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The Monastic Symbolism of Prostitution in Late-Thirteenth-Century France

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The motif of the reformed harlot is prevalent in medieval saints' lives, but its implications are problematic. This paper begins to examine these implications by contrasting the lives of Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene, which circulated in France during the late thirteenth century, with the lives of contemporaneous women in poverty to find that they do not in fact resemble one another. Rather, this paper argues for a reinterpretation of the prostitute as an example for—but more importantly as a symbol of—the monks who comprised its audience. It then examines the impact of this symbol's usage on gender and sexuality within the context of faith, including a monastic ideal of androgyny and erotic overtones in the desire for Christ, particularly in the form of communion. Finally, it contrasts the application of the symbol of the prostitute to monks and nuns, finding that the latter suffer from their affiliation in cases such as those of the Beguine sect, further emphasizing the gap between the saints and actual women, prostitutes or not, as well as their resemblance to male clerics.

Widely referred to as the oldest profession, prostitution has a long history fraught with varying social and cultural connotations. In the context of medieval Europe, a society veritably obsessed with order,¹ finding a place for such a morally tenuous line of work becomes a particularly difficult challenge, with fascinating ideological consequences. Some of the most visible representations of prostitutes in the literature are the lives of saints who were reformed harlots, such as Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. While the seemingly simple sinner-becomes-saint motif is relatively clear, the function of the image of the prostitute in relation to its audience muddies the waters of the moral self-image. In other words, once the narrative is situated within a particular social context, numerous problems begin to arise. One ought not to forget that these texts were read largely by monks and were intended as *exempla*, or stories with a didactic purpose for the betterment of the reader's life. This context and function raise the question of just how a monk could relate to a prostitute, when the two occupy such radically different spheres of

¹ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. H. B., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

medieval society, a problem which can be easily solved by recognizing that perhaps the prostitutes represented are not in fact intended to even approximate real ones, but rather function entirely as symbols. However, the precise content of the symbol and the associations it may invoke remain complex. The discourse of the idealized prostitute can prove to be just as messy as that of the real one, with implications for gender, desire, love, and interdependence, not to mention poverty, chastity, and obedience, which shaped the structure of Christian monastic life in thirteenth-century Europe. After the symbol is applied to monks, its function can change radically when applied to female monastics. Where before the prostitute can be viewed as a metaphorical shorthand for everyday aspects of a monk's life, when it is applied to nuns it operates in an entirely different way. Perhaps the most beautifully messy example of the collision of prostitution and monasticism is the Beguines, a sect of female Franciscans who faced allegations of prostitution because of their mendicancy. All in all, the prostitute as monastic symbol is incredibly complex, but it must first be set against a particular social backdrop in order to be understood. In this case, thirteenth-century France has a particularly fruitful proliferation of sources.

When it comes to actual prostitutes, the logical first place to look for case studies is in the lives of poor urban women. Unfortunately, this group is something of a perfect storm for illiteracy in thirteenth-century France, but despite the challenges, Sharon Farmer has synthesized some excellent points on poor women in thirteenth-century Paris.² She locates gender differences in the lower-class economic structure within the ideological framework of the separate curses of Adam and Eve upon their expulsion from Paradise, designating these roles as "productive" and "reproductive," respectively.³ Through this logic, where a woman's job is to produce children and a man's to feed them, it follows that women's labor was not paid with self-sufficiency in mind.⁴ However, many women did not fit the tidy model of attachment to men who would care for them financially, and for them the options were limited. Such single women

² Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

³ *Ibid*, passim.

⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

raised ideological problems for medieval social structures, not least because of the methods some employed to augment their income: “because women’s wages were often not sufficient to support one person, many unattached women—including many laundresses—had to supplement their wages through prostitution.”⁵ Though prostitution served as a source of financial relief to these women, its moral implications no doubt proved problematic in terms of their image in society, and perhaps as a result their own self-image, so it is reasonable to assume that monetary gain was the primary goal of entering this field of labor.

