

THE *VIDA DE SANTA MARÍA EGIPCÍACA* AND JULIA KRISTEVA'S THEORY OF ABJECTION

Connie L. Scarborough
University of Cincinnati

The story of Saint Mary the Egyptian is one of the repentant prostitute and, in its essence, reveals the age-old dichotomy of Christian attitudes toward women as revealed in the opposition between the whore and the madonna, the temptress and the saint, and the figures of Eve and the Virgin Mary. Saint Mary the Egyptian forms part of a sisterhood largely created and epitomized by the early Church Fathers of sinful women who find salvation.

The popularity of the life of Saint Mary the Egyptian in Spain is attested by several manuscript versions of her story --one in verse from the 13th century and two in prose which date from the 14th century (Baños Vallejo, *La hagiografía*, 63). The dissemination of the legend from its first extant version in the seventh century has been widely documented.¹ I

will here confine my comments to the Spanish verse version, the *Vida de Santa María Egipcíaca*.² The *VSME* derives from a Western branch of the legend of Mary the Egyptian in which Mary, rather than the monk Gozimas, is the central figure.³ Also, the verse *VSME* is the earliest extant vernacular version of the legend in the Iberian peninsula.

In the Spanish verse *VSME*, an adaptation of the French *Vie de Sainte Marie l'Égyptienne*, Mary abandons her parents' home at the age of twelve so that she may freely pursue her life as a prostitute. She goes to Alexandria where she is so popular that her numerous lovers fight and die over her. One day, Mary spies a ship in the harbor at Alexandria. The boat is full of pilgrims going to Jerusalem and she asks if she can accompany them, offering to pay for her

¹ "La primera versión conocida de la leyenda está en griego, y parece deberse a Sofronio, arzobispo de Jerusalén (m. 639), quien probablemente la compuso basándose en varias fuentes: De la *Vida de San Pablo Eremita* escrita por San Jerónimo habría tomado el esquema general; el personaje de María pudo recogerlo de otra María que sobrevivió milagrosamente en el desierto durante dieciocho años, y que aparece por ejemplo en la *Vida de San Ciriaco* de San Cirilo de Escitópolis; etc. De esta obra se derivan tres versiones latinas, dos anglo-

sajonas y varias francesas, en prosa. En verso se conocen dos versiones latinas y una vida rimada en francés que parece ser el precedente más inmediato del poema español" (Baños Vallejo, *La hagiografía*, 63).

² Hereafter, *VSME*. All quotes from the *VSME* are from the edition of Manuel Alvar.

³ For a complete discussion of the Eastern and Western branches of the legend, see Joseph T. Snow's article, "Notes on the Fourteenth-Century Spanish Translation".

passage with her body. During the voyage she has relations with all abroad and, upon arriving in Jerusalem, she again begins to ply her trade. However, on the Feast of the Ascension Mary tries to enter the church with the crowds of the faithful, but a group of armed heavenly warriors prevent her passage. She prays fervently to the Virgin Mary and a voice from heaven tells her to go into the desert beyond the River Jordan where she should assume an austere life on penance. Mary goes out into the desert where she lives with no thought for the physical needs or comfort of her body. A monastery is situated on the River Jordan, at the edge of the desert where Mary lives. Each year the monks from the monastery spend Lent wandering in the desert in spiritual preparation for Easter. After spending 47 years in solitude, Mary encounters a monk, Gozimas, who is spending the season of Lent in the desert. Gozimas immediately recognizes her as a holy woman and Mary confesses her life history to him, but she makes him swear to not repeat it until after her death. Mary predicts, with accuracy, that Gozimas will be sick during the following Lenten season and will not be able to leave the monastery. After he recovers, she requests that he bring her communion at the River Jordan. All happens as Mary predicts, and Gozimas gives the communion to her the next year after which she goes back to the desert where she dies in peace. When Lent next arrives, Gozimas is anxious to return to the desert to find Mary. He finds her undefiled body with a message written in the sand instructing him to bury the body. At that moment a lion appears and helps the monk to dig a grave for Mary. Upon returning to his mon-

astery, Gozimas shares Mary's remarkable story with the monks. The brothers are very moved and rededicate themselves to the service of God.

