“This volume provides us with a double pleasure. First, we have a sensitive version of the life done by Thurston. Second, we get a capacious study of how her life was received and expanded in the history of hagiography and spirituality. There is much to savor and instruct in this book.”

—Lawrence Cunningham, The University of Notre Dame

“This study of Mary of Egypt is in two parts: a poetic life and a scholarly analysis. It is a perfect combination of art and science that offers the clearest and most compassionate study of the saint that I have read.”

—Joyce E. Salisbury, Professor Emerita, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

“Bonnie Thurston has produced with this her latest offering a very creative and inspiring work on the ancient Christian figure St. Mary of Egypt. Through the masterful use of poetry and prose, Dr. Thurston weaves a beautiful tapestry on the very fabric of life and witness of this mother of the desert. I believe that this book will be read in the decades to come as a foundational text by those who are new and old to the story of this legendary saint.”

—Dr. John G. Panagiotou, Orthodox theologian and scholar

“Bonnie Thurston’s presentation of the life of Saint Mary of Egypt combines two elements: a sparkling verse rendering of the life, that not only retells the story but also touches the feelings in a way that highlights the importance of personal conversion. This is buttressed by a preliminary summary of the plot of the life and a review of its literary and theological characteristics. An attractive and original version of the life that will certainly help readers to make contact with its profound spiritual meaning.”

—Michael Casey, OCSO

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Saint Mary of Egypt

A Modern Verse Life and Interpretation

Bonnie B. Thurston

Foreword by Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG

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In gratitude for the life and work and friendship of
Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG
“I was a stranger and you took me in . . .”

Contents

Acknowledgments and Thanks Giving

A research project over a long period of time on an esoteric subject by an author not resident in a university is impossible without the help of librarians. I have been in debt to them all my life. When the project began, then research librarian at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Anita Johnson, was unfailingly helpful, cheerful, and willing to accompany me to lunch buffets at an Indian restaurant. When I moved permanently back to West Virginia, my college classmate and then director of West Liberty University Library, Cheryl Ryan Harshman, and her associate Alan Ramsey, behaved as if it were not troublesome to order articles from obscure journals from places as far away as Australia, and they did so with alacrity. When reading at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, I found everyone on the staff, especially those in the Radcliffe Camera, to be unfailingly helpful. (May the Readers' Café in Weston Library always have the best and cheapest cup of coffee in central Oxford.) My thanks to these and all librarians.

When he learned of my interest in Saint Mary of Egypt, the Rev. Dr. John G. Panagiotou began to send me information: Sunday bulletins for Lent V with icons of her on their covers and meditations on the back, information from the internet, and his own reflections on Saint Mary the Egyptian. One of the great joys of teaching is when a student becomes a friend and colleague.

Michael Woodward, publisher and editor of Three Peaks Press in Abergavenny, Wales, and fellow Thomas Merton scholar, tracked down and sent me a recording of John Tavener's opera *Mary of Egypt*, which I managed *not* to listen to until *after* I finished the manuscript of this book. My gratitude to Michael is

immense for this gift and for publishing my first two small collections of poetry.

For a number of years I was privileged on occasion to share life with the Cistercian/Trappistine community at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Crozet, Virginia, where Sister Kay Kettenhofen, OCSO, is a gifted iconographer (and drives the huge, terrifying mowing machine). She wrote a beautiful icon of Mary of Egypt for me that now presides over my sitting room. Sr. Kay answered several of my questions about the making of icons and Mary of Egypt. Both were invaluable, as is her friendship and that of her community.

Once again, I have occasion for gratitude to Hans Christoffersen and Liturgical Press, this time for taking on another "hybrid" book as well as for our long and fruitful relationship. Thanks to Michelle Verkuilen and Tara Durheim for promoting the book, and to Ann Blattner and Julie Surma for its lovely design and presentation. Finally, and especially, thanks to Professor Marsha Dutton, executive editor of Cistercian Publications, for her exacting editing of the manuscript and her patience with its computer-inept author.