While the sources available on actual prostitutes operating in the Middle Ages are limited, the religious discourse surrounding them is, on the other hand, quite plentiful. Some of the most poignant and influential saints’ lives were those of reformed prostitutes, such as Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. Supposedly the “special friend” of Christ,⁶ the Magdalene as she is described in her *vita* is actually a conflation of three biblical women: “Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the penitent woman of Luke 7:36-50.”⁷ She turns from a life of sin brought on by her youth, beauty, affluence, and the “weakness of her sex”⁸ by repenting and washing the feet of Christ with her hair and anointing Him at the feast of Simon the Pharisee.⁹ After this, Mary and her siblings, St. Martha and St. Lazarus, then become intimate friends of the Savior. In her reformed life, Mary is devoted to contemplation, which is directly contrasted with her sister’s more active life,¹⁰ the highlights of which include slaying a dragon.¹¹ Her contemplation is, of course, also set against her own previous life of the flesh, the zeal for which she now devotes entirely to spiritual matters. Though it describes a later saint, the written life of Mary of Egypt actually predates

⁵ Ibid, loc. cit.

⁶ Rabanus Maurus, *The Life of Saint Mary Magdalene and of her Sister Saint Martha*, trans. & ed. David Mycoff (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989), I. 1760. Hereafter referred to as *Life of M. M.*

⁷ *Life of M. M.*, 1.

⁸ Ibid., 63-75.

⁹ Ibid., 237-308.

¹⁰ Mycoff, Introduction to *Life of M. M.*, 1.

¹¹ *Life of M. M.*, II. 2330-2382.

that of the Magdalene and, in fact, provides some of the source material for other accounts of her legend,¹² so it is unsurprising that the two have quite a bit in common. Mary of Egypt also begins her life as a well-off young woman who falls into sin, but the description of her youthful debauchery is far more detailed. She describes to Zosimas, a particularly holy monastic through whom the story is told, how she fled from home to the city, where she immediately sought carnal relations with as many men as was possible. She is keen to emphasize, however, that the motivation for her debauchery was not money:

I was a public temptation to licentiousness, not for payment, I swear, since I did not accept anything although men often wished to pay me. I simply contrived this so that I could seduce many more men, thus turning my lust into a free gift. You should not think that I did not accept payment because I was rich, for I lived by begging and often by spinning coarse flax fibers. The truth is that I had an insatiable passion and uncontrollable lust to wallow in filth.¹³

After her conversion, she too devotes her life to contemplation and extreme asceticism. One commonality between the former sinful lives of the saints is particularly important: their lack of compensation. The Magdalene's carnal acts are not described in great detail, but there is no mention of her charging for the services of the flesh she presumably rendered during her profligacy. Mary of Egypt, on the other hand, as described above, makes very clear that she would rather beg and do hard labor than receive payment for sex.¹⁴ Nonetheless, she is referred to as a "Former Harlot" in the *vita's* title. This lack of the definitional component of the profession of prostitution illustrates that the epithet of "harlot" here functions as far more than a mere descriptor of either Mary's job experience. This is made even clearer in that both Marys come from noble backgrounds, completely unlike the impoverished prostitutes of medieval Paris. The real-life content of prostitution is therefore completely subverted, and it becomes clear that actual harlots

¹² Mycoff, Introduction to *Life of M. M.*

¹³ "The Life of Mary of Egypt, the Former Harlot, Who in Blessed Manner Became an Ascetic in the Desert of the <River> Jordan," trans. Maria Kouli, in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot, (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), paragraph 18. Hereafter referred to as "Life of M. E."

