signs of inner renewal.[112] The lives of Martin of Tours and Germanus of Auxerre employed the motif of changed dress to assert the charismatic origins of the episcopacy. Within a few generations, however, the reality of episcopal dress was very different from Sulpicius Severus's depiction of Martin of Tours as the Gallic Elijah in a hairy mantle. By the fifth century the western hierarchy had constructed a distinctive administrative dress—the *pallium*, *orarium*, *dalmatica*, *paenula*—to embody the responsibilities of the *vita activa*. The piecemeal development of complex liturgical vestments communicated and enhanced the power of those who performed the sacrificial action of the *sancta misteria*. The image of the ceremoniously clad bishop informed western Christian audiences that ascetic power had been subsumed by episcopal authority, while hagiographical accounts demonstrated to them that the institutional power of bishops had roots in the charisma of sacred males. The outward transformation of the bodies of holy men signified the suppression of earthly ambition and the birth of a spiritual power which united the charismatic and the institutional.

The institutional separation of church officials from non-sanctified, ordinary men and all women was manifested by the increasing sanctification of all objects associated with the eucharist and the altar. Individual male ascetics who did not assume public responsibilites, as did Martin and Germanus, were also rigorously excluded from the church hierarchy. Church councils prohibited women's access to offices, objects, and persons sanctified by promixity to the body and blood of Christ. Consecrated things, persons, and spaces were set against those regarded as profane or polluted.[113] This ritual process reflects (and descends from) Hebrew conceptualizations of sacred space that strove to isolate the sacred from the profane. As bishops were increasingly consecrated as "God's anointed" and "virginal administrators," women's authority within the church declined, as did the authority of individual holy men who stood outside the hierarchy.[114] Conciliar legislation, monastic *regulae*, liturgical texts, and hagiographical *vitae* contributed to the creation of a unique, male consecrated space that protected virginal men from the temptations of the flesh. Christian priests, like their ancient Hebrew prototypes, became members of an exclusive order distinguished by sacred dress, hairstyle, consecrated objects, and sexual status.

4

God's Holy Harlots

The Redemptive Lives of Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt

IN CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE, JESUS, LIKE ELIJAH and Moses before him, purifies himself in the terrifying desert, and the wasteland of Palestine provides the battleground for Christ's warfare with Satan: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And the tempter came to him" (Matthew 4.1–3).[1] In the Hebrew Bible, Moses sojourns in the deserts of Sinai in order to receive God's written revelation to the Israelites (Exodus 34.28). Elijah renews his spiritual potency in the wilderness around Mount Horeb, where angels nourish him while he rests under a broom tree (1 Kings 19.4–8). John the Baptist, who dresses in the charismatic garb of the prophet Elijah, preaches the urgency of repentance in the remote Jordan Valley before the looming eschaton (Matthew 3.1–17).[2] These four prototypical charismatic holy men all trusted in the solitary desert as the place of purgation, prophecy, and spiritual warfare. Four centuries after the crucifixion of Christ, Christian holy women and men also sought spiritual perfection in the deserts of Syria and Egypt.

The *vitae* of ascetic women and men reveal the theological messages central to any understanding of Christian desert spirituality.[3] Hagiographers recast the desert as a sacred terrain, where emaciated hermits recreate Christ's passion through ascetic practices. In return, God endows both female and male bodies with salvific powers.[4] Hagiographers constructed spiritual models of anchorites of both sexes to feature the theology of the crucifixion. Christ's sacrifice on the cross initiated both the expulsion of evil from the world and the rehabilitation of sinful humanity. Male desert *vitae* dramatize the militant aspects of this soteriology. The stalwart desert fathers purge the world of demonic influence, acting as militant guardians of humankind. The *vitae* of desert men chronicle the metamorphosis of

male flesh from dust to spirit, from Old Adam to New Adam (1 Corinthians 15.45–47). The lives of enshrined female penitents as recounted by their sacred biographers underscore the restorative powers of the cross. Women alienated from God (Genesis 3.6) can be reconciled to the Creator through an impassioned ascetic regime and self-entombment. Such females serve as mediators of human salvation; they atone for the sorrowful life of the postlapsarian Eve. The lives of desert men therefore reflect the supernatural spirituality of Christ and the prophets, while women's *vitae* humanize the militancy of desert asceticism and preach the necessity for universal repentance.

Apocalypse and Repentance in the Desert

The desert symbolically became the mother of the fourth- and fifth-century ascetic movement: "For more are the children of the desert than the children of the married wife" (Isaiah 54.1). The caves, hilltops, and constructed cells of the Egyptian and Syrian wasteland housed desert matriarchs and patriarchs whose heroic self-abnegation transformed them into legendary models of repentance and spirituality. Inasmuch as Christian hagiographers viewed the desert as an eschatological paradise free from mundane hierarchies, they adapted both holy women and men to biblical portraits of Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist.

Hagiographical depictions of the anchorites' dwellings, *askesis*, and salvific powers, however, belie the different theological strategies of male and female *vitae*. Certain holy men inhabit the natural landscape that was created by God before the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. The omnipotent Syrian and Egyptian anchorites dwell in the wilderness, in places such as ditches, bogs, and groves. Abba Elias survives for seventy years on the side of a remote mountain: "He had his seat under a rock in a cave, so that even the sight of him was very impressive."[5] Elias is portrayed as a prelapsarian being who "does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands" (Acts 17.24–25). Similarly, the Syrian holy man, Julian, lives in a cave "not made by hands."[6] Macarius of Alexandria sits naked in the Egyptian marshes.[7] Abba Macedonius crucifies his flesh in a pit.[8] James of Nisibis roams the Syrian hilltops in imitation of Elijah. In the spring and summer he lives in forests, while in the winter he retires to a cave. He refuses to make fires, thereby rejecting a fundamental skill of civilized humanity.[9] The lifestyles of holy men prove they are spiritual beings who have returned to the divine landscape created in Genesis (1.9).