Although she might deny it, Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG, is the *prima mobile* behind this study. I first encountered her work in *The Desert Christian: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* as a post-graduate student at Harvard Divinity School in 1983 and moved on to her books on early English Christianity and spirituality. Her *Harlots of the Desert* whetted my appetite for Mary of Egypt. For a number of years I was privileged to live for several weeks alongside the Sisters of the Love of God, her community in Oxford. The first time I arrived, I nearly fainted on the stairs in the house on Parker Street when I learned that hers was the other flat in the house. She was a gracious and generous neighbor, and many of the illuminated memories of my three recent residences there are of our drinking tea, eating biscuits (preferably chocolate), and discussing theology, literature, and life. Sr. Benedicta was unfailingly interested in my Mary of Egypt project, inquired about it, and heard the first of the poems. She gave love and will,

I am sure, receive the Kingdom. For all I have learned from her considerable scholarship and personal graciousness, I gratefully dedicate this book to her and hope that its deficiencies will not be an embarrassment.

Foreword

This new account of Mary of Egypt is not only a readable story, but it contains the inner truth about salvation for all. It has become fashionable to look into accounts of saints to assess their historical truth and often to reject the accounts for historical inaccuracy. This account of Mary of Egypt offers a far deeper way of understanding a holy life from the past. It has often been said that it is through true stories that the deepest reality can be known. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in "One Word of Truth," his Nobel Prize essay, "Not everything assumes a name. Some things lead beyond words. . . . Through art we are sometimes visited—dimly, briefly—by revelations such as cannot be produced by rational thinking."[1]

Among all the works produced in writing, the most influential are the works of the imagination, when what they affirm is truth: in drama, prose, poetry, music, or art. It is the integrity of the inner world that matters. It is noteworthy that the ultimate book for Christians, all four gospels, show that what Jesus most used to convey his teaching was the story, the imaginary account, the parable.

In this remarkable presentation of the story of Mary of Egypt there are few participants: the disciplined monk, the cheerful harlot, Mary the mother of Jesus, the lion who buries Mary, and the desert itself. The story was told and retold and given new forms for many centuries. What facts lie within the story of Mary are not its main interest—details were changed to make the theme

1. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "Nobel Lecture," www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/.

clear. The facts could and did happen in many places and times. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins,

> . . . For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the father through the features of men's faces.[2]

Poetry presents the truth that creation and recreation are the work of God in all times, places, and people, through vivid images, with redemption always valid and available.

With this in mind, Dr. Thurston has reversed the order of the story and first placed the story about Mary in verse, though it was originally told in prose from the view of the good monk Zossima. Next she has placed the story of Zossima, a monk ambitious for holiness and trying to earn it by his actions—fasting, solitude, prayer. He changes his understanding of values when he meets Mary, who has nothing of the sort: only God in the desert. The poetry here comes first, as a story of extremes meeting: the free-living Mary, the over-disciplined monk, linked because both want to hear the voice of God. Mary lost her humanity by putting herself and her sins at the center, as Zossima lost his humanity by concentrating on his own virtues.

The saints often seem inaccessibly good, not near our own mixed-up lives. But this author presents two lives, each a total mess. The story is non-judgmental. It's just about grace working for a man/a woman, a monk/a harlot: all they have in common is that both want to hear the true word of God to them, as they have made themselves, one deafened by his own works, one making herself deaf by too much noise of self. Neither relates to many other humans. For Mary, her only human contact is with Mary the mother of Jesus, as her protector and guide. For Zossima, his only contact is other monks, after Mary's death. In opposite ways

2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," *Poems and Prose* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 18.

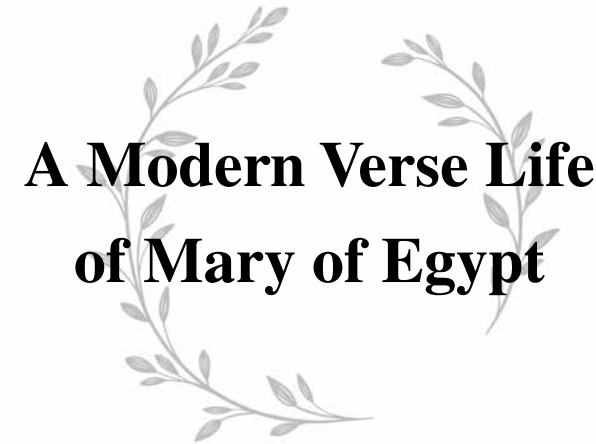
Mary and Zossima are both needy human beings. Their meeting is of two sinners—with the mother of God and the all-embracing persona of the desert, the place of ultimate solitude and silence, where the word of God can be truly heard and received.

