin and repentance. At the age of twelve, she tells us, she ran away from her family to Alexandria, where she lived for seventeen years as what Ana Maria Machado has called "an insatiable instrument of public debauchery."[17] The Old English version of her life specifies that she was even worse than a prostitute, since

> Ne forleas ic na minne fæmnhad for æniges mannes gyfum oþþe ic witodlice ahtes on-fenge fram ænigum þe me aht gyfan woldon, ac ic wæs swiðe onæled mid þære hatheort-nysse þæs synlustes, þæt ic gewilnode butan ceape þæt hi me þe mænigfealdlicor to geurnon, to þy þæt ic þe eð mihte gefyllan þa scyldfullan gewilnunga mines forligeres.

Nor did I lose my maidenhood at all in exchange for gifts from anyone or in fact that I might receive anything from any people who wished to give me anything,

16 Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, vol. 106, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987); Paticia Cox Miller, "Is There a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33.3 (2003): 419–35; Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Virginia Burrus, Charlotte Fonrobert, and Robert Gregg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Robin Norris, "*Vitas Matrum*: Mary of Egypt as Female Confessor," *Old English Newletter Subsidia* 33 (2005): 79–109.
17 Machado, "Memory, Identity," 155.

but I was very much on fire with the passion of desire for sin, so that I desired that they might rush to me the more numerously without payment, my purpose being to satisfy the more easily the disgraceful desires of my sexual depravity.[18]

After describing at length the debaucheries that occupied her teens and twenties, Mary tells us that she traded sexual favors for passage to Jerusalem on a ship of pilgrims – motivated by curiosity and a desire for adventure, rather than piety. Once in the Holy Land, Mary attempts to follow the pilgrims to church for the celebration of the exaltation of the cross, but miraculously encounters an invisible barrier to her entrance. She then, in the courtyard, earnestly prays, is overcome by divine revelation of her sin, and finds an image of the Virgin Mary, to whom she prays. Mary of Egypt is thereby converted – without human intervention – and promises to live out her life in penance. She enters the church, prays before the holy cross, and later baptizes herself in the Jordan before receiving communion in the church of St. John the Baptist. She then crosses the Jordan and begins her solitary sojourn in the desert, where she is miraculously sustained by God for the intervening forty-seven years before meeting Zosimas.

After recounting this story to Zosimas, Mary asks that he return to her in a year, and at that time administer the Eucharist to her (a sacrament which she had theretofore only experienced once). He obliges, and when he returns the next year he observes her walking on water to cross the Jordan to meet him. Another year passes, and this time Zosimas finds Mary's dead body, neatly arranged, with a note in the sand explaining that she had died one hour after their previous meeting. He then buries her with the aid of a tame lion, who miraculously appears.

Perhaps the key moment for the consideration of Mary's gender in the Old English and Latin texts comes when Zosimas first perceives the figure of Mary of Egypt in the desert. Both the Latin and Old English texts imbue this moment with gender ambiguity, but in slightly different ways. In Paul's Latin text, we are told that Zosimas sees "umbram quasi humani corporis apparentem"; Magennis translates this as "a shadow appearing of what seemed to be a human body."[19] A close examination of the Latin grammar here demonstrates the gendered indeterminacy of this formulation. More literally, in Latin Zosimas says that he sees "an appearing shadow as if of a body of a human." Both "humani" and "corporis" are in the genitive case. Grammatical gender in Latin takes three possible forms: masculine, feminine, and neuter. As a noun, "corpus, corporis" is gendered masculine, regardless

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18 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 82–83.

19 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 157; chapter 7 of Paul's text.

of the gender of the body in question. "Humanum, humani," meanwhile, is gendered neuter – it is specifically a word to designate a human being without designating that human's gender. Here, then, we have the body of a human whose gender is indeterminate or not yet designated. Zosimas's first perception of Mary's bodily form is thus explicitly designated as gender-neutral.