God grants them the power of subduing ferocious beasts because, like Adam (Genesis 1.26), hermits possess dominion over the animal kingdom.[10]

Other desert fathers imitate the passion and resurrection of Christ in human-made sepulchers.[11] The Syrian Abba Limnaeus constructs a tiny cell out of unmortared stones, sealing the door with mud. He reconciles the diseased and the possessed to God's grace, and he blesses pilgrims through a window. Athanasius's *Life of Antony* represents the saint mortifying his flesh and immuring himself in a tomb. The holy man engages in such fierce demonic combat that he collapses on the floor of his sepulcher. He finally emerges from the shrine with a new, spiritual body that is the physical manifestation of the apostle Paul's pronouncement, "it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15.44). Antony transforms himself into the New Adam or Christ through his rituals of self-abnegation, and, in return, God grants him the martial power of the cross—the power to bind and loose souls. The *Life of Antony* is thus a metaphorical re-creation of the passion, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Angelic recluses, like Antony, who roam the wilderness are mistaken for heavenly beings, just as the apostles Paul and Barnabas had been wrongly identified as Hermes and Zeus by the inhabitants of Iconium (Acts 14.12). A paralyzed beggar acknowledges Abba Agathon as a celestial being: "Raising his eyes, [the beggar] saw no man; [Agathon] was an angel of the Lord."[12] Abba Antony is such a visible icon of the faith that merely the sight of him insures salvation.[13] Abba Eustathius's asceticism transforms his body into that of Christ crucified, for he is so emaciated that "the sun shone through his bones."[14] Certain hermits engage in such fierce *askesis* that they no longer appear to be human. Abba Adolius's excruciating mortification and intense vigils led to the suspicion that he was a monster.[15] Abba Ammonius brands his flesh, Abba Julian reduces his body to skin and bones, and Abba John's swollen feet split because he never sits down.[16] Other fathers resemble biblical heroes. With his long beard and graceful body, Abba Arsenius looks like Jacob; his continuous weeping causes his eyelashes to fall out.[17] Desert patriarchs, like their Hebrew counterparts, outlive ordinary mortals because they no longer share human notions of time. Abba Cronides lives to the age 110, Abba Elias to 100, and Antony himself lives to 105.

The ascetic transformation of the male body from dust to spirit equips holy men with the militant powers of the cross and the apocalyptic prowess of the Archangel Michael, who battled a fierce serpent in the desert: "Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the

dragon. . . . And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan" (Revelation 12.7–9).[18] The Egyptian monks constitute a band of warrior-angels who safeguard humanity from demonic reptiles. According to one text, an entourage of desert pilgrims beheld the tracks of a large serpent. The hermit who had been guiding the group through the wilderness dispelled their terror by explaining that "we have destroyed many serpents and asps and horned vipers with our bare hands, and have fulfilled in our own lives the Scripture which says, 'I gave unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy'" (Luke 10.19).[19] Desert hagiographers develop a martial vocabulary to describe the celestial training of the anchorites. The hermits are likened to an army expecting its emperor, to a legion of angels, and to serpent-slayers who spit on demons. The barren landscape houses these godly soldiers, who cross pathless mountains by reading the stars. They collect water by sponging dew off rocky peaks, and they test their strength by destroying demons lurking in caves.

Male desert *vitae* provide Christian audiences with superhuman exemplars of Christian spirituality. The lives of the Syrian and Egyptian fathers intimate that the male body is perfectible in this world, for the desert patriarchs outlive ordinary humans and their angelic appearance manifests their sanctity. The male hermits have returned to the prelapsarian world where humans lived in harmony with their Creator. They re-create the landscape conceived by God before the fall, and the most exalted male anchorites communicate their abandonment of human society by embracing the natural life: "Many have not been induced to have a cave or hole or hut or cell, but giving their bodies to the naked air endure contrasts of temperature sometimes frozen by unrelieved frost, sometimes burnt by the fire of the sun's rays."[20] Through militant asceticism, they become Christ crucified whose self-sacrifice began the expulsion of evil from the world. These God-men have "appeared like stars in the East and reached the ends of the world with their rays."[21]

In some respects the *vitae* of female anchorites resemble the structure of male lives. Desert women engage in terrifying acts of self-crucifixion, they immure themselves in claustrophobic cells, and they serve as suffering mediators of divine grace. But whereas the lives of the lofty God-men approach celestial status on earth, most female *vitae* remain earthbound. Desert hagiographers use the lives of female anchorites and cenobites to humanize the militant spirituality of the desert and to preach the urgency of universal repentance. Contrite, obedient women are forerunners to ecumenical redemption because they atone for Eve's fall from grace.[22] And, like the women in the Christian gospels who instantly obey Jesus' command, female hermits personify total submission to the divine will.

Most holy women live in human-made structures, not in the open desert. The fifth-century desert chronicler Palladius immortalized the life of one female penitent, Alexandra, who symbolically remade herself into the Virgin Mary. Palladius recounts, "[Abba Didymus] also told me about a maidservant named Alexandra who left the city and immured herself in a tomb. She received the necessities of life through a window and for ten years never looked at a woman or man in the face."[23] Palladius's brief *vita* of Amma Alexandra parallels Athanasius's *Life of Antony*. Like the fearsome Antony, Alexandra journeys into the desert and transforms a house for the dead into her dwelling, for "death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15.54). Alexandra, in Palladius's narrative, recounts her ascetic experience to the famous Roman holy woman, Melania the Elder, who comes seeking her advice through the window of the tomb. Alexandra informs Melania of her own personal motivation to take up the *via crucis*: "A man was distracted in mind because of me, and rather than scandalize a soul made in the image of God, I betook myself alive to a tomb, lest I seem to cause him suffering or reject him."[24] When Melania asks the great amma how she endures the tedium of desert *askesis*, Alexandra replies that constant prayer, spinning flax, and meditating on holy scripture are sufficient to defeat the noontide demon of ennui. She merely "eats her crusts" and awaits the death of her flesh. Alexandra dies peacefully in her cell, which is so heavily bulwarked that the woman who routinely brought the amma food must break down the vault to retrieve the holy body.

This terse *vita* presents the female anchorite as an heir to the charismatic piety of the desert fathers. Like the heroic hermits, Amma Alexandra remakes a place of death into the locus of spiritual rebirth. She engages in model ascetic behavior: continuous prayer, manual labor, and vigilant celibacy. And, like the male recluses, she advises spiritual disciples through the window of her cell. Palladius's description of Alexandra's conversion to radical *askesis*, however, relies on a different theological purpose than that of Athanasius's Antony. Both anchorites trust friends and servants to bring them food, and both recluses achieve ascetic fame through their self-entombment. Antony, however, uses his sepulcher as a temporary battleground. According to Athanasius's *vita*, the abba survives savage attacks by demons who appear to him in the guise of torturers, beasts, and reptiles. His conflict with the devil is so intense that his friend who had been sup-

plying the ascetic with bread found the exhausted recluse lying on the floor of the sepulcher as if he were dead. At the end of Antony's tenure in the tomb, he vanquishes the devil: "The Lord did not forget the wrestling of Antony, but came to his aid. For when he looked up he saw the roof being opened, as it seemed, and a certain beam of light descending toward him."[25] This saving light (*aktina phōtos*) illuminates the spiritual "wrestler" and decimates Satan's subordinates.[26] After a celestial voice promises the godly athlete that he would become famous throughout the world, he leaves the crypt and embarks on a militant career in the open wilderness.[27] The tomb offers only a transient spiritual shelter for the famous abba whose tenure there is for the purpose of athletic training. Similarly, the Syrian father Baradatus begins his ascetic career in a cramped cell, dwells in a wooden coffin, and then emerges into the open air.[28] The tombs and cells of holy women, on the other hand, function as the fixed places of their piety and are symbolic of saintly women's inviolable chastity.