In this remarkable book, Dr. Thurston shows the way to understand the truth of the story of Mary and Zossima. She places first the story's truth in verse, then the explanation in prose. It is not that the historical context is unimportant. It is analyzed and presented with care, but what is central is the eternal truth of redemption and mercy for all. Its value is summed up in the defense of poetry that Keats sent to a friend: "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination—What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not."[3]

In this book we have the beauty of truth for all indeed.

Benedicta Ward
2021

3. John Keats, [On the Imagination and "a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts": Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817], www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69384/selections-from-keatss-letters.



A Modern Verse Life of Mary of Egypt

To the Reader

I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.

Isaiah 41:18

Hers is a tale
that was often told
by those long past
and better than I.
I tell it again only
for love of her
who loved the flesh,
but loved Him more,
who leads the way
across the Jordan
to live in the desert,
to find it paradise.

Preface

Listen with your heart,
If you would have God's mercy.

. . .

These who would love God,
Will receive great benefit from it.
If you listen to this story
It will do you more good than any fable.

The Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian, anonymous 13th-century Spanish poet[1]

1. *Saint Mary of Egypt: Three Medieval Lives in Verse*, trans. Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, CS 209 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 117.

Mary's Origins

An Egyptian from the Nile,
of noble stock by my good parents
who baptized their babe,
coddled, educated, loved her,
and strove to raise her well,
I was their beautiful child,
but willful, wanton, lewd,
and soon licentious.

I gifted my parents with grief,
threw their warnings to the winds.
In the Name of God, my mother
admonished me with tears,
pleaded I pursue a purer path,
promised me a good husband.
My father despaired of me,
cursed the hour of my birth.

Do not blame my debauchery
on those who did their best
for their delinquent daughter
of serpent-sharp tooth.
I disdained, abandoned their love.

At twelve years old I left them,
took my lusts to Alexandria,
never saw them again.

Mary in Alexandria

At first the great, glittering
city impressed a girl child
from the Nile country:
all those majestic buildings,
great markets full of men
who were all on about
a big, old library as full
of doddery old Greeks
as some quarters were
of dusty old Jews, or
others of randy Romans.
Those suited (and used)
me better than scholars.
Oh, there were Christians,
pompous, hypocritical,
more interested in argument
than in lonely immigrants,
and in their famed church
with some relic named Mark.
Who cares if I can't bed him?
One bedfellow burbled on
about the neo-somebody's.

The only body I wanted
was a live and lively one.
There were plenty of those.
I threw away my spindle,
any lingering respectability.
There are pleasanter means
for a girl to make her way
in a great, imperial city.
People are the same,
and men want exactly
the same thing I do.

Further Exploration of Mary of Egypt and Her Story

This modern verse life of Mary of Egypt began with a brief introduction on traditions about her life and a sketch of her story's development. Although that introduction is ancillary to the poems, some readers may wish to know more about the background of Mary's life and the liturgical, literary, and iconographic depiction and development of her story. Though far from comprehensive (hers is a story too rich for containment), the following material fills in some of the gaps, and the bibliography points the way for those who are intrigued by the woman and her story.

As primary sources attest, Mary was hardly the only ascetic saint in early Christianity, but as Efthalia Walsh notes, "Mary appears to have been the most widely known in Byzantium." She was "enormously popular" in the Eastern and Western churches, and her story "was first understood strictly as a monastic document, written . . . to teach monastics true humility. The tale was told not to exalt Mary for her own sake, but to contrast Mary's humility with the monk Zosimas's pride in his saintliness."[1] It was "one of the most colorful and . . . one of the most controversial of the mediaeval saints' lives," writes Hildegard Tristram, "because of its treatment of extremes."[2]

1. Efthalia Makris Walsh, "The Ascetic Mother Mary of Egypt," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 34 (1989): 60.

2. Hildegard L. C. Tristram, Introduction to *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, ed. Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 10.