¹⁴ This story makes the interesting but questionable assumption that a woman could, in fact, earn a living through such means, but at least includes some detail of her hardship.

were far from the minds of the monks who constructed these lives, or that they perhaps actively sought to distance the saints from the realities of prostitution. Both Ruth Karras and Claire Nouvet have explored the alternate meanings of the term “whore” in the Middle Ages, the former stating that

[t]he terms *meretrix* (Latin), *putain* or *folle femme* (French), common woman or whore (English) and others, could be used for any woman considered promiscuous, indeed any who had sex outside of marriage. When we find them in sources we cannot assume they mean someone engaged in commercial sex, although they often do,¹⁵

and the latter describing how Heloise, in her famous letter to Abelard, “does not assume the status of a whore but only the name of whore.”¹⁶ It is clear then that the image of the prostitute has a flexible meaning and function in medieval discourse, but its precise role in this literature has yet to be ascertained. Maria Kouli’s assertion in her introduction to the *vita* of Mary of Egypt that our takeaway from reading the life is one of “reassurance to every Christian: if such a licentious woman could find forgiveness, surely ordinary sinners could find salvation”¹⁷ seems inadequate seeing as “harlot” does not necessarily refer to any specific type of licentious woman in the first place. Furthermore, in the literature even saints decry their own unworthiness and sin, and to imagine that in an *exemplum* one might communicate even by implication that their need for repentance is in some way lesser seems rather counterproductive. Karras’s view of the content of the prostitute’s image is more expansive. She writes that “the prostitute could be used as a metaphor for all sinners,”¹⁸ but she also falls into the same trap as Kouli, also saying “if she could repent and be saved then surely so could everyone.”¹⁹ Both neglect to consider that these *vitae* were not meant for the consumption of “every Christian,” because not every Christian could read them to begin

¹⁵ Ruth Marzo Karras, “Prostitution,” in *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, v. 2, ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Nadia Margolis, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 770.

¹⁶ Claire Nouvet, “The Discourse of the Whore: An Economy of Sacrifice,” *MLN* 105, no. 4, French Issue (Sept. 1990), 750-773, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-7910%28199009%29105%3A4%3C750%3ATDOT%22A%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>, 754.

¹⁷ Maria Kouli, Introduction to “Life of M. E.,” 65.

¹⁸ Karras, “Prostitution,” 771.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 771.

with, but rather were most often read by members of monastic orders. The function of prostitution in these stories then must be located within the specific context of monastic spiritual life.

At a primary level, the prostitute saints function as a source of humility and a commentary on the sin of the human condition for the monks reading their lives. For example, in the life of Mary of Egypt, when the saint first encounters Zosimas, the especially holy monk who supposedly has written the story, there is a great fuss between the two of them as to who shall bless whom.²⁰ Each claims to be more sinful and undeserving than the other, but in the end it is Mary, the woman who “had an insatiable passion and uncontrollable lust to wallow in filth”²¹ who ends up blessing Zosimas,²² heretofore presented as the absolutely pure example of the most holy monastic life. Clearly, if monks are to follow this *exemplum*, they must set themselves beneath the very bottom rung of the ladder of society as more sinful and unworthy than even a prostitute. Such self-abasement fits smoothly into the New Testament doctrines that “every valley shall be exalted”²³ and that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”²⁴ Naturally, the prostitute saints obtain their sanctity in part through the process of conversion, which shall be examined in greater detail below.

The second Franciscan rule defines monks by their vows of “poverty, chastity, and obedience,”²⁵ concepts which play a key role in understanding the conversion of Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene as well as the relationship between prostitution and monasticism. The saints go from lives lacking at least chastity and obedience to ones with all these qualities intact. This conversion to a monastic mode of life is clearer in the *vita* of Mary of Egypt than in that of the Magdalene. She is specifically said to “renounce

²⁰ “Life of M. E.,” 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 14.

²³ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Isaiah 40:4

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Luke 15:7.

