Conclusion: Sacred Fictions

BUILDING ON MODELS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE, the Christian gospels established gender-based images of piety and faith that remained influential well into the modern period. In late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, those images were most powerfully and widely transmitted through the popular medium of hagiography. In part the product of their environment, the *vitae* of saints are thus a cornucopia of information for the historian about society, culture, and values in different times and places. To concentrate mainly on the historical "facts" of these texts, however, is to ignore their role as sacred fictions, as documents providing spiritual direction for ancient and diverse audiences. Hagiography is a very treacherous source, wherein the historian is tempted to treat the *vitae* as transparent windows on the past rather than as fictional narratives driven by biblical *topoi*, literary invention, and moral imperative. Perhaps predictably, crucial theological and salvific messages of hagiographical texts often have been neglected by historians intent on extracting social or political realities. In particular, feminist historians have analyzed the sacred biographies of holy women to reveal the hidden history of female empowerment in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is no denigration of feminist values to suggest that this is to enlist hagiographical texts in a modern political agenda that can only do violence to their subtle, convoluted nature. On the contrary, an understanding of *vitae* within their historical context can do much to illuminate perceptions of male and female capacities that have shaped the fate of both sexes throughout western history.

The sacred fictions of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages cannot be read at face value for the history of women in the church any more than the Christian gospels can be taken as factual depictions of Jesus' mission and destiny. The gospel of Luke (8.1–2) makes a distinction between Jesus' male and female disciples that would be exemplary for the future: "And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Suzanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." The

passage nicely captures the tension between the male votaries, "the twelve" who constitute Jesus' most intimate circle, and his female supporters who formerly were demon-possessed and diseased. The Savior's most important intimates are not the women who watch the events of the crucifixion "from afar" (Matthew 27.55) but apostolic men who lie "close to the breast of Jesus" (John 13.25).[1] The contrast not only encapsulates a difference of function among the followers of Jesus—charismatic males who will extend the mission of salvation and female patrons who will support them—it also assumes certain failings that were regarded as intrinsic to men and women.

Men, including some of Jesus' cherished companions, are liable to be alienated from faith because they venerate the human intellect. In the gospels, Jesus uses the metaphor of blindness to condemn masculine skepticism: "You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean" (Matthew 23.26). Vision and darkness symbolize Jesus' ministry to men: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind" (John 9.39). The resurrected Christ converts the future apostle Paul by clouding his mortal eyes: "Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing" (Acts 9.8). Men are the doubters of Jesus' divinity, both during his earthly ministry and after his bodily resurrection. Spiritually blinded by overweening reason, men are hard-won converts to the grace of God. Demanding proof of the resurrection, the apostle Thomas touches the flesh of Christ: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20.25).

Lacking the male commitment to reason and evidence, women do not demand physical proofs or miraculous signs. They unquestioningly recognize the Messiah, as with the Samaritan woman submitting to Jesus with the simple declaration, "I perceive that you are a prophet" (John 4.19). The failings of women lie in the flesh, not in their display of immoderate reason. Time and again, Jesus violates Hebrew taboos in response to the faith of women: "And [Jesus] came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you arise.' And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And [Jesus] gave him to his mother" (Luke 7.14–15). By touching funeral biers and cleansing menstruating women, Jesus ignores purity laws in the name of the new dispensation. He tends to the unique ailments of women, restoring a girl at the onset of menstruation (Mark 5.42) and curing a post-menopausal woman (Luke 13.11–13). When a hemorrhaging woman touches Jesus' robe, "he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease'" (Mark 5.34).

The presentation of Jesus' ministry in the gospels relies on ancient gender constructions that identify human intellect as masculine and human flesh as feminine. The skepticism of men poses a barrier to simple faith, while the "fleshy wrappings" of women impede the soul's journey back to God.[2] But if the faults of women lie in their bodies, their strength stems from their unquestioning faith. Inferior to men by virtue of their weak intellect and polluted flesh, women embody wellsprings of simplicity and devotion from which even men might draw. The gender-based temptations of the intellect and of the flesh thus account for the twofold symbolic mission of Jesus: to restore spiritually blind men to God's grace and to release the simple faith of the female as an example to all humankind. The biblical rhetoric of inversion depicts a human-God who ventures beyond patriarchal heads of households to embrace faithful women, who thereby become symbolic icons of the new order despite their pollution and intrinsic faults. The salvific message of the gospels depends on Jesus' restoration of diseased and demon-possessed women, for the conversion of these polluted females to pristine faith in God foreshadows the possibility of universal redemption. The fall from paradise that began with the failings of Eve will be reversed by the simple, submissive faith of her daughters.