In the next two sentences, we then get further indeterminacy in the gender identification of the still-apparitional Mary: "uidit aliquem in ueritate properantem ad partem occidentis. Mulier autem erat quod uidebatur" (he saw that there really was someone hastening in a westerly direction. It was a woman that he saw).[20] The *humani corporis* of the last sentence is now designated as "aliquem," a pronoun meaning "someone." *Aliquem* is the accusative masculine and feminine form of the pronoun, as distinct from the neuter "aliquid." So now the text specifies that this human exists in a gendered system of male and female, but has not yet been designated as one or the other. Finally, in the second sentence, Mary is designated as "mulier," a woman. The syntax of this last sentence in the Latin, with "mulier" as the first word, draws attention to the revelation of the apparition's gender. Thus, the moment of Mary's first appearance is marked by both uncertainty about and ultimately emphasis upon her gender, as first she is a human apart from gender designation, then a gendered being whose gender is not yet revealed, and finally a woman.

The Old English version of this first encounter is similarly marked by gender ambiguity, but slightly differently. There is a lacuna in the Old English text at Zosimas's first perception of Mary, so the grammar of the entire sentence is not clear, but the object of Zosimas's perception is "on mennisce gelicnysse," "in manly likeness," or, as translated by Magennis, "in human physical form." Magennis is of course correct that we might take "mennisce," and later "man," to be accurately translated as "human," but this translation choice elides the gendered nature of the word in Old English.[21] In Latin, remember, "humanum" is grammatically neuter, and semantically separate from a word for adult male human, for instance "vir": human and man are different words in Latin. In Old English, however, like in the modern English of the twentieth century, "man" can mean both an adult human gendered male, and a human, generally. I argue that this semantic difference between the two languages becomes important in how the two texts represent the gender of Mary.

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20 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 156–57; chapter 7 of Paul's text.
21 Several previous scholars have also noted the implications of gender oscillation in this passage. See, for instance, Blud, *The Unspeakable, Gender, and Sexuality*, 31; Gillian R. Overing and Clare A. Lees, *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England.* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 141.

As we continue to the elaboration of Zosimas's investigation of the appearance or likeness in the Old English version, we find that he "þær soðlice man geseah," which Magennis renders as "really saw there a human being." We are thus moving toward more specificity in what Zosimas perceives – from likeness of a human, to certainly a human – but again we repeat the slippage inherent in the word "man." The next clause, then, gives either a further specification, or a correction, to this perception: "and witodlice þæt wæs wifman þæt þær gesewen wæs," "and it was actually a woman that appeared there." We move from "man" to "wifman"; the form of "wifman" demonstrates that a woman is a kind of man – we thought it was a man, now we know it is a wo-man. The semantic gender categories in the Old English are much more slippery than in the Latin: while Latin has clearly separate words for designating adult male ("vir"), adult female ("mulier"), and general human ("humanum"), in Old English the word "man" designates either human regardless of gender, or adult male, while "wifman" designates a (hu)man who is female. In other words, Latin posits human as a category within which male and female are separate sub-categories. Old English posits (hu)man as a category within which some are also (wo)man – every woman, then, is by definition also a man. Linguistically, this is further underlined by the fact that, in Old English, the word "wifman" is grammatically gendered male, a fact that often befuddles modern students of Old English.

Watt and Lees translate this same Old English passage a bit differently from Magennis, underlining the gender shift: "Truly he [Zosimas] saw there a man hastening westwards in the desert, and really it was a woman who was there seen."[22] Both of these translations, of course, are correct: the "man" in Old English means both man and human, as the etymology of our modern English words man, human, and woman imply. The crux of my argument here is not that one translation is better than the other, but rather that the simultaneous correctness of them both tells us something about the differing ways in which Latin and Old English categorize and designate gender. The Latin text and the Old English text represent gender differently because the two languages provide different opportunities for and constraints upon how Mary's (always ambiguous) gender is designated, particularly at a moment where expected ecclesiastical gender categories are subverted, and the relationship between gender, sexuality, and sanctity is problematized.