The extremes were not only those of Mary's life, but those of Zossima's as well. Both made radical departures from one set of behaviors and attitudes toward life and spirituality to another. And while the story does celebrate "a monastic spirituality that is rigorously ascetic and contemplative,"[3] its appeal (which is that of any well-told tale about characters with whom readers engage and whom they come to care about) is universal: the reality of second chances or, in theological terms, the hope of salvation for the sinner. It's a good story that reflects sound theology, or it would not have survived. And survive it certainly did, as Mary of Egypt's appearance and staying power are attested by the church's liturgical calendars, in its iconography, and in literary history.

Beyond the historical existence of the heroine, a problem related to writing a brief study of Mary of Egypt is chronological: the long history of transmission of the tale and the changes that occurred in it over time. Rather than assume the burden of reference to every document in each period, I have tried to indicate in a general way whether the source, theme, or detail in the narrative is "early" (generally the period of the New Testament and Greek fathers) or "medieval" (the Latin fathers and thereafter), fully understanding the potential overlap of these two designations and their coarseness.

For a woman with obscure Egyptian origins, Saint Mary's life story got around. Her feast was celebrated as early as the late seventh century as far away from Egypt as Northumbria. Her life is still read at the morning service on the Thursday of the fifth week of Lent in the Orthodox Church, and, as the only woman celebrated on a Sunday in Lent, she is commemorated on the fifth Sunday, the Sunday before Palm/Passion Sunday. In the Eastern church her feast day is April first and in the West on the second (or occasionally the ninth) of April.

In the introduction to *Holy Women of Byzantium*, Alice-Mary Talbot explains that in earlier eras of the church, "popular veneration preceded official church recognition of the sanctity of a holy

3. Tristram, Introduction, 13.

man or woman."[4] Talbot notes that a local cult developed first as pilgrims came to the saint's tomb. The anniversary of the saint's death became his or her feast day, and a *vita* (life) was written or an icon painted, and "eventually the saint might be recognized by the local church hierarchy." She goes on to say, "But canonization in the strict sense . . . did not occur in the West until the tenth century, and in Byzantium only in the thirteenth century."[5] This is almost certainly the route that Mary of Egypt's sainthood followed. It is her *vita* with which this essay is predominantly concerned (although mention will be made in passing of the iconographic record).

The Literary History of Mary's Life

Efthalia Makris Walsh notes that there are three early versions of the life of the woman we know as Mary of Egypt. She is variously depicted as a former nun and virgin in a monastery (a story attributed to John Moschos, d. ca. 619), or as a singer in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem who, fearing she would tempt men, retired to a cave, where a wandering monk encountered her and subsequently told her story (Cyril of Scythopolis, a monk who lived in monasteries by the Jordan river, d. ca. 560), or as the sexual profligate become desert anchorite, contrasted with Zossima who preserves her story (Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem, d. 638).[6]

The transmission of Mary's story from Zossima's telling of it to his monastic brothers, through Greek and Latin written versions, to the numerous vernacular manuscripts of the medieval period and into our own day, is complex and convoluted. Because this verse life is in English, I briefly trace the transmission history in

4. Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), vii.

5. Talbot, *Holy Women,* vii.

6. Walsh, "Ascetic Mother," 61–63.

English, though it would be possible to trace her life in many European languages. A hundred known manuscripts of early Greek texts exist, as well as versions in Armenian, Ethiopic, Slavonic, and Syriac; at least five continental French versions, a number in Spanish, and five Norse manuscripts were recorded between 1250 and 1445.

Although Andrew P. Scheil thinks that the "text's appeal remains enigmatic to a modern audience," he suggests it was "apparently a compelling narrative for readers in medieval England, existing in Latin, Old English, Middle English, Old Norse, Anglo-Norman, Welsh and Irish renditions."[7] Excellent scholarly accounts of the chain of English transmission are found in Simon Lavery's "The Story of Mary the Egyptian in Medieval England" and Jane Stevenson's "The Holy Sinner, The Life of Mary of Egypt" (both found in *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*) and in Hugh Magennis's *The Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt* (all cited in the bibliography). What follows is an abbreviated version of the literary/transmission history from the Middle East to the British Isles.