Benedicta Ward in her book *Harlots of the Desert*, has shown how the early histories of prostitutes who repent of their way of life and afterwards follow the rigors of extreme asceticism fit into a wider context of monastic conversion during the early Christian period.

While cognizant of the hagiographic traditions to which the *VSME* conforms, its association with the composite figure of Mary Magdalene from the New Testament, and the monastic atmosphere in which it was most probably produced, we still must ask why elements of the story of the repentant prostitute were so appealing to churchmen advocating the ascetic life.

Perhaps one reason is that elements of the repentant whore's story embody the universal experience of abjection together with the basis for the Christian concept of sin. Julia Kristeva in her book, *Powers of Horror*, elaborates the theory of abjection. An application of this theory to the *VSME* proves most valuable in illuminating the story's appeal to those advocating the ascetic life. Structurally, the poem is a study in contrasts: Mary's lascivious life before her conversion in Jerusalem as opposed to her life of extreme asceticism and deprivation in the desert; her physical beauty as she plies her trade as prostitute as opposed to her outwardly hideous appearance after 47 years of martyrdom; her haughty arrogance and amorality as a prostitute and her humility and true repentance as an anchorite. Firstly, the poem's vivid descriptions of the physical changes which occur in Mary's body lend themselves to

Kristeva's analysis of abjection. Abjection, as used by Kristeva, may be defined as "the subject's reaction to the failure of the subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject's corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 70). Since Mary's spiritual drama, as portrayed in the *VSME*, is intimately bound to her use and abuse of her corporeality, her experience of abjection seems paramount to an understanding of her perceptions of her own body and its functions as well as the monk Gozimas' reaction to her physical appearance. According to Kristeva, a child's entry into the production of discourse, into signification, is possible only when bodily processes and sexual drives enter into a kind of stable subjectivity in which these functions become linked to signifiers. An awareness of bodily defilement is a prerequisite for what she terms claiming one's "clean and proper body", that is, the child's constitution as speaking subject (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 71). Thus Mary's recognition of corporeality, whether in using her body's capacity for sexual activity as a means for material gain or minimizing all bodily concern and awareness as an act of penance, relates well to Kristeva's notion that what is considered impure in one's body can never be fully obliterated. Mary is keenly aware that her efforts at mortification in and of themselves are insufficient to redeem her previous life:

Que fe aquí huna doliosa,
que por ell yermo va rencurosa
por los pecados que fizo grandes,
que son tan suzios e tan pesantes,
de que he yo gran repitencia

e só aquí en penitencia.

(vol. 2, 88, vv. 1013-1018)

"It is *impossible* to exclude ... psychically and socially threatening elements with any finality. The subject's recognition of this impossibility provokes the sensation Kristeva describes as abjection" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 71-72). Whether as prostitute or anchorite, Mary experiences a certain stable subjective identity, but the abject is always present and manifests itself unpredictably (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 72). Mary's experiences the abject when confronted by the heavenly guards at the temple's gates in Jerusalem. This celestial intervention shatters her mastery over the abject, her subjective identity and stability. Likewise, in the desert, after a solitary life of 47 years, she encounters Gozimas and feels compelled to confess her former conduct, that is, her former relationship to her body, and, with this confession, admit to the repressed, admit that her present denial of bodily comfort and necessities is but another unstable identity she has adopted. "Abjection involves the paradoxically necessary but impossible desire to transcend corporeality" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 72).