Throughout the Old English text, gender, authority, and ecclesiastical prestige are constantly questioned and reconfigured in ways that can be designated as queer. The initially competing, but in the end complementary, positions of

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22 Watt and Lees, "Age and Desire," 53.

authority for Mary and Zosimas provide a clear example. Upon their first meeting in the desert, each prostrates him/herself to the other: "He Þa sona on Þa eor ðan hine astrehte and hire bletsunga bæd. Heo ongean hi astrehte and his bletsunga bæd" (He then immediately prostrated himself on the ground and asked for her blessing. She in turn prostrated herself and asked for his blessing).[23] This competitive prostration apparently lasts for hours, with Mary arguing to Zosimas that his priestly authority should be honored, while Zosimas asserts that Mary is "soðlice Godes Þinen" (truly God's handmaid). After further back and forth, we are told that Mary eventually acquiesces to give her blessing to Zosimas, and the two get up off the ground to continue their conversation. This episode is echoed later, when Zosimas attempts to kneel to Mary, but she "him ne geÞafode fulfremodlice on Þaeorðan astreccan" (did not let him prostrate himself fully on the ground).[24] She then proceeds to demonstrate her miraculous knowledge of the (imperfect) practices of Zosimas's monastery, on which she corrects him, and orders him to return next year and bring her the Eucharist. Here, Mary and Zosimas both physically and verbally perform an ambiguous, hybrid, and queer relationship to authority, as Mary refuses Zosimas's subjection to her, then commands him, but commands him to demonstrate his own ecclesiastical superiority in priestly administration of the sacrament.

In fact, the text's representation of the administration of sacraments repeatedly queers hierarchical ecclesiastical authority. Mary's initial conversion simultaneously confirms the importance of ecclesiastical sacraments while reconfiguring traditional roles of authority. As Mary recounts the story, she was physically, yet invisibly, barred entrance from the church of the Holy Cross, which the other pilgrims were able to enter. After repeated physical struggle against this invisible divine force, Mary tells us:

> Ða gewat ic witodlice Þanone, and me ana gestod on sumum hwomme Þæs cafertunes and on minum mode geornlice Þohte and smeade for hwilcum intigum me wære forwyrned Þæs liffæstan treowes ansyn. Þa onhran soðlice min mod and Þa eagan minre heortan hælo andgit, mid me sylfre Þencende Þæt me Þone ingang belucen Þa unfeormeganda minra misdæda.

So then I went away from there, and I stood alone in a particular corner of the courtyard, and in my mind I earnestly pondered and considered for what reason it was that the sight of the life-giving tree was being denied me. Then truly

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23 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 74–77.

24 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 88.

knowledge of salvation touched my mind and the eyes of my heart, when I reflected that the inexpiable circumstances of my misdeeds had closed the entrance against me.[25]

While entry into the church is clearly Mary's goal, demonstrating the importance of the Church and the holy relics, Mary's conversion happens only after she removes herself from the doorway of the church and the crowds of pilgrims. It is then, alone, that she comes to the revelation of her prior misdeeds; true knowledge touches her mind and her heart only after individual contemplation, without interference from other Christians or clergy. Conversion, then, is between only Mary and her God, not a function of the Church.

After this epiphany, Mary of Egypt finds an icon of the Virgin Mary in the courtyard of the church, and enters into conversation directly with the Mother of God. Mary of Egypt recounts to Zosimas her lengthy prayer to the Virgin, culminating with a command and a promise:

> Ac hat nu, Þu wuldorfæste hlæfdige, me unmedemre for Þære godcundan rode gretinge Þa duru beon untynede, and ic me Þe bebeode and to mundbyrdnysse geceose wið Þin agen bearn.