Alexandra's decision to immure herself in the desert, as Palladius presents it, stems from her desire to save the souls of men. Palladius's *vita* duplicates the gender precepts of sacred discourse by presenting the female body as a source of temptation. By removing her body from the sight of men, Alexandra works for male redemption. Thus Amma Alexandra's self-entombment elevates her as a salvific force within the human community.[29] Antony imitates the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ to achieve the salvific power of exorcism. Similarly, Alexandra's self-imprisonment is a redemptive act that empowers her to mediate the salvation of men. The obedient Alexandra is like the Virgin Mary, who submits to divine power: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1.38). Amma Alexandra's ascetic lifestyle, as Palladius describes, is stationary and passive. She does not fight the demonic battalions of the wasteland but struggles in her cell against another desert enemy, ennui. She spins flax in her crypt in imitation of the charitable, chaste women of Hebrew and Christian sacred discourse, and there she awaits the death of her flesh. The mortal Alexandra is unlike the God-men of the desert who dwell in a divine landscape and move in sacred time.

Other desert women, such as the Egyptian Piamoun who settles village disputes from the cell she shares with her mother, find the source of their ascetic power within enclosed spaces.[30] Syrian hagiography also provides examples of immured women ascetics who pray, spin, and seclude their bodies from the sight of men. The physical appearance of these women associates them not with the biblical patriarchs and prophets but

with the baldness and wretchedness of the repentant "daughters of Zion" (Isaiah 3.24–26). The emaciated Syrian mothers conceal their flesh with enveloping cloaks, and immense iron weights force them to creep about their crypts in imitation of the doubled-over woman in Luke (13.11–13).[31] Their self-entombment represents militant virginity because fortified tombs make the female body impenetrable; their Madonna-like chastity reverses Eve's fall from grace. Enclosed spaces also point to the language of the Song of Songs (4.12) which defines God's bride as "a garden locked, a fountain sealed." Enshrined, penitential females do not strangle reptiles or expel demonic legions. The fact that women can live as charismatic recluses is a miraculous event itself, according to these metaphorical texts. The hallowed lives of mournful women personify repentance and submission. They convey that female flesh can evolve allegorically from the fallen Eve to the immaculate Virgin.[32]

Pelagia: God's Holy Harlot

The late antique biographers of the legendary ammai, Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt, recount how the two former harlots convert to the life of radical self-abnegation. Mary's iconoclastic *vita* diverges from the standard life of an enshrined penitent, for the harlot-saint roams the Jordan River Valley where she displays her naked body to a male priest who becomes her votary. Pelagia travels independently in Palestine wearing a bishop's *chiton*. The lives of both harlot-saints, however, soften such provocative images by merging the biblical motif of defiled woman as instrument of salvation with desert portraits of penitential recluses.

The life of Pelagia of Antioch probably first circulated orally among fifth-century ascetics in Syria and Palestine and later became a popular liturgical tale of conversion. The earliest written text of the life may date from the seventh century. There exist numerous translations of a Greek original, including Syriac, Latin, Arabic, Armenian, and Slavic versions.[33] Latin translations of the *vita* were known in the early medieval West, and the legend remained popular throughout the Middle Ages.[34] An emended version appears in Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century hagiographical collection, *The Golden Legend*. In Jacobus de Voragine's rendering, Pelagia describes herself as "a sea of iniquity cresting with waves of sin . . . an abyss of perdition."[35]

Pelagia's mythological biography is based on a series of other texts, including the apocryphal lives of Mary Magdalene, martyr narratives that

feature transvestism, and desert *vitae* that profile the miraculous conversion of actresses and whores. Male desert anchorites themselves use the image of a harlot to characterize monastic discipleship.[36] Pelagia's hagiographer, who claims to have been an eyewitness to the events he describes, introduces himself in the text as a deacon named James, who accompanied a Bishop Nonnus to a fifth-century episcopal synod held at the church of Julian the Martyr in Antioch.[37] James describes Nonnus not only as a paragon of episcopal virtue but also as a monk from the most famous *coenobium* in Egypt, the Pachomian foundation at Tabennisi.[38] Nonnus, the hagiographer emphasizes, had been forced into the onerous office of bishop because of his desert training and pristine spirituality.

According to the *vita*, Nonnus and James arrive at Antioch and join the congregation of bishops who had assembled at the entrance of the basilica of Saint Julian. The other metropolitans beg the eloquent and erudite Nonnus to deliver the first sermon. While Nonnus is speaking, a parade of opulently dressed actors, mimes, and slaves passes by the porch of the church. The foremost actress of Antioch, Pelagia, sits astride an ass, her great beauty singling her out among the debauched retinue. Gold, pearls, and gems cover her body, and her feet and head are bare; her perfumes and ointments drift over the seated bishops as she sinuously passes.[39] Scandalized, the holy men throw their veils over their heads and hide their faces within the folds of their scapulas.[40]

Nonnus, however, not only refuses to bury his head in his sacred garb, he gazes intently at the exquisite woman. In an almost comical fashion, he repeatedly questions the other bishops: "Were you not delighted by her great beauty?"[41] When the other bishops do not reply, Nonnus mocks his compatriots by hiding his head in a copy of the holy scripture.[42] Because the other bishops continue to resist the physical allure of the actress, Nonnus brilliantly incorporates her bejeweled image into his sermon, castigating the episcopacy by comparing the meticulous care with which Pelagia decorates her body to the work of embellishing the soul for the bridegroom, Christ: "Why do we not adorn ourselves and wash the dirt from our unhappy souls, why do we let ourselves lie so neglected?"[43] Afterward, Nonnus and James retire to their rooms, and the bishop continues his discourse on the soul and the bridegroom from the Song of Songs.[44] He laments the state of his own soul in a prayer to God: "Alas, I am a sinner and unworthy, for I stand before your altar and I do not offer you a soul adorned with the beauty you want to see in me."[45]