²⁵ Bernard Gui, *The Inquisitor's Guide*, ed. Janet Shirley (Welwyn Garden City: Ravenhall Books, 2006).

the world and all worldly things” when she crosses the Jordan at the Virgin’s behest²⁶ and is so chaste that she runs for some distance through the desert to avoid Zosimas seeing her naked body, as her clothing has disintegrated over years of exposure to the elements.²⁷ The issue of obedience is somewhat harder to parse for her but is related to her spiritual mediation through Zosimas, which will be discussed later. Mary Magdalene too denounces her worldly goods, including the expensive perfumes with which she anoints Christ, and even gives up the home in which she and her siblings offered so much hospitality to Him to travel to Europe and spread the Gospel.²⁸ Her chastity is similarly apparent, as Christ becomes the object of her now purely spiritual desire. The issue of her obedience is complicated in a way similar to the treatment of this issue in the life of Mary of Egypt, and they will be discussed in conjunction. While the parallels of the prostitutes’ conversions to the process of becoming a monk are obvious, we must remember that these documents were also probably largely read by men who were *already* members of monastic orders. These saints are meant to be an *ongoing* example. It is not enough to turn from the world once by entering a cloister, but one must constantly turn from it, as it is inescapable simply through the fact of living in an embodied, and therefore inherently sinful, form.²⁹ The monks, therefore, are not meant to identify with the latter stage of the Marys’ lives as saints, but the former, as prostitutes. In this way, they will *always* be striving to follow the *exempla*, hoping to one day achieve the sanctity of these holy women. A good literary example of this mindset, in addition to the aforementioned Mary of Egypt’s conception of herself as remaining a “sinful woman,”³⁰ is the life of Mary of Oignies, in which the already virtuous cloistered woman never seems fully satisfied with her own self-discipline, always striving to further mortify the flesh and lessen the distance between herself and the kingdom of heaven. Additionally,

²⁶ “Life of M. E.,” 23.

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ This, of course, is how her relics are said to end up in France. *The Life of Mary Magdalene*, 2132-2208.

²⁹ Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), passim.

³⁰ “Life of M. E.,” 14 and passim.

the life of the prostitute as presented in the *vitae* does not differ as radically from monastic life as one might think. I have already discussed the poverty of Mary of Egypt during her sinful life, during which she made a living from begging and hard labor much as monks do, and though she certainly cannot be said to have been chaste, there is a certain removal from the world and interchange with others that parallels the vow of chastity in becoming a prostitute. Karras sums this up in her assertion that “the individual prostitute was...a marginal character, excluded from the community.”³¹ As one may expect in the highly hierarchical Middle Ages, the issue turns on whom one reports to.

The vow of obedience is perhaps the most ideologically weighty of the three, and proves a fruitful ground for understanding the discourse of prostitution as it relates to monastic life. In theory, by taking vows of chastity and poverty monks give up sex and personal possessions,³² but when it comes to obedience, their very autonomy is on the line. In the first two vows, one abandons the world, and in the last, one abandons the self by locating the will externally to the person. In the lives of Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalene, their obedience is best exemplified through their spiritual mediation through others. The former, after living alone in the desert for decades is nonetheless dependent on Zosimas to give her communion before she dies³³ and does not even know how to read, “because [she has] never met a man” during her time in the desert,³⁴ though this is repurposed as a testament to the power of the Word. While these limitations of course raise questions about female disempowerment in the face of the medieval male religious hegemony, it also makes an important point about the structure of monastic life and indeed Christianity as a whole: that it is by and large based on interdependence. Obedience fosters this, and helps to perpetuate the understanding what Hegel would call “the I that is we,”³⁵ the identity-defining

³¹ Karras, “Prostitution,” 772.

³² Just what this means for different orders at different times is much more complicated, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