But command now, O glorious lady, the door to be unfastened for me in my unworthiness to greet the divine cross, and I will commit myself to you and choose you as my advocate against your Son.[26]

The disrupted hierarchies here are striking, as Mary of Egypt commands the Mother of God to be her ally not only in opening the doors of the church (and, implicitly, Church), but also in interceding *against* her son. The word "bearn," furthermore, denotes not only son, but more generally, child – designating age, not necessarily biological relation. This places additional weight on the disruption of hierarchies in this prayer – the sinner commands the Virgin Mother, who will (and does) advocate for the sinner against Christ, figured as a child. All of this is done to gain Mary of Egypt admittance to the Church.

The hierarchical disruptions of Mary's miraculous conversion continue after she leaves the church of the Holy Cross and makes her way to the river Jordan, where, it would seem, she baptizes herself:

> and ic me Þyder inn eode and me Þær gebæd, and sona in Iordane Þa ea astah and of Þam halgan wætere mine handa and ansynu Þwoh, and me Þær gemænsumode Þam unbesmitenum gerynum ures Drihtnes Hælendes Cristes on Þære ylcan cyrcan Þæs halgan forryneles and fulluhteres Iohannes.

25 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 88–91.

26 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 90–91.

And I went in there and prayed, and, immediately after, I descended into the Jordan and washed my hands and face with the holy water, and I partook in the life-giving and undefiled sacrament of our Lord the Saviour Christ in that same church of the holy Precursor and Baptist John.[27]

The baptism is strongly implied not only by her washing in the holy water of the Jordan, but also by the fact that she partakes of the Eucharist only after this ablution, even though this is, apparently, her third time in a church that day (once in the church of the Holy Cross, and twice in the church of St. John, once before and once after her apparent baptism). Again, we see the simultaneous confirmation and reorientation of ecclesiastical authority. The story of Mary's miraculous conversion makes very clear that church entry, holy relics, and the Eucharist are all essential, even while conversion and baptism happen without priestly intervention. Simultaneously, the power of the Virgin Mary is confirmed, as, paradoxically, is Christ's – were Mary of Egypt not deeply concerned by Christ's forgiveness, there would be no need to solicit – or command – the Virgin Mary's intercession. In addition, throughout these episodes Mary of Egypt depicts herself as abject and subservient: weeping and throwing herself upon the mercy of both the Virgin Mary and anonymous strangers who give her money, bread, and direction. She makes very clear that she is deeply aware of her own sinfulness and unworthiness, even as she exhibits primary agency in her conversion and attendant actions.

These episodes repeatedly reconfigure systems of gendered and ecclesiastical authority, as Mary of Egypt is converted by women (herself and the Virgin) and baptized by a woman (herself) while consistently still recognizing the authority and importance of Christ and the Church. As in the episodes of competing and ultimately unsuccessful prostrations, hierarchical gender systems are consistently disrupted. But the resolution is not reversal – that is, the holy woman is not figured as unequivocally above the monk, nor the Virgin above Christ. Rather, these instances reveal the inappropriateness and insufficiency of such binary categorizations and hierarchical symbolism – prostration itself, whether Zosimas to Mary or Mary to Zosimas – is rendered inappropriate and even ridiculous. As Victoria Blud observes,

> In the symbiosis that flowers in the desert, between pious and penitent, cenobitic and eremitic, learned and unlettered, cloistered and outcast – Mary and Zosimas are constantly occupying the same spaces. They are both repenting, both advising: the territories that might have found a natural allotment in accordance with their respective professions and lifestyles are, instead, overlapping – a common ground.[28]

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27 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 94–97.

28 Blud, *The Unspeakable, Gender, and Sexuality*, 32.

In the story of Mary and Zosimas, binaries are repeatedly collapsed as the two protagonists are represented as both–and. Sacraments – whether baptism or the Eucharist – are essential and sin is abhorrent, but the navigation of sin and redemption is complex and involves multiple actors of multiple genders. Conversion, salvation, and sanctity are more complex than binaries and hierarchies will allow or describe. What we see represented instead is not only Mary's queer gender, but the queering of social and ecclesiastical relationships.