On the Sabbath, Nonnus preaches from the episcopal throne, or *cathedra*, of the bishop of Antioch. His stunning sermon causes the congregation to flood the cathedral with their tears. Pelagia, who had never before entered a church, crosses the sacred threshold and listens to Nonnus's discourse. After Nonnus grants her an audience, Pelagia prostrates her body before the entire synod and pleads with Nonnus to baptize her. Nonnus assents and provides the harlot with a baptismal sponsor, the deacon Romana. He then exorcises and baptizes the repentant actress and feeds her holy communion.[46]

After her baptism, Pelagia dons the white tunic of a spiritual catechumen and moves into the house provided for the newly baptized. She struggles with the demons of fornication and avarice and soon resolves to leave the city for the wilderness. She bequeaths her jewels, ornate clothing, gold, and silver to Nonnus, who distributes them to widows, orphans, and other poor. She also frees her slaves and provides each with a gold collar.[47] On the eighth day after her baptism, she removes her *tunica alba* according to church custom, but violates the ritual purity commandments of Deuteronomy (22.5) by donning Nonnus's tunic or *chiton*. She then flees Antioch and travels to Jerusalem where she builds a cell on the Mount of Olives.[48]

Years later, Bishop Nonnus sends Deacon James to Jerusalem to locate a famous holy anchorite named Pelagius. James makes the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, lodges with the monks on the Mount of Olives, and eventually discovers Pelagius's cell.[49] He knocks on the window and an emaciated figure with sunken eyes appears at the opening of the oratory.[50] James informs the shriveled hermit that he had been sent by Bishop Nonnus. The anchorite succinctly replies: "Tell him to pray for me." James departs for the city inspired by the angelic face of the recluse. Once back in Jerusalem, he learns of the holy reputation of the immured Pelagius. In response, James returns to the cell but finds the saint dead inside the crypt. He collects a number of monks who break down the cell and carry the "sacred little body" outside.[51] As they prepare the body for burial, the ascetics discover that Pelagius is really Pelagia. This "miracle" attracts crowds of pilgrims who marvel at Pelagia's holy life: "Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for you have hidden away on earth such great treasures, women as well as men."[52] Her funeral procession is an elaborate affair: "Monks came in from all the monasteries and also nuns, from Jericho and from the Jordan where the Lord was baptised, bearing candles and lamps and singing hymns; and the holy fathers bore her body to its burial."[53] Pelagia's successful metamorphosis into Christ crucified had deceived even the deacon,

who questioned himself: "How could I have known her again, with a face so emaciated by fasting?"[54]

Scholars have focused on the *Life of Pelagia the Harlot* to explore the symbolic function of ascetic transvestism in late antique hagiographical literature.[55] One historian has claimed that spiritual cross-dressing was a revolutionary act because it enabled women to "escape their social, and indeed their biological destiny."[56] Pelagia's *vita*, however, presents a feminized portrait of ascetic spirituality rather than a model for women to escape their biological fate. Her transvestism serves as a textual device that enables the hagiographer to explain how the former harlot journeyed alone to the Holy Land. The *topos* originates in Greco-Roman adventure tales and Christian martyr texts that feature female heroines who elude their male captors or guardians by traveling independently in masculine guise. (For example, in the second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the ascetic heroine, Thecla, puts on a man's *chiton* and travels to Myra.)[57] Pelagia's adoption of male garb and her subsequent metamorphosis into a spiritual eunuch is not the crucial theological issue in this text. The symbolic heart of the *vita* lies in its re-creation of biblical texts which describe the metaphorical relationship between contrite women and spiritual men. Biblical conversion rhetoric recasts Nonnus and Pelagia as Solomon and the queen of Sheba, the bride and groom from the Song of Songs, Christ and a repentant female sinner, and the New Adam and New Eve. The *vita* reinforces the Christian theology of the cosmetic, the necessity of universal repentance, and the power of male altar servants to reconcile female sinners to God.

In the Hebrew Bible, a wealthy woman visits King Solomon to test his wisdom: "Now when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon she came to Jerusalem to test him with hard questions, having a very great retinue and camels bearing spices and very much gold and precious stones" (2 Chronicles 9.1). Solomon so astounds the queen with his brilliance that there was "no more spirit in her" (2 Chronicles 9.4). After the queen submits to Solomon's authority, she extols his God-given power: "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king" (2 Chronicles 9.8). She then bequeaths to Solomon countless treasures, including talents of gold, gems, and spices (2 Chronicles 9.9), and returns to Sheba. The *Life of Pelagia the Harlot*—with its rich retinue, daring woman, precious goods, and eloquence evoking penitence—clearly reconstructs this biblical passage. In the Hebrew Bible, a wise and holy man subdues a spirited and wealthy woman; in the hagiographical retelling

of this story, an exemplary ascetic reconciles a recalcitrant female sinner to God's grace.

This sacred fiction is also a Christian reworking of the Hebrew Song of Songs which describes the intense, sexual desire of a bride and bridegroom: "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth" (Song of Songs 1.2). On the surface, Nonnus and Pelagia share an intense, erotic passion, but the didactic intention of the author is clearly theological, not sexual. Monastic audiences understood the erotic poetry of Solomon's love songs as a metaphor of Christ's relationship with the individual soul or Christ and the church.[58] In Pelagia's *vita*, the subtle eroticism of the text signifies the intimate experience of divine love in the individual soul. Pelagia's "jewels and ornaments" and her "fragrance of oils" seduce Nonnus (Song of Songs 1.10–11, 4.9–10): "His speech [which] is most sweet" (Song of Songs 5.16) captivates the actress. Pelagia's jeweled body represents the soul adorned before God; Nonnus's "ravished heart" (Song of Songs 4.9) personifies the human desire for God. The hagiographer thus transforms the ecstatic dialogue between confessor and penitent into an allegory of the soul ravished before God.

Pelagia is also the biblical harlot who represents human apostasy from God, and Nonnus's spiritual taming of this willful woman emulates Christ's conversion of polluted women. In the gospel of Luke (7.37–38), a notorious female sinner enters the house where Jesus and the apostles are dining, and she anoints Jesus' feet and washes them with her tears and wipes them with her hair. The men at the table castigate Jesus for allowing an unclean woman to touch him. "The Pharisee who had invited him saw it, and he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner'" (Luke 7.39). Jesus rebukes the Pharisee for his inhospitality and embraces the repentant female as a vessel of pure faith. Pelagia's *vita* reproduces this scene from Luke. When Pelagia boldly passes by the bishops seated on the church porch, the hagiographer claims that all of the holy men except Nonnus hid their faces in their scapulas. Like the Pharisee who recognizes the female anointer as a notorious sinner, the synod of bishops shuns the actress because of her reputation for debauchery. Nonnus, who covers his head with his Bible, preaches to the others that God should be their refuge, not material embodiments of their rank such as the *scapula*. The hagiographer uses an unclean woman to castigate prideful male altar servants, including Nonnus, who claims that "today the ornaments of a harlot have shone more brightly than the ornaments of my soul."[59]