When Gozimas and Mary meet the second time, the monk offers her communion and the anchoress prays to Holy Mary to intervene on her behalf with her Son. She requests that her "galardón" (vol. 2, 100, v. 1278) for her years of service in the desert should be to die in the Virgin's company (vol. 2, 100, vv. 1279-1288). At this moment of prayer, after having confessed and received communion, Mary experiences the abject, the space inhabited by the

death drive (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 73). She wants to die and enjoy the heavenly reward for her extreme act of penance. "[T]he abject is a condition of the unified,thetic subject, yet is intolerable to it. Even at times of its greatest cohesion [Mary's 47-year dedication to the ascetic life], the subject teeters on the brink of a yawning hole which threatens to draw it into it. This abyss marks the place of the genesis *and* obliteration of the subject, for it is a space inhabited by the death drive..." (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 73). Since the abject insists on the subject's necessary relation to death and corporeality, Mary realizes that the denial of her bodily well-being has still not allowed her to escape its ultimate destiny.

However, since the *VSME* maintains such a strict duality of reverse proportion between the saint's physical appearance and her spiritual health (i.e. when she is considered beautiful her soul is corrupt and when her body has become hideous her spiritual being is beautiful) we must venture into Kristeva's analysis of the abject with relation to Christian principles.

In an important chapter in *Powers of Horror* entitled "...Qui tollis peccata mundi," Kristeva explains how, in Christian narrative, abjection is no longer considered exterior as, for example, it had been in Judaic tradition where defilement was based on dietary taboos, contact with lepers, etc., but rather interior, i.e. that it is permanent and comes from within (113). The Christian interiorization of impurity is at the core of the Egyptian's story. Her legend quite clearly exemplifies the teaching found in the Gospel of St. Matthew (23:27): "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypo-

crites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." Kristeva observes that "[t]hrough the process of interiorization, defilement will blend with guilt... But out of the merger with the more material, object-like abomination, a new category will be established-Sin" (116). And it is precisely the realization of Sin, of guilt, that strikes Mary when she is prevented from entering the temple in Jerusalem. Being cognizant of Sin, of interior impurity, leads the saint into her life of penance in the desert and this nagging consciousness ultimately reveals itself in her confession to Gozimas, and most particularly for our discussion here, in her receiving communion. Kristeva discusses the Eucharist as part of the tendency in Christianity toward interiorizing and spiritualizing the abject (*Powers of Horror*, 118). In Kristeva's terms, for the Christian, the Eucharist is catharsis: "divine nourishment, the body of Christ, assuming the guise of a natural food (bread), signifies me both as divided (flesh and spirit) and infinitely lapsing. I am divided and lapsing with respect to my ideal, Christ, whose introjection by means of numerous communions sanctifies me while reminding me of my incompleteness. Because it identified abjection as a fantasy of devouring, Christianity effects its abreaction. Henceforth reconciled with it, the Christian subject, completely absorbed into the symbolic, is no longer a being of abjection but a lapsing subject" (*Powers of Horror*, 118-119). For Mary, the figure of the repentant whore who epitomizes the lapsed subject, the Eucharist she receives from

the hands of Gozimas after her years alone in the desert without the solace of communion is the ultimate prerequisite to death. The being of abjection, defined as Mary living in solitude, subjecting her body to the elements, depriving it of food and comfort, in essence, denying her own corporeality, experiences pleasure, a sense of reintegration with her spiritual self after consuming the Host: "Cuando María fue comulgada, / alegre fue e bien pagada..." (vol. 2, 100, vv. 1273-1274). Her Christian "fantasy of devouring" has been fulfilled and she is now capable of integrating her physical need for devouring with a sense of spiritual self as lapsed subject in need of reconciliation with the Divine.