The final episode of the Old English *Life* recounts Zosimas burying the body of Mary with the help of a lion, and again gender simultaneity characterizes the encounter. This time, however, it is the genders of the lion and Zosimas that are queered. One year exactly after Zosimas administers the Eucharist to Mary, he returns to the desert again for the monastery's Lenten ritual, and again seeks to find Mary. After twenty days' walk, he arrives at the dry streambed of their first encounter, and finds, there, Mary's intact dead body. Next to the body he finds writing in the sand, seemingly composed by the illiterate Mary, explaining that she died in this spot one year prior, the same day that she had received communion. There are a number of miraculous aspects to this discovery by Zosimas. The writing, apparently composed by a woman who professed to be illiterate, has been preserved undisturbed, like the body itself, for a full year. Furthermore, Mary had apparently reached this location the same day as she had received the Eucharist, in spite of the fact that traveling the distance between the two locations took Zosimas twenty days' walking. And then, in a desert where Mary professed to have seen no living animal or human for forty-seven years, a tame lion appears to help Zosimas bury Mary's body – indeed, it is the lion who enables the burial, as the elderly Zosimas, without tools, is unable to dig an effective grave in the hard desert ground. The lion digs Mary's grave with its claws, after which Zosimas washes Mary's feet with his tears, and buries her body in the grave while praying "Þæt heo for eallum Þingode" (that she would intercede for all).[29]

This episode inscribes queerness on multiple levels. As Watt and Lees have noted, the scene is notable for the gender fluidity of the lion. As the lion is referred to over the course of the passage, it is first gendered male, then female, then male, then female again.[30] Strikingly, this gender alternation is an innovation of the Old English text, as the Latin version of the *Life* is consistent in gendering the lion male.[31] Onnaca Heron has discussed this passage in detail,

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29 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 119.

30 Watt and Lees, "Age and Desire," 64.

31 Watt and Lees suggest that it may be relevant that the episode seems to be borrowed from St. Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes* (chapter 16), which contains two lions rather than the one in Mary's *vita*. However, Jerome's text refers to the lions only collectively, in the plural male form

explicating the gendered grammatical functions of the Old English text in comparison to the Latin and Greek, amply demonstrating the gender shifting apparent in this passage. Heron cites this shift as evidence of her claim that the Old English text "immasculates" Mary of Egypt, viewing Mary's gender as accomplishing a linear trajectory from female to male over the course of her life, and the text.[32] However, I concur with Irina Dumitrescu's assertion that Heron's "examples in support of the claim that Mary is a 'manly woman' do not demonstrate Mary's manliness as much as they do the general indeterminacy of Mary's character, gender, and body."[33] Certainly, the lion's gender oscillation in the Old English text is non-linear, and ultimately lands on female, undermining claims of teleological gender transformation while highlighting the possibility of gender mutability. In addition to the ambiguous gendering of the lion, we also see Zosimas here clearly elided with the woman in the Gospels who washes Jesus's feet with her tears.[34] Mary, meanwhile, is elided with Christ, as she is referred to as the "halgan lichaman" (literally "holy body") whose feet are washed.[35] This episode, then, echoes the gender syncretism of the text as whole; in this final moment, gender is simultaneous and unstable, as the lion(ess) oscillates gender while the male body performs the biblical sinful woman and the female body performs the male Christ.

(which could, of course, designate either two male lions, or a male and a female), and so does not provide a textual source for reference to a female lion. Similarly, the entry for Paul the Hermit on January 10 of the *Old English Martyrology* refers to two lions collectively without indicating their individual genders. Christine Rauer, *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 46.

32 Onnaca Heron, "The Lioness in the Text: Mary of Egypt as Immasculated Female Saint," *Quidditas* 21 (2000): 23–44.

33 Irina Dumitrescu, *The Experience of Education in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 196. Dumitrescu's examination of the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*, while focused primarily on representations of pedagogy and the student–teacher relationship, also emphasizes the continual complication of binaries within the story. Most important, of course, is the fact that the sinful Mary is represented as teacher, and the monk Zosimas as student. Additionally, Mary is represented as an "ambivalent mentor" (130), and conventional categorizations of body/spirit, outward/inward are drawn into question. Dumitrescu writes: "The result is two instructional encounters between Zosimas and Mary characterized by oscillation between sanctity and temptation, curiosity and coercion, holy desire for learning and lust for the teacher's body. This wavering is intensified in the Old English version" in comparison to the Latin (132).