community that is in this case the revealed religion. To put it another way, medieval Catholicism is a structural realization of God's proclamation that "it is not good that the man should be alone"³⁶ in that it is impossible to carry on without at least two people so that the sacraments of Communion and Confession can take place. The mediation in the lives of these saints encapsulates this idea. Mary Magdalene's spiritual mediation adds to the discourse of obedience in that it occurs at first not just through another human, but through Christ Himself. Her most used epithet is the "special friend" of Christ, emphasizing her importance through her relationship to Him. In our context, this serves to highlight that even when there is no one else to report to, one must always obey God. However, there is also a certain element of earthliness which persists even in this narrative. After she becomes the first to see Christ on the day of the resurrection, he sends her to bear the news to the apostles, and thus she gains another epithet: apostle to the apostles,³⁷ again mediating her through not just earthly individuals, but designated mediators, apostle meaning "messenger."³⁸ The title is somewhat reminiscent of the Pope's title of "servant of the servants of Christ." After the ascension, the Magdalene does not turn to a completely solitary life of contemplation as one might expect, though contemplation remains the most important feature of her religious life, but rather she attaches herself to another apostle: Maximinus, with whom she travels to France.³⁹ In this case, keeping in mind that these works were meant for the eyes of men, if we read the women's spiritual mediation as an example of monastic obedience, it leaves male monastics in a somewhat odd position: one of femininity. The monks' feminization, while at first seemingly outrageous, actually makes a good deal of sense in light of the previously examined points that the reader of these *exempla* was meant to see himself as the lowest of the low, beneath the exalted scum of the earth, and that he was meant to be obedient. Women in this society were in some way seen as both. It

³⁶ Genesis 2:18.

³⁷ *The Life of Mary Magdalene*, l. 1160-1.

³⁸ "Apostle," in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), last modified March 2013, (Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9427?rskey=JFcAQL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

³⁹ *Life of M. M.*, 2100-3.

has been made abundantly clear that women were thought to have a greater potential for sin, both through their connection to Eve and the physical makeup of their bodies.⁴⁰ They were also often forced into obedience, consequently lacking spiritual and economic agency, and were encouraged to be completely subservient within the marriage structure.⁴¹ Thus, they are perfect examples for monks attempting to spiritually humble themselves.

The implications of gender variation in the *vitae* are widespread and offer insight into the medieval monk's spirituality. The prostitute saints are presented in their former lives as unquestionably female, as exemplified in the life of Mary Magdalene when part of the reason she strays from virtue is explained by "the weakness of the sex."⁴² This gendering makes perfect sense, women being, as indicated earlier, viewed as more susceptible to sin. After their conversion, however, the gender of these saints becomes decidedly more ambiguous. While parallels to the Virgin are to be expected, as she represents a paragon of womanhood, some of the more striking comparisons in the *vitae* set the Marys against John the Baptist and even Christ Himself. Not only is the Magdalene referred to as the beloved of Christ, a title generally given to John, but explicit comparisons are also made between the deeds of the two in Chapter 32 in pairs, including John calling himself unworthy to untie the Lord's sandal and Mary washing Jesus's feet with her hair, and a comparison of her anointment of Christ before His death with His baptism by John.⁴³ While Mary of Egypt is never explicitly compared to the Beloved, her life as a wild woman in the desert, clothed in tatters and feeding off what she can find, certainly recalls the early life of John,⁴⁴ and she also pays an important visit to a church dedicated to him before she crosses the Jordan.⁴⁵ Perhaps

⁴⁰ Elliott and Farmer both return repeatedly to this theme in their separate works, *Fallen Bodies* and *Surviving Poverty*.

⁴¹ Jacques de Vitry, excerpts from Sermon 66 in *Sermones Vulgares*, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴² *Life of M. M.*, 74.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 1839-1868.

⁴⁴ "Life of M. E.," 30; cf. Matthew 3:4.

⁴⁵ "Life of M. E.," 26.