The former harlot's intense compunction shames the male hierarchy, just as the passionate faith of evangelical women humbled the male apostles, whom Christ rebukes as "foolish men, and slow of heart to believe" (Luke 24.25). Pelagia writes to Nonnus that she is like the sexually depraved Samaritan woman whom Christ converts at a well (John 4.7–39): "Will you look upon me, as He did?"[60] When the harlot enters the church to be baptized, she pleads with the bishop to remember Christ's compassion toward sinners: "If you are a true disciple of Christ, do not reject me, for through you I may deserve to see His face."[61] She imitates the repentant action of the woman who anoints Jesus by washing Nonnus's feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair in full view of the other bishops.[62] Pelagia cautions the bishop that, if he does not baptize her, he will be like an apostate and idolater. In the *Life of Pelagia the Harlot*, the hierarchical servant represents the pathway to grace, while the sinful woman manifests the universal nature of God's love. The hagiographer employs the rhetoric of inversion to remind Christian audiences that faith depends on submission and repentance—that is, on qualities closely associated with the female.

The *vita* also presents Pelagia's metamorphosis from the fallen Eve to the immaculate Mary. The cell on the Mount of Olives transforms Pelagia's voluptuous body into a vessel of God's grace. The hagiographer signifies her piety not by recounting tales of heroic warfare against demons but by describing her withered flesh and skull-like face. Pelagia's conversion to the life of penance is the *vita*'s miracle. Pelagia's mythographer features her cell, an enclosed space perfecting the process of conversion.[63] Pelagia, who personifies the bride from the Song of Songs (4.12), has now become "a garden locked, a fountain sealed." The architecture of seclusion transforms a body that had been open to sin into an impenetrable fortress, and Pelagia transmutes into the New Eve and the immaculate Virgin. Although this text features a woman who symbolically becomes a man, the *vita* presents a very feminized portrait of desert asceticism. Pelagia, like the other female recluses of the desert, mortifies her flesh to atone for the fall of Eve.

The hagiographer employs the theology of the cosmetic to further the Eve-Mary duality. Pelagia first appears in the text as the embodiment of feminine self-indulgence: "She was dressed in the height of fantasy, wearing nothing but gold, pearls, and precious stones, even her bare feet were covered with gold and pearls."[64] The woman tells Nonnus, "I was called Pelagia by my parents but the people of Antioch have called me Margaret (a pearl) because of the amount of jewelry with which my sins have adorned me; for I am decked out as a slave for the devil."[65] Tertullian, the great theologian of the Christian cosmetic, had claimed that Eve's expulsion from paradise resulted from her desire for ornate dress and shiny baubles.[66] The hagiographer denotes Pelagia's fallen state by the pearls and gold that cover her naked body. She is the besotted whore from Revelation (17.4): "The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls." The hagiographer represents Pelagia's conversion by reporting that she relinquishes her jewels, perfumes, and ointments—the *signa* of her enslavement to sin—to the bishop Nonnus, who exorcises the jewels and donates them to orphans, widows, and beggars.[67] Pelagia ends her life as a withered recluse who, like a daughter of Zion, replaces perfume with rottenness, a girdle with rope, a rich robe with sackcloth, and beauty with shame. "Ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground" (Isaiah 3.24–26).

Throughout the *vita*, the figure of Nonnus serves as the conduit of grace and the Christ-like savior of this "New Eve." The sacred biographer uses the anomalous image of the harlot-saint to castigate the pride of the late antique episcopacy and to reaffirm the power of consecrated altar servants. The bishop is a Christ-like holy man whose eloquent speech personifies the power of the Holy Spirit. He preaches from the *cathedra*, the symbol of episcopal authority, and his conversion of the harlot requires the hierarchical prerogatives of baptismal exorcism and holy communion. Nonnus obeys church law by appointing baptismal sponsors to ensure that the prostitute will not lapse into her old life of sin. His sublime oratory converts her, and he teaches her how to make the *signum crucis* to exorcize the demons of fornication. Moreover, she initiates her life of radical self-abnegation by donning his tunic. The *vita* both rebukes male altar servants and empowers them by embracing the biblical rhetoric of inversion.

The *Life of Pelagia the Harlot* is built on a series of paradoxical images. Nonnus first appears in the narrative as a Christ-like holy man, and Pelagia disports herself as the incarnation of feminine apostasy and blasphemy. The hagiographer describes the saintly bishop as Christ's apostle, while Pelagia characterizes herself as Satan's votary. Nonnus officiates at the sacred altar, but the harlot has never even crossed the threshold of a Christian church. Her advent in the *vita* is a satirical re-creation of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem: "The next day a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. . . . And Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it" (John 12.12–14). Pelagia, in *imitatio Christi*, proudly passes by the episcopal synod riding an ass. The first half of Pelagia's life

mocks the more conventional lives of female saints who engage in extensive charity, join the discipleship of important church leaders and ascetics, and travel independently around the Mediterranean with their own retinues.[68] Pelagia's charity assumes a sexual form, and her admirers are lecherous men, not virginal ascetics. Her spirited independence stems from the wealth she earns from lascivious acts. Her entourage includes actors and whores, and, when she frees her slaves, she gives them golden collars, thus parodying the iron shackles worn by ordinary bond servants. This paradoxical *vita* does not offer a revolutionary portrait of female piety, but reaffirms well-established biblical depictions of defiled women who submit to divine power through the mediation of spiritual men. Pelagia's *vita* thus highlights the restorative powers of the crucifixion by portraying the conversion of the harlot to the life of penance.

Mary of Egypt: Vessel of Sin and Repentance

Unlike the *Life of Pelagia the Harlot*, the sacred biography of Mary of Egypt departs from stereotypical portrayals of female piety. Mary's hagiographer radically rewrites the biblical discourse on prophecy and charisma by adding a spiritually potent woman to the chain of male prophets and miracle workers. The *vita*, which is attributed to the patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius (c. 600), is based on a series of earlier texts, including Jerome's fourth-century *Life of Paul the First Hermit*.[69] The life also follows the pattern established in the fifth-century desert corpus of depraved women who castigate male pride.[70] Although Mary's life originates from fourth- and fifth-century desert texts, the earliest written version may date from the seventh century, and, like the *Life of Pelagia the Harlot*, the Greek text has been translated into numerous languages. Knowledge of the *vita* in the West may have been as early as the seventh century.[71] The ninth-century court of the Carolingian king, Charles the Bald, possessed a small volume of the Latin *vita* which may have been used for lay devotional purposes.[72] Mary appears in the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* as a "public woman" who "never refused her body to anyone."[73] This sacred fiction continued to be popular throughout the Middle Ages as an epic story of repentance and conversion.