In his essay on Byzantine literature in *The Cambridge Medieval History,* Franz Dolger notes that "It was a genuine love of storytelling as well as a delight in miracles and the need to edify that produced the extensive and lively collection of Lives of the Saints which is one of the most characteristic achievements of Byzantine religious literature." He continues, "The lives and sayings of the monks who had retired into the desert to gain through their strivings special *charismata* or gifts of the Holy Spirit were of immense interest to contemporary readers."[8] Mary of Egypt's *vita*

7. Andrew P. Scheil, "Bodies and Boundaries in the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt," Neophilologus* 84 (2000): 138. I have found references to four Middle English redactions, three Anglo-Norman references in the 12th and 13th centuries, and four Welsh from the mid-13th to 14th centuries in addition to five Norse manuscripts from 1250 to 1445.

8. Franz Dolger, "Byzantine Literature," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. IV, part II, ed. J. M. Hussey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 224, chap. 27. For more on Byzantine hagiography see 224–25.

is one of the most enduring of these. Mary of Egypt's death date has been variously assigned the years AD 421[9] and 430.[10] In scholarly literature she is usually referred to as a fifth-century saint. If we can trust the earliest texts, her story was told by Zossima to his brothers at the Jordan River monastery, then began to circulate not long after her death, in the late fifth century, certainly by the early sixth.

Several scholars suggest that the *Vita Pauli* by Saint Jerome (d. 420), the life of Paul of Thebes (traditionally the first Christian hermit, who died ca. 340), provided a model for the earliest lives of Mary of Egypt. Several scholars highlight the similarity between the *Vita Pauli* and Mary's life. Walsh, for example, referring to Sophronius's Greek life, which is apparently the first independent life of Mary, writes, "What is new in Sophronios . . . is that the anchorite is a woman."[11] Sophronius is often identified with the Patriarch of Jerusalem from 634 until his death in 638, but Dolger says his "identity with the Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem . . . is dubious." Sophronius had first been a monk in Egypt in a monastery near the Jordan, which may place him relatively near the events of Mary's life. Dolger goes on to say that Sophronius's "*Lives of John and Cyrus* and his *Mary the Egyptian* are presented in a highly rhetorical style and somewhat pedantically rhythmical prose."[12] Other scholars suggest Sophronius's narrative is a re-working of a story that first appeared in the "Life of Kyriakos" by Cyril of Scythopolis (ca. 560).[13] In a digression of some six hundred words in that work, Abba John encounters in a cave a solitary who had been a harpist in Jerusalem but who, as a result of scandal, had fled to the desert, where she had lived

9. E. D. Carter, "Mary of Egypt, St.," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1967), IX:387.

10. Heron, "Lioness," 23.

11. Walsh, "Ascetic Mother," 63.

12. Dolger, "Byzantine Literature," 224–25.

13. An English translation is found in R. M. Price, trans., *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine,* CS 114 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991). Mary's story is reflected in pages 256–57.

for eighteen years. She asks him to return again, and when he does, she is dead.[14] Sr. Benedicta Ward, SLG, includes Cyril of Scythopolis's story in her chapter on Mary in *Harlots of Desert.*[15]

Magennis writes that Mary's story came to the Latin West by means of Greek and Palestinian travelers.[16] The most widely known Latin life of Saint Mary of Egypt is that of Paul the Deacon (d. ca. 790).[17] Paul was a monk of Monte Cassino, a chronicler and scholar who was important in the development of early Medieval Latin and who for some years served Charlemagne. Paul's *vita* is a literary translation into Latin of Sophronius's Greek life. Paul describes himself as "the worthy deacon of the church at holy Naples," who "translated from the Greek language into Latin the most praiseworthy conversion . . . and the great repentance and very brave struggle of the worthy Mary of Egypt, how she completed the days of her life in the desert." He continues, "far be it from me that I should engage in falsification in the details of the holy narrative."[18] A complete English translation of the *"Life of St. Mary of Egypt* by Sophronius, bishop of Jerusalem, translated into Latin by Paul, deacon of the holy church of Naples," is also found in Ward's book.[19]

It is possible that knowledge of Mary of Egypt came to England via the Greek Archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus

14. Jane Stevenson, "The Holy Sinner: The Life of Mary of Egypt," in Poppe and Ross, *Legend of Mary*, 20–21.

15. Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources,* CS 106 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 28–29.