Biblical discourse is the key to understanding the symbolic meanings of female *vitae*; scriptural notions of the male and female flowed directly into and pervasively shaped the writing of Christian hagiography. Late antique and early medieval sacred biographers simultaneously present the sanctification of women through the *imitatio Christi* and the obedience of these potent women to the greater authority of sacred males. The critical salvific directive of women's *vitae* is the transformation of female flesh from sin to redemption in imitation of the metamorphosis of fallen Eve to the blessed Mary. Because women were first alienated from God (Genesis 3), they personify human attachment to carnal indulgence and the estrangement of flesh from the spirit. But like unfaithful Israel, who "upon every high hill and under every green tree bowed down as a harlot" (Jeremiah 2.20), fallen women can be reconciled to God through the agency of charismatic males. The sacred biographies of desert hermits, patrician philanthropists, and Merovingian nuns all replicate the spiritual metamorphosis of the biblical daughters of Zion, who "walk with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go" until the

Lord converts them into icons of repentance, mourning human apostasy and sitting "ravaged upon the ground" (Isaiah 3.16–26). Christian hagiographers adopt Isaiah's rhetoric in presenting humble and contrite female penitents as mediators of grace for men and women. As a metaphorical reunion of flesh and spirit, the conversion of the female represents the possibility of redemption for all sinners, whatever their sex.

Hagiographical texts emphasize the hope for universal salvation through the conversion of whores, wealthy matrons, and pampered queens. The Syrian and Egyptian ammai who conceal their withered flesh under enormous mantles and creep about in cramped cells function as enshrined penitents, atoning for the fall of Eve by serving as archetypes of piety. The conversions of the harlots, Pelagia and Mary, to lives of radical self-abnegation refashion their debauched bodies into vessels of redemption. The sacred biographies of Roman patricians teach that even opulent matrons can humble themselves to hierarchical male authority and can pass "through the eye of a needle." The written lives of Helena, Paula, and Melania serve as spiritual medicine for aristocratic women clinging to the feminine vices of self-indulgence and ostentation. The charismatic lives of Frankish holy women show that institutional claustration, always under male authority, can transform the female body into a celestial benediction for barbarous nations.

Almost always written by men, the sacred lives of female penitents contain specific spiritual messages for the male ecclesiastical hierarchy. Mary of Egypt's mythological *vita* uses the leitmotif of inversion both to castigate masculine pride and to empower male altar servants. Mary is less the central figure of her own sacred fiction than a mere instrument through which a male priest, Zosimas, comes to recognize that naive faith is superior to the righteousness of works. Even though she is the means of humbling the prideful Zosimas, Mary submissively relies on the male priest to bring her the Lord's body and blood in a sacred vessel. The achievements of the Augusta Helena in her legendary biography are less important in themselves than in their contribution to her son Constantine in his creation of a holy polity. Helena is an allegorical Madonna of a Christian empire, whose nurturing and devotional actions soften the militant, apocalyptic *Vita Constantini*; her private, domestic concerns complement the public actions of the victorious emperor. The ambivalent portrait of Melania the Younger in Gerontius's text mutes the powerful holy woman's economic influence within the fifth-century church by introducing the biblical motif of feminine self-indulgence as an impediment to salvation. Because Melania retained substantial wealth until her death, she remained a scandal to the male hierarchy as well as a living proof of the depths of female frailty. It is clear from Gerontius that Melania could only exorcize the final demons of self-indulgence through the superior agency of sacred males. In their *vitae* of Frankish queens, hagiographers critique the usurpation by women of the powers of the consecrated male hierarchy by highlighting the evangelical image of dutiful women ministering to apostolic men. Just as Mary of Egypt took second place to Zosimas in her *vita*, Monegund's spiritual career, as it appears in Gregory of Tours's account, was an appendage to that of the *cultus* of Saint Martin. In like fashion, Queen Radegund's charismatic asceticism, as related in Fortunatus's *vita*, was qualified, and thereby controlled, by being placed within a context of domestic duty and cloistered virtue. In feminizing the spirituality of their sacred subjects, male hagiographers simultaneously circumscribed the charismatic power of holy women and elevated the hierarchical authority of male ecclesiastics.