even more strikingly, she is likened to Christ as well, not only by being tempted during her time in the desert,⁴⁶ but also by performing the miracle of walking on water.⁴⁷ Zosimas explains the latter thus: “Indeed, God spoke the truth when He promised that those who purify themselves *liken themselves to God as much as possible*.”⁴⁸ Even Mary of Oignies is also masculinized indirectly by Jacques de Vitry in his account of her life. Margot H. King describes his regard for the saint: “Although he was her confessor, he confesses that in the spiritual sphere she was master and he disciple,”⁴⁹ yet in his sermons, Jacques quotes the Pauline epistles, saying, “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man.”⁵⁰ In all three cases, it seems that these saints are on some level viewed as something other than female, though not quite male either. On the other side, Christ himself feminizes his followers in the life of Mary Magdalene, saying “he gives birth to me who, hearing me in his heart, preaches me; he becomes my mother, whose voice engenders the love of me in others.”⁵¹ All of these examples hint at a kind of spiritual androgyny arrived at through the power of religion: men become women and women become men. The texts present the spiritual self as a space between genders, in part by containing both, as in “man’s soul is woman,”⁵² but perhaps more importantly in the notion of overcoming the natural self. When the Magdalene abandons her life of the flesh for one of religious contemplation, she is said to have “vanquished nature and triumphed over herself.”⁵³ Such a victory of course falls right in line with monastic concerns of defying the body. On a more gendered level, by taking vows of chastity monks are in a sense renouncing the most “natural” performance of their gender in terms of their role in sex and reproduction. By abandoning a life that thus forces one to consider one’s sexed nature, they too abandon the maleness

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁸ Ibid., loc. cit.

⁴⁹ Margot H. King, general introduction to *Two Lives of Marie d’Oignies*, ed. Margot H. King and Miriam Marsolais, (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 2003), 10.

⁵⁰ Jacques de Vitry, “Sermon 66,” 1, quoted from 1 Tim. 2:12.

⁵¹ *Life of M. M.*, 475-6.

⁵² Ibid., 1185.

⁵³ Ibid., 340.

of their flesh. It is thus unsurprising that the prostitute, already shown to be appropriate in her sinful nature as a metaphor for the sinful monk with his eyes set on sanctity, not only *can* cross gender lines with relative ease, but also *must* in the sexless world of spirit.

While the content of actual prostitution is subverted to its new purpose as ideological shorthand for the sinner, it does not entirely disappear. The *exempla* of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, as well as that of the Beguine saint Mary of Oignies who, though not a reformed prostitute, is connected with prostitution through her affiliation with the Beguines, contain not just a highly gendered tone, but also an erotic one. At its most basic level, the eroticism of the texts manifests itself in the desire of the holy women for God and their particular attention to his body, whether it be whole as in the case of Mary Magdalene, received as Communion, or reunited with in death. As discussed earlier, Mary of Egypt waits for an entire year to receive her Communion, rejoicing when her longing is at long last fulfilled. The women of the diocese of Liège, where Jacques de Vitry learned at the feet of Mary of Oignies, are described as

wasting away with such an intimate and wondrous state of love in God that they were faint with desire and who for many years could only rarely rise from their beds. There was no other cause for their sickness except him, since their souls had melted with desire for him,⁵⁴

and the death of the saint herself is called “her wedding day.”⁵⁵ Communion is also described in terms of intense desire in this life: “I knew one of these holy women who, when she violently desired to be refreshed by the meat of the true Lamb, the true Lamb himself could not endure that she languish for a long time but gave himself to her and, thus refreshed, she recovered.”⁵⁶ Mary Magdalene’s religious life is perhaps the most replete with erotic imagery not just with her death, which parallels Mary of Oignies’s in that it is put in terms of “enter[ing] that court for which [her soul] fainted and longed”⁵⁷ and reuniting

⁵⁴ Jacques de Vitry, “The Life of Mary d’Oignies,” trans. Margot H. King, in *Two Lives of Mary d’Oignies*, ed. Margot H. King and Miriam Marsolais (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 2003), 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁷ *Life of M. M.*, 2605-6.

with “Jesus Christ--her only desire,”⁵⁸ but also in her physical interactions with the Savior. The most important examples of these interactions are her washing of Christ’s feet and her two anointments of him, which are presented in highly sensual terms. In the first, after being “impregnated” by the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit,⁵⁹ she makes her way to the house of Simon the Pharisee and uses her body—that is, her hair, tears, and mouth—to wash the feet of Jesus,⁶⁰ which in conjunction with the earlier metaphor of impregnation is rather suggestive. Her second anointment of Christ is even more sensually charged:

Having sprinkled the feet of the Saviour with the precious nard, she spread it over them and massaged them with her hands and fingers; then she wrapped them gently in her hair, which was of surpassing beauty. Drawing them to her breast and lips, she tenderly washed them. She held them and caressed them for a long time, then let them go.