16. Hugh Magennis, trans., *The Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 11.

17. The Latin text translated by Paul from the Greek of Sophronius appears in *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844–1846), 73:671–90; *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* (Brussels, 1901).

18. Quoted in Magennis, *Old English Life,* 59.

19. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert,* 35–56.

(602–690). Her story would also have been carried by continental monks to the British Isles and perhaps directly from Egypt to Ireland via monks.[20] The medieval period was one that Hildegard Tristram helpfully calls a time of "cultural interaccessibility," a period of trade, raiding, warfare, mobility, and multilingualism. Latin was the international language among many vernaculars from which there was translation from one to another. "Medieval cosmopolitanism," Tristram says, rested on the universal knowledge of Latin.[21] At any rate, Mary's feast day appears in Anglo-Saxon liturgical calendars, and the earliest vernacular account of Mary of Egypt in Old English is based on Paul's life, dated in the tenth or early eleventh century, and closely follows the Latin.[22] Simon Lavery's "The Story of Mary the Egyptian in Medieval England" provides a concise and comprehensive review of the many redactions of her story.[23]

The differences in the telling of Mary's story in the many versions and vernaculars in which we find it are due to the sources used, the time period in which they were written, and the locations of the translation. For example, Lavery points out that the Greco-Latin texts were made for court and monastic circles and reflect an austere style and avoid sensuality in telling the story.[24] The Old French versions present Mary of Egypt as a dangerous courtesan, and "the penitent is less active and interesting than the sinner."[25] The insular (British Isles, Ireland, Iceland) accounts reflect popular interest in miracle stories connected with saints'

20. See David Knowles, *Christian Monasticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969/1977), chaps. 1 and 2.

21. Tristram, Introduction, 2–8. She adds that "scholars who are competent in only one language and one area cannot possibly claim to have a true sense of the importance of the works they study" (12).

22. Magennis, *Old English Life,* 10–12, 43; Tristram, Introduction, 14.

23. Simon Lavery, "The Story of Mary the Egyptian in Medieval England," in Poppe and Ross, *Legend of Mary,* 113–48.

24. Lavery, "Story of Mary," 124, 132.

25. Lavery, "Story of Mary," 135.

tombs and miraculous conversions via the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They soften the austere, Byzantine story and focus on the Blessed Virgin's mediating role.[26] The basic narrative of Mary of Egypt was retained, but it was malleable. Its shape shifted to fit concerns of the age and place in which it was produced.

There is a very extensive scholarly literature on the versions of the life of Mary of Egypt in the British Isles and Ireland, where, as on the continent, she was a popular saint among monastics and in the general population. This very condensed account of the story's transmission suggests two primary things. First, there are historical and geographical connections among the life of Mary as it (probably) occurred, has been told, and was recorded by its first chroniclers. The written record of Mary of Egypt is ancient and unbroken from its origins into the medieval and early modern period. Second, from an early period there are multiple written lives, later in multiple languages. Something about the story of Mary of Egypt appealed to Christians across continents, societies, and languages. She survived the move from early Christianity in the Middle East into far-flung Byzantium in the East, and the medieval period in the West. Although her story is told from slightly different angles in different cultures and for different audiences, its appeal seems universal, in part because that appeal was both literary and theological. It is to those aspects of the written lives of Mary of Egypt that we now turn.

Literary Echoes, Antecedents, and Techniques

One reason Mary of Egypt's story endured was that it was such a *good* tale. But as Ward makes clear, "the story of Mary of Egypt is of deeper significance than simply a dramatic tale of lust turned into love. It is clearly packed with intricate symbols."[27] In fact Magennis points out that in most Old English saints' lives the

26. Lavery, "Story of Mary," 137.
27. Ward, *Harlots of the Desert,* 33.

Select Bibliography

Because Saint Mary of Egypt was so popular in late antiquity and the medieval period, there is a vast secondary literature on her story in several European languages, especially in French, German, Greek, and Spanish. I have confined the following suggestions for further reading to English studies, largely those used in the preparation of this book.

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