The *vita* of Mary of Egypt is a complicated text that not only places Mary in the roles of Christ, Elijah, and Saul but also contains stereotypical reactions to female sanctity. The hagiographer refashions the former whore into a female Saul, for, like Saul, Mary receives loaves of bread before beginning her spiritual journey (1 Samuel 10.3–4). Her independent

life in the desert resembles the spiritual solitude of Elijah and Christ. Moreover, her *vita* follows the eastern model of repentance which emphasizes the extra-institutional power of living anchorites.[74] Mary's extraordinary power stems not from a church office or from symbolic consecration, but comes from her simple ascetic regime, her devotion to the Virgin Mary, and her direct communion with God.

Mary's hagiographer characterizes her independence, piety, and extreme asceticism by providing her with emaciated flesh, withered breasts, short hair, and sun-blackened skin. The holy woman, unlike most of her female counterparts, lives in the Jordanian wilderness. She miraculously crosses the Jordan River in imitation of Elisha and Jesus: "As soon as she had made the sign of the cross, she stepped on to the water and walking over the flowing waves she came as if walking on solid land."[75] Mary describes the harsh life of the desert to her confessor: "I was burned by the heat of the summer and frozen stiff in the winter by so much cold."[76] She has no access to learning, but like the greatest male heroes of the Egyptian desert, relies on spiritual wisdom. She lives off bread and herbs, and her physiognomy parallels that of the Son of Man in Revelation (1.14), for she is "naked, her body black as if scorched by the fierce heat of the sun, [her] hair . . . was white as wool and short, coming down only to the neck."[77] The enervating regime of desert life is inscribed on the body of Mary of Egypt, which resembles that of the eschatological Messiah.

It is this extraordinary physical appearance that the priest Zosimas encounters on a trip into the desert. Zosimas had been raised in a monastery and his spirituality reflects the disciplined routine of the communal life. When he is in his fifties, however, he leaves his own monastery and travels to another *coenobium* located in the Jordan River Valley. The hagiographer explains that God had led Zosimas to the Jordanian community because it follows a strict rule. He also describes the hermitage as a training place for charismatic prophets and master ascetics inasmuch as the monks are required to don the tattered clothing of Elijah and graze in the desert like the great hermits of Syria. The brotherhood's spiritual goal is "to be in the body as a corpse, to die completely to the world and everything in the world."[78] In order to enact this sacrificial death, the monastery requires all its monks to leave the community during Lent and go into the desert in imitation of Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and Christ. While in the desert, the holy men are to pray, keep night vigils, and live off the wasteland. Zosimas participates in this eremitic ritual and penetrates the depths of the Jordanian desert carrying with him only a little food and ragged clothing.

Zosimas roams the wilderness for twenty days, prays facing East, and

sleeps on the hard ground. While he is meditating, he sees a naked, sun-blackened female walking in the desert. His first reaction to this peculiar human body is to make the sign of the cross to protect himself from demonic fantasy. In fact, the hagiographer intends his audience to view this initial contact between male confessor and female penitent as an allusion to Jesus' first encounter with the devil in the desert (Matthew 4.1–3). Zosimas decides that this unusual individual is indeed human, and he violates his vow not to seek human contact by pursuing the unclothed woman along the banks of the Jordan. After an exhaustive chase, the charismatic figure turns toward Zosimas and addresses him by his name; she requests that he clothe her in his threadbare monastic cloak. The two ascetics then kneel together and argue over who should give the blessing. Mary reminds Zosimas that, because he is a priest and has the power to stand by the sacrificial table and to distribute the body and blood of Christ, he should bless her. Zosimas responds by emphasizing that God had led him to a "mother in the spirit" in order that he may receive a spiritual charism. The priest also informs the amma that "grace is recognised not by office but by gifts of the Spirit."[79] Mary acquiesces and begins praying for the holy man.

Zosimas trembles at her words, her ability to levitate while praying, and her Christ-like power of clairvoyance. Although he still believes that she might be a demonic fantasy, the wasted figure assures him that she is flesh and not spirit.[80] Zosimas pleads with the shriveled woman to explain how she came to live her life for Christ "for whose sake you clothed yourself in this nakedness, for whose sake you have wasted your flesh."[81] Mary agrees to recount her history because, as she explains, "you have seen my body . . . why not my bare life?" Before narrating the miraculous conversion of her sinful existence, the saint warns Zosimas that her life has been the exact opposite of priests, God's chosen vessels, for she had been the "chosen vessel of the devil." The hagiographer establishes a context for Mary as a fallen Eve in the amma's caution to the holy man that the details of her life will make him "run from her as from a snake."[82]

Before living for over forty years as an ascetic in the Jordan Valley, Mary experienced a life that was wholly contrary to the conventional tales of the childhood days of female saints. She abandoned her parents at the age of twelve—when many holy women vow marriage to Christ—and journeyed to Alexandria. There she earned a living by begging and by spinning flax, and offered her body for pleasure, not payment. By classical standards, Mary was the worst kind of harlot because she engaged in intercourse not from financial need but to satisfy lust. She always carried a

spindle, as if to mock the distaffs of the chaste, charitable women of sacred and classical discourse. The ex-prostitute informs the undefiled priest that all unnatural acts were welcome to her.

Eventually Mary met a group of sailors at Alexandria's harbor who were headed for the Holy Land to attend the festival of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The harlot pushed her way through the crowd of pilgrims and, in an inversion of pious preaching, enticed the Egyptian and Libyan seafarers with lewd language. Mary claimed that at the time her strong desire to go with them was motivated not by religious ceremony but by the beautiful bodies of the seamen to whom she offered her own as payment for the voyage. She, like Jezebel, led men to sin, for once she arrived in Jerusalem, she seduced male pilgrims at the religious festivals. Mary's journey to Jerusalem is a perverted pilgrimage, and her activities in the city invert the Christian apostolic mission; as she tells Zosimas, "I was hunting for the souls of young men."[83] During the festival of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Mary attempted to enter a church, but her polluted body was miraculously suspended outside the sacred space, held fast by the discriminating power of a relic of the true cross. Resting in the basilica's forecourt, she saw an icon of the *Theotokos* which impelled her to confess her sins to the Virgin, weep, and beat her breast.[84] She called upon the Mother of God as the mediator of salvation, imploring the Virgin to grant her access to the *sanctus sanctorum*.