But this intimacy between our Lord the Saviour and the first of his servants is small in comparison to what followed,⁶¹

that being her anointment of his head, which follows in similarly loaded language. It becomes clear that in abjuring their former lives as prostitutes and entering into one of chastity does not necessarily mean that eroticism goes out the window for holy women like Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. Rather, their erotic nature is preserved and becomes a central aspect of their spirituality. In fact, rhetoric of near-sexual desire for God becomes so integral for saints, especially female ones, that even those who have led virtuous lives from the beginning, like Mary of Oignies, are caught up in it. What this means for the monks reading these *exempla* is a complicated and far-reaching issue, in part explained by the biblical citations which tie these three lives together.

In the lives of the three Marys, perhaps the most oft-quoted book of the Bible is the Song of Songs. While the history of this passage to various religious sects is its own affair, it maintains a good deal of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2609.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 240-251.

⁶¹ Ibid., 870-5.

importance for the Catholic Church. The erotic poem was interpreted by medieval theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux as an allegory for the relationship of the Church to Christ as the bride to the bridegroom. Bernard wrote numerous sermons on the subject, including a pivotal one on the nature of different types of spiritual love.⁶² Bernard acknowledges that to some degree the human desire for Christ is often less than elevated in nature: “Notice that the love of the heart is, in a sense, carnal, because our hearts are attracted most toward the humanity of Christ and the things he did or commanded while in the flesh.”⁶³ Yet he also takes care to emphasize the spiritual aspects of holy love, in part by the example of Christ, whose “love was never sensual, but always in the wisdom of the Spirit.”⁶⁴ Bernard’s efforts to retell the Song of Songs, a poem written in sensual language, into a higher spiritual love are clear, and shed light on the desire attributed to prostitute saints in their hagiographies and its significance for chaste monks. The force at work in the *vitae* is similar to that in Bernard’s sermons on the Song of Songs, where the highly eroticized image of the prostitute is transformed into that of a saint, maintaining much of its desire and sensuality but this time directed at the more appropriate object of God. The zeal of these reformed prostitutes, expressed by both saints, is not lost but rather reappropriated in similar terms to constitute their sanctity. So, too, could monks turn their desires from sin, keeping all of their fervor toward salvation in order to themselves become exemplary members of the Church, but this would of course be an ongoing process, so monks could still be viewed as prostitutes constantly repeating the moment of repentance. In conjunction with the gender-switching aspects of the texts, monks are feminized both as members of the bride of Christ, and more subversively as receivers of the eroticized sacrament, the body of a man.

While the image of prostitution has proven to be an important and positive spiritual metaphor for monks, it becomes problematic when applied to women. Male religious authorities reapplied the

⁶² Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 20: Three Qualities of Love,” in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, v. 2, trans., Kilian Walsh (Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1971).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