34 Luke 7:38.

35 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 118. Magennis translates "halgan lichaman" as "saint." While this is clearly in keeping with the overall meaning of the passage, the more literal rendering of "holy body" makes clearer the connection with Christ.

In their argument for seeing Mary of Egypt in the Old English recension as genderqueer, Watt and Lees claim that: "Mary is, in short, represented as going beyond, or transcending both her womanliness and physicality, even as the *Life* insists on both. And in transcending gender and sex, she is, or becomes, trans-gendered or genderqueer."[36] Watt and Lees productively explain this thesis through an examination of the roles played by age and desire in Mary's *vita*; the aged Mary, they claim, is outside of or beyond a gender system defined through sexual desire, even as she and Zosimas reconfigure expected relationships based upon desire. I, on the other hand, want to lean more on what it means to claim that Mary transcends gender. The claim of "transcending gender" can take multi-ple forms. Perhaps the most well known is the "virile woman" trope, in which exceptionally holy women were seen to "become male." This conception is well documented among patristic writers, including Saints Ambrose and Augustine, and has been well explored by a variety of feminist scholars.[37] Alternatively, the idea of a "third gender," instantiated by those vowed to religious chastity, is documented in medieval rhetoric and has garnered attention in recent scholar-ship.[38] The connection between chastity and a third gender, however, necessarily links to a system of gender defined by sexuality; a refusal to participate in a het-erosexual system of desire removes one from the binary gender categories upon which such a system depends. Being asexual, however, is not the same as being genderqueer; I argue here that Mary (and perhaps also Zosimas, and the lion (ess)) does not reject gender categories so much as refigure them toward inclusiv-ity, allowing one individual to be simultaneously male and female.

Victoria Blud addresses this rejection/reconfiguration of categories, gen-dered and otherwise, in Mary's *Life* in terms of the unspeakable. She draws an explicit connection between the unspeakable, queerness, and the apophatic, as noted above.[39] Blud's analysis centers on gender indeterminacy or ambiguity in the Old English *vita*, citing the ancient and medieval theory of bodily humors to demonstrate how Mary and Zosimas invert expected medicalized gender catego-ries; she also highlights the movement of the text between the physical and the spoken word. As Blud points out, the body is in fact necessary for speech – and

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36 Watt and Lees, "Age and Desire," 59.

37 As seen above, Onnaca Heron, "The Lioness in the Text," has made specifically this claim about Mary of Egypt. I explore St. Augustine's development of this trope through his discus-sions of St. Perpetua in Margaret Cotter-Lynch, *St. Perpetua Across the Middle Ages: Mother, Gladiator, Saint* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Other major works addressing this trope include Cobb, *Dying to Be Men* and Newman, *From Virile Woman*.

38 See, for instance, McNamara, "Chastity as a Third Gender."

39 Blud, *The Unspeakable, Gender, and Sexuality*, 11.

so rather than body and word being opposed, they are in fact interdependent. At the end of the text, both the Eucharist and the burial of the dead body of Mary play primary roles, demonstrating the continued importance of the body, even as Mary herself moves from a physical person to a story to be told. As Blud further asserts, "Mary is a decidedly liminal character . . . repeatedly cast in suspension between extremes."[40] In describing Mary as genderqueer, I claim that this in-betweenness is inclusive of, rather than apart from, the designated extremes. She is simultaneously sinner and saint, teacher and student, male and female.