Finally, the miraculous power of Christ's Mother guided Mary's sinful body over the threshold of the church, where the harlot "threw [herself] on the floor and kissed the sacred dust."[85] She then returned to the icon and vowed to remake her body into a vessel of repentance. The Virgin's celestial voice instructed her to go out into the wilderness and cross over the Jordan River. Mary left the forecourt of the church and walked through the streets of Jerusalem. Her supernatural experience had so transformed her physical appearance that, as she wandered the city, a Christian gave her three coins and called her amma. The transfigured woman used the coins to buy three loaves of bread and then ran out the city gate.

When Mary reached the Jordan River, she washed her hands and face in its salvific waters, an action designed to evoke symbolic baptism and spiritual rebirth. The amma received communion at the church of Saint John the Baptist and then, under the Virgin's direction, she crossed the Jordan. She had been living in the desert for forty-seven years when Zosimas found her walking along the river banks. She tells the virginal monk that during those five decades in the wilderness she had been tempted

by memories of her former life of sin, but that a miraculous light surrounded her and provided her with spiritual peace: "This light saved me from the lusts of mind."[86] But unlike Antony's "saving light" which rescued the great hermit from vicious, demonic attacks, Mary's saving light delivered her from her inherent depravity. During her generation of desert life, Mary received neither instruction nor communion from a priest until she encountered Zosimas. Zosimas, on hearing this "life-giving narrative," pleads with the holy woman to tell him more.

At this point in the narrative, the hagiographer employs the rhetoric of inversion from the gospels in order to make a spiritual point about miraculous power. A favorite motif of the evangelists uses spiritual doubters to prove the wonder-working abilities of Christ. In the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, it is not the ex-harlot who functions as the "doubting Thomas," but a priest, Zosimas. In Matthew (6.31–34) unfaithful men ask Jesus: "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?"[87] Zosimas, in like fashion, asks the holy woman: "What have you been able to find to eat? Have you passed this length of time without suffering? Did you not have any food or vestments?" Mary, like Christ, convinces the doubting Zosimas that God has mandated her ascetic and charismatic life. In her *vita*, Mary becomes confessor, absolver, and prophet—all male-gendered personifications.[88]

At the end of the narrative, the hagiographer provides a second significant gender reversal. Zosimas journeys again to the desert to administer communion to Mary, only to find her dead. Zosimas responds to this discovery by expressing for Mary the same piety Mary Magdalene demonstrates for Christ (Matthew 26.6–13; Mark 14.3–9; Luke 7.36–50; John 12.1–8): "He saw the holy one lying dead, her hands folded and her face turned to the East. Running up to her, he watered the feet of the blessed one with tears; otherwise he did not dare to touch her. He wept for some time."[89] The hagiographer emphasizes the intense feelings of Zosimas by framing him in the evangelical role of Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary at the cross. Zosimas anoints Mary with his tears, weeps for her, covers her with his monastic cloak, and buries her with maternal care; he dares not touch her, just as the Magdalene was instructed not to touch the risen Christ (John 20.17). The hagiographer represents Zosimas emotionally identifying with the saint to the extent that he is seen to assume the persona of both Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt. This cross-gendering characterizes the physical intensity of Mary of Egypt's faith as masculine, whereas Zosimas's emotional intensity is a feminine expression of piety.

The gender reversals in the *vita* of Mary of Egypt are extreme examples of a hagiographer adhering to the Christ model in celebrating a saint's life that could understandably be viewed as revolutionary. Mary, unlike Pelagia, converts to the life of repentance without the aid of the priesthood, and she lives most of her spiritual life outside the jurisdiction of the church hierarchy. She baptizes herself in the Jordan; her desert *askesis* remakes her body into the eschatological image of the Son of Man. She assumes the guise of a hierarchical servant and reduces a priest to the status of an ascetic disciple. At the same time, however, the hagiographer also tempers the potentially subversive message of Mary's independence from the ecclesiastical hierarchy by introducing a male figure, the ascetic and priest Zosimas. In fact, Mary's hagiographer makes her encounter with Zosimas, the representative of the male hierarchy, the central feature of the *vita*.

The final sections of the life underscore the salvific importance of the eucharist. Mary begs the priest to bring her Christ's body and blood in a "holy vessel."[90] She takes communion at the church of Saint John the Baptist before entering the depths of the desert, and Zosimas gives communion to her toward the end of her life. These concluding passages also resemble the Hebrew purification rite for female adulterers. In Numbers (5), Yahweh describes for Moses the process for reconciling an unfaithful wife to the community. According to the ceremony, an altar servant shall "take holy water in an earthen vessel. . . . And the priest shall set the woman before the Lord, and unbind the hair of the woman's head, and place in her hands the cereal offering of remembrance" (Numbers 5.16–18). Mary's life thus reaffirms the authority of sacred males; even though the woman walks on water, travels at supernatural speed, and prophesies, at the end of her life she depends on a male priest to cleanse her sins, administer the eucharist to her, and bury her in orthodox fashion. The lesson that the female saint is ultimately subordinate to holy men is reflected in later medieval artistic depictions of Mary that feature the great woman hermit kneeling before the priest Zosimas to receive communion from him, such as Francesco Traini's (or P. Lorenzetti's), "St. Mary of Egypt Receiving the Sacrament" (Figure 2).[91]

Although the legend of Mary is a partial re-creation of Jerome's famous life of *Paul the First Hermit* (c. 380), Mary's hagiographer reorders Jerome's *vita* to conform more closely to traditional gender expectations. In Jerome's earlier version, a male ascetic, Paul, is the Mary of Egypt character, while the Zosimas figure is the famous Antony who travels into the

Figure 2. Francesco Traini (P. Lorenzetti?), "St. Mary of Egypt receiving the Sacrament," detail of the Thebaid. Camposanto, Pisa, Italy. Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

Egyptian desert to find and bury Paul, a superhuman ascetic. The differences between the male and female versions of the same story are noteworthy. In Jerome's narrative, the Zosimas figure (Antony) immediately recognizes the holiness of Paul (the Mary character). In the Mary of Egypt redaction, however, Zosimas first believes that the ex-prostitute's naked, blackened body is a demonic fantasy because desert demons often assumed the guise of women to tempt virginal ascetics. Jerome's *vita* places the two male hermits on an equal footing; they pray together, share bread, and Antony receives instruction from the elder ascetic without reservation. (Figure 3). In contrast, Zosimas questions Mary's validity as a holy person and as a teacher. Paul is very erudite whereas Mary is illiterate and her faith child-like. Paul wears a cloak made from palm leaves; Mary is ashamed of her naked body. Paul is an untouched virgin, but Mary describes her sordid sexual past in shocking detail to the naive Zosimas.[92] The subtle, erotic images that accent the *vita* of Mary of Egypt reveal the conservative gender reworkings of the female text. The didactic message of Jerome's *Life of Paul the First Hermit* is simple: the virginal, erudite, superhuman recluse Paul was the first inhabitant of the Egyptian desert and the mentor of the more famous Antony. Mary's *vita*, however, transforms the rather uncomplicated message of Jerome's life into a more complex narrative that relies on the harlot-figure as the embodiment of repentance.