Another element associated with ingestion which embodies the Christian interiorization of abjection involves the three loaves which Mary initially takes with her into the desert. After she hears the voice of God which instructs her to do penance in the "yermo" beyond the River Jordan, Mary encounters a pilgrim who gives her three loaves of bread; miraculously these three loaves keep her alive during the 47 years she dwells in the desert. One is of course reminded of the New Testament miracle in which Christ multiplies the loaves and the fishes. With reference to the Biblical miracle, Kristeva notes that "Several lines of thought appear to converge on that article of multiplication. If there is, on the one hand, a concern for 'satisfying' the hunger of the greatest possible number, it is...to the spirit that the food seems destined, for Jesus does not cease calling upon understanding to decipher the meaning of his action. Satisfied physiological hunger gives way to unsatiated spir-

itual hunger, a striving for what 'it could possibly mean'" (*Powers of Horror*, 117). Kristeva's emphasis on the metaphorical meaning of the multiplication of the bread in the Biblical miracle is equally present, and indeed reminiscent of it, in the *VSME*--i.e., "that multiplication of dietary objects also constitute[s] (taking into account the inward displacement of emphasis) a sort of invitation to multiply, if not relativize, conscience itself..." (*Powers of Horror*, 118). It is precisely Mary's conscience, her feeling of guilt over her former life, that is multiplied in the desert together with the meager amount of food which sustains her for nearly half a century.

Another Christological parallel which appears in the *VSME* is the saint walking on the surface of the River Jordan in order to receive communion from Gozimas. The saint's identification with Christ reaches, in this scene, a kind of climax, but the identification remains incomplete due precisely to her condition of sin: "Sin, even if its remission is always promised, remains the rock where one endures the human condition as separate: body and spirit, body jettisoned from the spirit; as a condition that is impossible, irreconcilable, and, by that very token real" (*Powers of Horror*, 120). Even though Mary has renounced her body in favor of a life totally dedicated to the spirit, it is her own corporeality that served as instrument of her sin and, although momentarily suspended from its earthly restraints as she finds herself capable of walking upon the surface of the river, she reaches the far shore as a body in need of spiritual food, communion, to insure the remission of her sins.

In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva treats the multi-faceted Christian concept of sin, especially with regard to its link to desires of the flesh. Original sin, as conceived by Christian thought, belongs to both sexes; "but its root and basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation" (126). Thus after Eve entices Adam to eat of the Forbidden Fruit, he falls victim to covetous desires, not the least of which is the desire for woman--sexual covetousness (*Powers of Horror*, 127). And it is precisely this most basic manifestation of sin that is at the root of Mary's life as a harlot. But in terms of abjection, and in terms of the didactic intent of the story of the saint's life, her sin, meant for remission is absorbed, i.e., it is not designated "as other, as something to be ejected, or separated, but as the most propitious place for communication--as the point where the scales are tipped towards pure spirituality" (*Powers of Horror*, 127). It is Mary's familiarity with and incorporation of her sin which allows for its "recognition... [as] an evil whose power is in direct ratio to the holiness that identifies it as such, and into which it can convert" (*Powers of Horror*, 123).

In a sense the magnitude of her sin allows for an equally magnanimous outpouring of for-

giveness, of holiness. The interiorization of abjection "becomes the requisite for a reconciliation, in the mind, between the flesh and the law" (*Powers of Horror*, 127-28).

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- BAÑOS VALLEJO, FERNANDO, *La Hagiografía como género literario en la Edad Media*, Oviedo: Departamento de Filología Española, 1989.
- GROSZ, ELIZABETH, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989.
- KRISTEVA, JULIA, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia UP, 1982.
- SNOW, JOSEPH T., "Notes on the Fourteenth-Century Spanish Translation of Paul the Deacon's *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegyptiacae, Meretricis*", en Jane E. Connolly, et al. eds., *Saints and their Authors: Studies in Medieval Hagiography in Honor of John K. Walsh*, Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1990.
- Vida de Santa María Egipciaca*, estudio, vocabulario, edición de Manuel Alvar, 2 vols., Madrid: CSIC, 1972.
- WARD, BENEDICTA, *Harlots of the Desert*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987 (Cistercian Studies Series, 106).