Several previous scholars have discussed Mary of Egypt alongside transves-tite or cross-dressing saints, despite the fact that Mary engages in no inten-tional sartorial disguise.[41] Watt and Lees, meanwhile, claim that Mary of Egypt can usefully be categorized with Saints Euphrosyne and Eugenia, whom they classify as transgender.[42] Ana Maria Machado has discussed a similar dynamic in the Portuguese tradition of Mary of Egypt and Pelagia, in which "The change in name and gender can be read as an allegory for the brutal change sinners must go through in order to attain sanctity," leading to an emphasis on gender hybridity in the *vitae* of these saints.[43] All of these scholars, in offering reclassi-fications of Mary of Egypt, ask us to look at a "holy harlot" alongside "holy transvestites," and therefore to reconsider the possible gender configurations for the saints in these stories.

Here, the work of M. W. Bychowski is helpful, as she refigures previous dis-cussions around "transvestite" saints, particularly St. Marinos, to instead talk about transgender saints in terms of authenticity and artifice. Bychowski coins the terms "*imago transvesti*" and "*imitatio transvesti*" to discuss transgender saints in terms of medieval conceptions of *imago dei* and *imitatio Christi*, which she identifies with an authenticity of the soul, in contrast to the artifice entailed in "*imagines mundi*," "the socially assigned images of the self which contrast with those made by God."[44] For St. Marinos, Bychowski asserts, transitioning to live as a male monk functions as an authentic movement of the soul toward living out his existence as *imago dei*, and the public revelation of his gender transition after his death serves as an inspiration to others toward *imitatio Christi*. As such, the earliest *vita* of St. Marinos posits the disruption of socially

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40 Blud, *The Unspeakable, Gender, and Sexuality*, 30.

41 Sandra Lowerre, *The Cross-Dressing Female Saints in Wynkyn De Worde's 1495 Edition of the Vitas Patrum: A Study and Edition of the Lives of Saints Pelage, Maryne, Eufrosyne, Eugene, and Mary of Egypt* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006).

42 Watt and Lees, "Age and Desire," 60–61.

43 Machado, "Memory, Identity," 153, 157–58.

44 Bychowski, "Authentic Lives," n. p.

constructed gender categories as integral to the saintly life. Bychowski views "the transition of the saint as an act of salvation that embodies the creative, transformational, and reforming image of the Creator."[45] We might see a similar movement in the Old English *Life* of Mary, where the elderly Mary in the desert is represented as an authentic *imago dei*, in contrast to Zosimas's expectations, which are based upon *imagines mundi*. As Blud describes, "Zosimas, desiring a male counsellor, stumbles across a woman (indeed, a naked woman), but is initially able to 'see' a masculine figure; Mary, whose object of desire is the very personification of feminine sanctity [the Virgin Mary], finds the role of her Marian guide supplied by a man."[46] In Bychowski's reading of transgender saints, we see an echo of Keller's theological assertions drawn from late medieval mystics. By transcending earthly categories of gender, albeit in different ways, both St. Marinos and St. Mary of Egypt embody the divine.

Watt and Lees discuss the ways in which Mary, in the Old English *Life*, is explicitly depicted as a Christ figure. In both the Latin and Old English texts, Zosimas observes Mary levitating in prayer and walking on water. Zosimas's original quest, when leaving the monastery to spend forty days in the desert for Lent, structurally and liturgically parallels Christ's forty days in the desert, but Zosimas himself frames his quest as one to find Christ – or a "holy father" who is like Christ – in a double mimetic relationship. Instead of a desert father, he finds a desert mother, in Mary, but the depiction of this desert/holy mother/father explicitly undermines Zosimas's (and potentially the reader's) expected categories as defined through binaries and hierarchy. Perhaps Zosimas does not look for a father and find a mother, but instead looks for a holy person who is defined by gender whom he can emulate, and instead finds that the holy person, Mary, while clearly Christ-like, recombines and transcends gender categories in ways that can most readily be described as queer. As Watt and Lees assert,

> There is something ineffable and transcendental about this transgendered Mary, who is harlot and virgin, penitent and Christ, woman and monk. 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 genders and across age and mortality too.[47]

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45 M. W. Bychowski, "Transgender Saints: The Imago Dei of St. Marinos the Monk," *Things Transform* (blog) August 19, 2016, http://www.thingstransform.com/2016/08/transgender-saints-imago-dei-of-st.html.