Although the lives of female saints directed a special message to male altar servants, a more universal one was intended for general Christian audiences. Congregations absorbed the lessons of hallowed *vitae* through a variety of means, including written texts (whether read singly or with others), liturgical performances on feast days and holy days, and artistic productions (in paint, sculpture, and chant). However they were communicated, narratives of sacred women taught that both sexes can imitate Christ in their everyday lives—always in ways that conform to conventional gender precepts. Of course, the lives of contrite harlots, impoverished patricians, and ascetic queens all take the *vita Christi* to fantastic extremes—a naked Mary roaming the harsh Jordanian desert, a lice-infested Melania the Younger immured in a claustrophobic cell, Radegund branding herself with a red-hot crucifix. The hagiographers who constructed these images of extravagant asceticism certainly did not expect average Christians to replicate the self-inflicted torments of these saints. Rather, the very immoderation of suffering extolled in the *vitae* was intended to induce Christians to embrace the necessity for daily sacrifice, no matter how mundane and meager, such as giving alms to the church, submitting to penitential correction, enduring fasts, restraining from sexual intercourse, and forswearing ornaments and cosmetics.

The purpose of the hagiographers was not simply to denigrate or confine female capacities per se but to illuminate them for an audience focused on private, domestic concerns. In this regard, a crucial lesson of the lives of Pelagia and Mary of Egypt was that if the lowliest of society, common

harlots and profligates, could redeem themselves, then so too could those less ravaged by demands of the flesh. The lives of Helena, Paula, and Melania conveyed the moral to all ranks of society that wealth and position were less important than self-abnegation and piety. The lives of Radegund and Balthild taught that if queens could so completely suppress temptations of the flesh, if they could so successfully subordinate themselves to hierarchical authority, then far less exalted persons could do so as well. These general lessons were entirely consonant with the concern of hagiographers to mute or domesticate the achievements of outstanding women. Narratives of charismatic females submitting to the direction of male ecclesiastics served to reinforce the injunctions that all Christians should obey the priestly caste and that all wives should comply with their husbands' commands.

Like the apostles who were "close to the breast of Jesus," the lives of holy men generally presented distant ideals, dramatizations of the militant soteriology of the crucifixion, and the unique power of God's altar servants. In contrast, the *vitae* of holy women emphasize the restorative powers of the cross, the virtue of simple piety, and women's domestic ministry to superior men. Like the repentant females who ministered to Jesus and followed him to Golgotha to witness the crucifixion "from afar," holy women dutifully and submissively served charismatic men precisely because their spirituality was distinct from and subordinate to that of sacred males. That spirituality probably had a special relevance at a time when the ecclesiastical hierarchy was increasingly separate and distinct from the general society. As the altar space became the special reserve of relatively few consecrated males, most men and all women were excluded from the most sanctified area of the church. Lessons that could be drawn from female *vitae* had increasingly greater relevance to ordinary Christians than did narratives focused on the hallowed male priesthood. Sacred fictions of the female saint brought piety down to earth.

Subtle, complex, and replete with narrative incident, hagiographical texts had enormous potential for expansion and elaboration. Diverse meanings were garnered from (or imposed on) the *vitae* as they spread throughout the Mediterranean and reached into different social groups, especially as texts were scrutinized and interpreted to address concerns that were distant from those of the original hagiographers. In this regard, it seems that the more extreme and inventive were the sufferings of the saint, the more the sacred life was open to allegorical reconstruction. The *Life of Mary of Egypt*, then, experienced striking transformations, even though the central

narrative of the text remained unchanged. It was probably intended by the original author as a castigation of prideful male ascetics who, in their mortal attempts to live as Christ crucified, ignored the Lord's teachings on humility. That message, however, had only slight resonance for Frankish audiences unacquainted with the excesses of anchoritic asceticism; hence, in Carolingian Gaul, where paganism still flourished, the *vita* of Mary was read as an elaborate allegory of the conversion process. In eighth-century Byzantium, the iconodule John of Damasus used the *vita* of the Egyptian Mary to demonstrate how an icon of the *Theotokos* converted the whore to the life of repentance.[3] In the fourteenth century, an Italian merchant, John Colombini, converted to the life of radical privation after he read Mary's provocative *vita*.[4] For audiences in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the story of Mary's transformation from a debauched harlot into a redemptive vessel symbolized the future renewal of an apostate church divided by violent schism. In the nineteenth century, the French painter Dominique Papety chose to depict the first meeting between a shy Zosimas and a very seductive Mary of Egypt (Figure 5). John Tavener's opera, *Mary of Egypt: An Icon in Music and Dance* (1992), reworked the desert legend as a parable about the chimerical nature of virtue and the different paths toward salvation.