The image of the harlot in the *Life of Mary of Egypt* exemplifies hagiographers' dilution of radical gender imagery by introducing more traditional gender precepts found in Hebrew and Christian discourse. The ancient Near Eastern *topos* of the harlot connects the depravity of prostitutes with the pervasive sinful nature of humanity.[93] The redemption of even one harlot signifies the potential for universal salvation. The life of the virginal Paul, whose asceticism and godliness are superhuman, could not communicate this message. His is an unattainable model, however, whereas Mary's is accessible to the sinner.[94] The body of a former prostitute, reformed through extreme mortification, mirrors the hope of an eschatological reward for contrite sinners. Like the *Life of Pelagia*, Mary's *vita* follows the theological pattern of the reversal of Eve's fall through the militant chastity of the Virgin Mary. In fact, the life promotes the cult and theology of the *Theotokos*, for Mary's conversion to the life of repentance springs from her supernatural discovery of her spiritual antithesis, the Blessed Virgin. Mary herself tells Zosimas that the Mother of God had guided her throughout her independent *askesis* in the desert. The hagiographer also emphasizes that the Virgin Mary is the mediator of grace and

Figure 3. Francesco Traini (P. Lorenzetti?), "Saints Paul and Anthony," detail of the Thebaid. Camposanto, Pisa, Italy. Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

that through her immaculate example even the most base sinners can be saved.

Mary's life also follows the biblical prototype of women whose faith is superior to that of the male apostles (Mark 5.24–34, 7.24–30; Matthew 9.19–26, 15.21–28; Luke 8.40–48; John 11.3, 21–32). The *vita* recreates the conversion of the sexually depraved Samaritan woman, who confronts Jesus at a watering well. The simple faith of the Samaritan woman humbles the male apostles who constantly question Jesus' symbolic actions. Mary's hagiographer, like the evangelists, embraces the rhetoric of inversion to castigate the pride of a monk who personifies misguided faith in a monastic rule. Mary functions as the Samaritan woman in her own life because, although she had been an insatiable harlot, contrition and submission yet led her to the purest faith in God. Her *vita* speaks directly to men who, like Zosimas, place too much value on the rational intellect and ritual observance. Mary's contemplative spirituality is gendered female precisely because of its emphasis on obedience and repentance. Indeed, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* is not about the ex-prostitute; it is about both Zosimas and the universal nature of God's love for humanity. The hagiographer uses Mary's simple faith and sordid past to rebuke the works-righteous monk and to affirm the possibility of universal salvation through the conversion of the harlot figure. Like the Virgin Mary who holds the redemption of the world in her womb, the life of the Egyptian Mary suggests that repentant women carry the hope of universal salvation within them.

The most iconoclastic features of the *Life of Mary of Egypt* are her physical description, her independent conversion, and her symbolic self-baptism in the Jordan. In his depiction of Mary's sun-blackened body and white-wool hair, the hagiographer fuses the image of the bride from the Song of Songs (1.5–6), "I am swarthy but beautiful. . . . Do not gaze upon me because I am dark, because the sun has blackened me,"[95] with the apocalyptic Son of Man from Revelation (1.14), "his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow."[96] The wizened desert hermit is both the eschatological Messiah and Christ's bride;[97] she is a vessel of sin and a vessel of redemption; she is the devil's votary and a virginal male's spiritual guide. The Egyptian begins her life as a whore and ends it as a desert hero. Few women's *vitae* demonstrate better the paradoxical nature of sacred gender.

Mary's legendary life, like Pelagia's, belittles the more conventional *vitae* of women saints. The defiled woman has sex for pleasure, she cor-

rupts Christian pilgrims, and she inverts the apostolic mission by "hunting for the souls of young men." The unrepentant harlot is like the female prophets denounced by the prophet Ezekiel for leading the weak into apostasy: "Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people?" (Ezekiel 13.18). Mary's *vita*, like Pelagia's, mocks the charity, chastity, and pilgrimages of most holy women. The harlot-saint's autonomy results not from celibacy but from carnal corruption. Her philanthropy and charity take the form of the free bestowal of her body on Christian pilgrims; she undertakes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land by offering herself as payment for the voyage. Mary's conversion to the life of extreme penance, however, transforms her unruly body into a disciplined receptacle of God's grace. Only the conversion of sexually depraved women, such as Mary of Egypt and Pelagia of Antioch, could teach Christian audiences that redemption is possible even for the most loathsome sinners. The *vitae* of eastern holy men suggest the opposite; only superhuman hermits can hope to bridge the gap between the temporal and the divine. The sacred fictions of reclusive females, however, soften the militancy of male texts by allegorizing the metamorphosis from Eve to the Blessed Virgin, from human perdition to ecumenical redemption.

5

"Through the Eye of a Needle"

Wealth and Poverty in the Lives of Helena, Paula, and Melania the Younger

In the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, wealthy widows house, nourish, and finance the prophetic and apostolic missions of God's most holy men. In Hebrew scripture, a wealthy woman from Shunem provides a sanctuary for Elisha: "So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food. And she said to her husband, 'Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God, who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there'" (2 Kings 4.8–10). God commands a widow of Zarephath to feed Elijah, and she brings the holy man water in a vessel and a morsel of bread (1 Kings 17.8–13). In response to the piety of both these ministering women, Elisha and Elijah resurrect their sons (2 Kings 4.34; 1 Kings 17.22). In the gospels and Acts, prosperous women support Jesus' ministry and the apostolic missionary movement by supplying their own households as neophyte *ecclesiae* and by offering food and drink to God's votaries. Jesus himself commends a poor widow who donated two copper coins to God: "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12.41–44; Luke 21.1–4).

Late antique hagiographers blend the sacred lives of Roman patrician women with biblical depictions of female patrons of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. The fourth- and fifth-century corpus of texts that comprise the Helena legend, Paula's *epitaphium*, and Melania the Younger's *vita*, contain dramatic accounts of philanthropy, pious projects, and patronage of the cult of martyrs and saints. These lives advertise the mobility, independence, and empowerment of imperial women who convert to the

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Sacred Fictions

Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity

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