46 Blud, *The Unspeakable, Gender, and Sexuality*, 33.

47 Watt and Lees, "Age and Desire," 64.

If we follow the implications of Bychowski, and the assertions of Watt and Lees, in labeling Mary as transgender, I suggest that we read "trans" in the inclusive, expansive sense of the Latin preposition: trans means across, through, and beyond, in a cluster of simultaneous meanings that at once draw together and elide distinctions.[48] This, I claim, is what the Old English figuration of Mary of Egypt does: eradicate binary categories of gender without eradicating gender itself, as Mary is across, through, and beyond both male and female.

This also places the Old English depiction of Mary of Egypt within a matrix of medieval texts in which gender is represented as variously queered. Tison Pugh, addressing queer masculinity in several Middle English texts, writes that "consisting both of sexual acts and breaches of normativity, queerness comprises sexual, amatory, and gendered practices that ostensibly depart from prevailing cultural norms."[49] Robert Mills considers the various gendered representations of St. Eugenia in visual art.[50] Most notably, a special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* in October 2019 demonstrates the application of transgender theory to a range of texts from across the Middle Ages.[51]

Fashioning Mary as genderqueer in the Old English *Life* destabilizes a femininity defined by and based upon heteronormative desire; when we cease to define women by means of male desire and reproductive function, the gender binary dissolves. This dissolution allows us a rereading of the implicit dangers of Mary's promiscuous youth: she has sex but not for money, and never reproduces; she defines her own desire, rather than being defined by men's desires. Thus, even when presented as putatively female, Mary positions herself outside of a heteronormative gender system that would categorize, or control, her agency and desire. What is striking about her Alexandrine youth is her brazenness, her aggressiveness, her agency. Mary is, throughout the text, whether harlot or holy woman, the author of her own life. This is reflected in the structure of the Latin and Old English versions of her *vita*, where her story is written as reported speech: Mary tells her story in her own words to Zosimas, which are then written down in the *vita*. She frames her own story. This is different from

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48 For the inclusive definition of trans*, see, most recently, Halberstam, *Trans**. For one account of the history of the development of the term, see David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). See also Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, revised edition (New York: Seal Press, 2017).

49 Tison Pugh, *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 3.

50 Robert Mills, "Visibly Trans? Picturing St. Eugenia in Medieval Art," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5.4 (November 2018): 540–64.

51 *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, guest editors M. W. Bychowski and Dorothy Kim, Vol 55.1 (October, 2019).

some other versions of her *vita*, in which the story is told chronologically from the point of view of an unnamed omniscient narrator who reports on Mary's life.[52]

We see Mary's agency asserted throughout the text, perhaps most strikingly in her conversion without human intervention – based only upon the invisible force barring her entry to the church, and her prayerful conversation with the image ("anlicnysse")[53] of the Virgin Mary – and her apparent self-baptism in the river Jordan before entering the church of St. John the Baptist to receive her first communion.[54] As we have seen, she does not wholly reject the structures, sacraments, and authority of the Church. Sacraments are still sacraments, after all – as Mary makes clear, Eucharist and church entry and monastic practice are important. However, she selects when, where, and how to utilize the Church in service of her own sanctity. Like desire, gender, and authority, she does not reject the Church but queers it, recombining aspects of both ecclesiastical authority and charismatic inspiration to fashion a paradoxically inclusive Christian community. If Mary can simultaneously be defined by her sexuality and her genderqueerness, we must think of her not as beyond gender, or apart from gender, but embodying a syncretic gender identity which is both–and, a gender which is separate from, without denying the existence of, her sexuality, and which posits ways of thinking gender which are perhaps new to us but also a thousand years old.

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52 See, for example, the twelfth-century *Vie de Sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* in Dembowski, *Vie De Sainte Marie*.

53 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 90.

54 Magennis, *Life of Saint Mary*, 94.

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