discourse of prostitution to monastic women for decidedly more negative purposes than the contemplative example it provided for men in the clergy. One of these purposes was to deprive nuns of their property. Because women could not say Mass, nunneries required a priest to be hired to do so for them each Sunday, and for this reason were more expensive than all-male houses.⁶⁵ This additional expense was often a fly in the ointment of the financial plans of the higher-ups in the diocese, a motive which, when coupled with the opportunity provided by the social power vested in the male sex, sometimes led to the dissolution of these female religious retreats. Such dissolution was often accomplished under the pretenses that the houses had been polluted by their sinful inhabitants, who were often labeled as prostitutes, as was the case with Hildegard of Bingen.⁶⁶ The monastic women who bore the brunt of defamation as harlots were not cloistered women like Hildegard, but belonged to the more active and worldly sect of the Beguines. An order of female mendicants patterned on the life and works of Mary of Oignies, as well as some Franciscan doctrine, the Beguines operated around Burgundy and were one of the most “active” sects of religious women in Europe in that they imitated male Franciscans in public begging, which sometimes included lodging in the houses of strangers.⁶⁷ Needless to say, their mendicancy raised the eyebrows of more than a few, and left them to face allegations of prostitution levied so regularly and early on against them that their ill-repute figured prominently in Jacques de Vitry’s *vita* of Mary of Oignies, one of the most important documents to the order.⁶⁸ Jacques himself exhibits some uncertainty as to their public begging practices, writing that though Mary wanted to live her life in this way, she was persuaded by her “friends” to stay in the cloister.⁶⁹ In their case it becomes clear that all of the positive aspects of the metaphor of prostitution that were available for

⁶⁵ Michael Peixoto, in the seminar “Forgery, Lies, and Deception in the History of the Middle Ages,” given at Sarah Lawrence College, Spring 2014.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jacques de Vitry, “The Life of Mary d’Oignies,” 38.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 45.

religious men—humility, repurposed *eros*, spiritual androgyny, and a deepened understanding of the vows—did not apply to their female counterparts. The slandered holy women are unable to escape their womanhood, the way that men and the fictionalized “women” of the *vitae* were, for while “man’s soul is woman,” no mention is made of the reverse being true, and these women are still decried as weak in the face of fleshly temptation. This reasoning may proceed from the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam, for she proceeds from him such that he contains her. The Beguines’ vows are also invalidated in that their attempt at humility and observance of the vow of poverty gains them only defamation, and the locus of their eroticism is forced from the realm of the holy to that of the profane, attacking the vow of chastity. Once again, the vow of obedience remains paramount and is subverted in the case of the Beguines. In Bernard Gui’s *Inquisitor’s Guide*, which outlines questions to ask Beguines in order to ascertain if they are heretical, the bulk of concern is not for their chastity, but for their obedience, specifically to the Pope:

They say too that if the lord pope ordered or agreed to this condemnation of the four Little Brothers as heretics, then he is himself a heretic, and the greatest of them, when it is his duty as head of the Church to defend gospel perfection. Thus, they say, he has lost his papal power, they do not believe him to be pope, the faithful owe him no obedience and the See is vacant.⁷⁰

While Bernard makes no mention of the accusations of prostitution, these no doubt fed the possibility of the Beguines’ trial by contributing to their *infama*. Where identification with the prostitute did no harm to the monk, the damage it did to the reputation of the Beguines began a downward spiral into their being tried as heretics. Perhaps the problems of connecting them to prostitutes stem, in addition to the obvious role of maintaining gendered power structures, from the tangible possibility of the association. A group of women who cohabitated but ventured out into their communities, many of which were urban, and asked strangers for money may have been simply too close to images of actual prostitution. This idea only increases the already wide gap between real prostitutes and the prostitutes of the literature. The

⁷⁰ Bernard Gui, 103.

prostitute can only be a positive example when those for whom she acts as such cannot possibly be imagined as prostitutes within the prevailing matrix of cultural imagery, which mostly means monastic men.

The image of prostitution often brings with it a somewhat visceral reaction because of the connotations of the profession. While such piquancy was no doubt more than present in late thirteenth-century French discourse, it is nonetheless a mistake to allow this to halt our understanding of the metaphorical significance of the image. Because of the perceived divide between monastic men and prostitutes, the connection between the two in religious literature is often ignored, and prevalent scholarship tends toward highly generalized claims of the harlot's significance. By contextualizing the image, we are able to see that the prostitutes represented in fact have nothing in common with their real-life counterparts and indeed are available only with great danger for women at all. By and large, those who could most profit from their spiritual offerings were monks. With all of this in mind, it is truly a testament to the sophistication of medieval thought that despite whatever differences they may have in reality, in the literature even a monk can be a whore.

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