Few sacred biographies have had so extraordinary a career as Mary of Egypt's, but many were reinterpreted in novel ways. The life of Melania the Younger, originally a critique of feminine self-indulgence, was recast in later centuries as an allegory of the bounty that flows from God's grace, whereas political elements in the story of Radegund, which were central to its composition, were ignored to highlight the saint as the embodiment of monastic virtue. Audiences hundreds of years removed from the society of Roman aristocrats could appreciate the narrative of the life of Paula as an allegory about the triumph of obedience and humility over earthly obsessions. The *vita* of the Augusta Helena was the product of writers devoted to allegorical discourse, so Helena was consciously presented from the first as a mediator of grace for the Christian empire. This made it easy for later medieval and Renaissance writers to adapt the model developed for Helena to the lives of other royal matriarchs, such as the Byzantine Empress Irene (mother of Constantine VI), Blanche of Castile (mother of Louis IX of France), and Margaret Beaufort (mother of Henry VII of England).

By the seventh century, hagiographers had at their disposal a formidable array of *topoi* of female piety refined over centuries. They had become adept at applying conventions that first appeared in the *vitae* of ascetics of

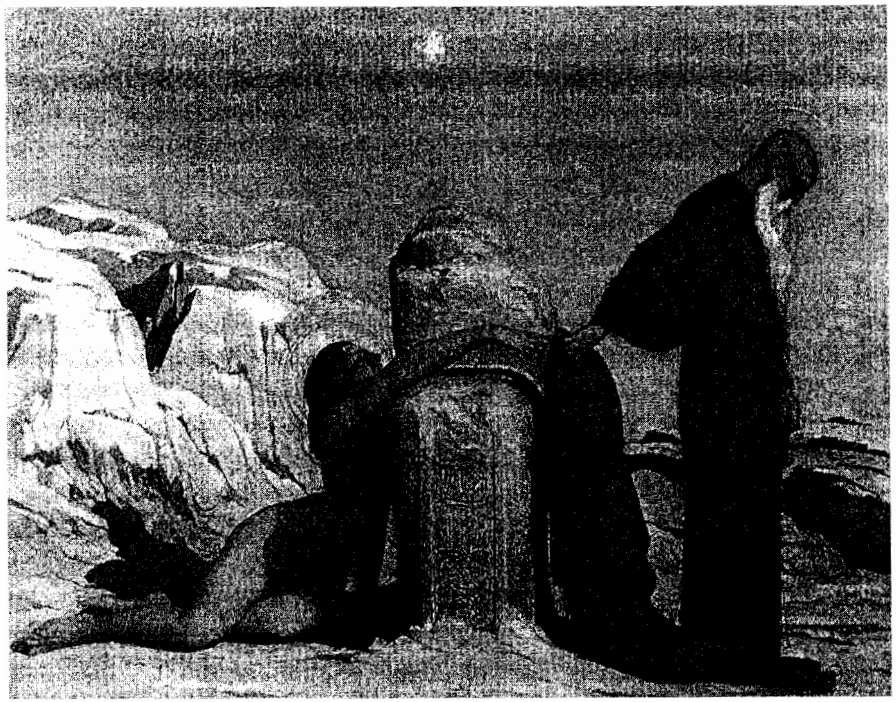

Figure 5. Dominique Papety, "Abba Zosimas delivers his cloak to Saint Mary the Egyptian (1837–42)." Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France. Musée Fabre—Montpellier, Cliché Frédéric Jaulmes.

the East to the very different scene in Merovingian Gaul. This hagiographical inheritance played a large role in the history of women in the West over the next thirteen hundred years. Biblical rhetoric, as institutionalized in the *vitae* of repentant females, continued to foster both negative and positive images of women in sacred and even secular portraits. Women who deviated from what men considered appropriate behavior for females were represented with the negative attributes of Eve: frail flesh, weak judgment, depravity, levity, and self-indulgence. In contrast, virtuous women in Roman Catholic and later Protestant narratives were seen as like the Virgin Mary, with lives exemplifying the ideal feminine qualities of piety, submission, motherhood, innocence, and compunction. Domesticity, philanthropy, and claustration, the crucial attributes of early medieval female saints' lives, continued to be the focal points of feminine piety for cloistered nuns and a diverse group of lay women. Domestic metaphors permeated the symbolic language of late medieval female mystics, who signified their rejection of the world through humble table service under the disciplined guidance of sacred males. Claustration, which constituted a central feature of medieval spirituality for women, emerged as a secular ideal in late medieval and Reformation Europe. Fifteenth-century preachers, such as San Bernadino of Siena, celebrated the *madonna clausura* ("cloistered lady") as the ideal wife because she rarely ventured out of her home and (allegorically speaking) knew only the company of angels. San Bernadino enjoined married women to avoid using wigs, opulent clothing, and featherbeds, and he even went so far as to urge them to avoid public appearances, including sermons in church.[5]

Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century did away with the institutional cloister as women's special domain, but they resituated women within the confines of a cloistered, secular household ruled by a patriarch. The home increasingly was elevated as a peculiarly female realm, where the wife served as the spiritual helpmate of the man and as the moral guardian of the child. The separate sphere of female spirituality, so thoroughly delineated in late antique hagiography, thrived in the secular atmosphere of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[6] While the supposedly spiritual nature of women meant that they were not suited for public authority, philanthropy remained an appropriate activity. Women could venture into public life, especially in voluntary reform organizations, to the extent that they supported worthy endeavors that were defined by men and that preserved the sanctity of home and the family.[7] Women who went beyond those limits risked criticism and scandal that was not radically different from that visited on Melania the Younger and Queen Radegund. Moreover, following hagiographical precedent, the physical appearance of women continued to be seen as an outward sign of their interior piety or depravity. The theology of the cosmetic resurfaced in the image of the nineteenth-century "painted woman" whose loose hair denoted a licentious female, while in the 1920s short hair on women was widely regarded as an assertion of hedonism and gender transgression.[8] Long after the hagiographical roots of such notions were forgotten, they continued to condition perceptions of the nature and capacities of the female.

Drawing on the Hebrew Bible and Christian gospels, hagiographers narrated stories that assumed common notions about women and men, faith and reason, reverence and authority, the sacred and the profane. Although little that they asserted on these topics was novel, the popularity and longevity of hagiographical texts meant that their biographies of holy

women and men played a substantial role in preserving, elaborating, and passing on a venerable tradition of accommodating female spirituality within hierarchical structures. It is clear that the audience for these texts was never composed only of Syrian abbots, Roman matrons, Byzantine courtiers, and Frankish lords. Rather, they were aimed at disparate audiences of ordinary persons seeking guidance and consolation in an exceptionally tumultuous time. The *vitae* of holy women were an important vehicle for teaching moral lessons relevant to the needs and aspirations of common Christians in their homes, families, and marriages. In sustaining an ancient tradition of saintly biography, from the female ascetics of the eastern desert to the penitent queens of western courts, late antique and early medieval hagiographers responded to deep-seated spiritual anxieties and hopes. Their sacred fictions held out the promise of universal redemption. As Zosimas pleaded with Mary of Egypt when shame made her stop telling her story, "For God's sake, speak, Mother; go on and do not break the thread of your life-giving narrative."[9]

Notes

Abbreviations

AS	*Acta Sanctorum*. Bruxelles: Impression Anastaltique Culture et Civilisation, 1970.
CC	*Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*. Turnholt: Brepolis Editores Pontificii, 1956.
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. New York and London: Johnson Reprint, 1963.
MANSI	Mansi, Joannes Dominicus, ed. *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*. 31 vols. Graz: Akademmische Druck—u. Verlagsanstalt, 1960.
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. Societas Aperiendis Fontibus Rerum Germanicarum.
EPP	*Epistolae*.
SCR	*Scriptorum*.
SRM	*Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*.
PG	J. P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia Graeca*. Paris, 1886.
PL	J. P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia Latina*. Paris, 1886.
SC	*Sources Chrétiennes*. Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1943–.

Introduction

1. "Mulier autem erat, quod videbatur, corpore nigerrimo, prae solis ardore denigrata, et capillos capitis habens ut lana albos, modicos et ipsos, non amplius quam usque ad cervicem descendentes": *Vita S. Mariae Aegyptiacae, Meretricis*, 7 (PL 73.677); translation from Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 41.

2. The Vulgate reads: "caput autem eius, et capilli erant candidi tanquam lana alba, et tanquam nix." Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version.

3. Author's translation of Vulgate: "Nigra sum sed formosa . . . nolite me considerare quod fusca sim, quia decoloravit me sol."

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