PROMISCUOUS GRACE:
BEAUTY, DECAY, AND THE DIVINE IN THE LEGEND OF SAINT MARY OF EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

*Promiscuous Grace* explores how aesthetics and theology converge in the concept of grace understood as both divine gift and a feature of beauty. It suggests that surprising forms of beauty, including the grotesque, emerge when we attend to the complex interactions of sacred and profane elements in pre-modern works. This complexity is easily lost to modern readers who, careful to avoid orthodoxy, read hagiography against the grain often focusing on the scabrous aspects of the genre at the risk of identifying it too quickly with an aversion to beauty. Three medieval and early modern Iberian instantiations of the legend of St. Mary of Egypt are at the core of this project: an important anonymous thirteenth-century poem, *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca*; a baroque play by Juan Pérez Montalbán (c. 1638), *La gitana de Menfis*; and paintings by Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652). These works trace Mary’s transformation from dissolute twelve-year-old to penitent hermit, a conversion effected through the intervention of an image of the Virgin Mary. In its singular triangulation of beauty, decay, and the divine, this particular saint’s life functions as an exceptional vehicle for artists and poets to reflect on the question of representation in general and particularly on the function of beauty in works that ostensibly are about penance and asceticism. Each version of the legend is sustained by a web of relations: between sacred and profane, beauty and deformity, tradition and innovation, doctrinal content and sensual form. This relational approach leads to a more general reconsideration of both aesthetics and religion as spaces of active cultural negotiation rather than as neutral, closed, and self-referential spheres. This dissertation thus contributes to recent theoretical work on the intersection of religion and secular culture by offering an alternative to the methodological impasse created when works from the past that explicitly engage religion are seen as simply affirming or subverting *doxa.*
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On the Threshold, a Profane Introduction

“Beauty consuming itself like incense burnt before God in solitude” is the poignant way Émile Mâle, the pioneer historian of Christian art, described the lasting appeal of the story of Mary Magdalene, the archetype of the sanctified prostitute. *Promiscuous Grace* is an attempt to trace a different genealogy for our fascination with the story of repentant sinners of the flesh by taking as its point of departure the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt. I want to argue that Mary’s conversion from dissolute twelve-year old to venerable anchorite through her interaction with an image of the Virgin Mary has served as a productive vehicle for artists and writers to reflect on questions of representation in general, and particularly on the function of beauty in works that ostensibly are about penance and asceticism.

More precisely, this study aspires to illuminate a paradox seldom noted, namely that although the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt tells the story of a holy harlot, a sexy topic if there ever was one, it has been told in forms that are rarely recognized as attractive themselves, at least not from an aesthetic perspective. From the oldest vernacular instantiation of the legend in Spain, the thirteenth-century poem *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca*, deemed deficient and derivative by its own twentieth-century editor, to the iconographic tradition of this particular saint, which often veers towards the grotesque, tarrying with the beautiful would seem to be either beside the point or detrimental to the didactic purpose of the story. Indeed, the ascetic life Mary leads after her conversion, in its defacement of her once famous beauty, is often read as the fitting punishment for her previously sinful life. And yet, as the chapters that follow will show, the sidetracking of
beauty in the contemporary reception of the legend is all the more peculiar because the story itself is structured around the juxtaposition of human and spiritual beauty.

ACCOUNTS OF SAINT MARY OF EGYPT

Mary’s fabulous life circulated in Eastern monastic circles already in the sixth century, although the first surviving written record, attributed to Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, dates from the seventh century. In that tradition, and those that follow it, the life of the Penitent is embedded into the larger quest for spiritual perfection of the monk Zozimas. Accordingly, her vita actually begins with an account of the monk’s life-long devotion to God, which earned him a reputation for holiness and gave rise after fifty-three years to the temptation of thinking that he had nothing more to learn from his brothers. One year, during Lent, he left the monastery to meditate in the desert and came across the shadow of a human being, the anchoress Mary of Egypt, who called him by name and asked for his cloak to cover her nudity before she could reveal herself to him and share her story. She described her comfortable upbringing somewhere in Egypt, and how at the age of twelve, she left her family to take up residence with the prostitutes of Alexandria. Significantly, she pointed out that she did not receive money for her services, which she performed out of insatiable passion rather than greed, thus earning her keep by begging and spinning flax.

Ever unsatisfied, she noticed a crowd of beautiful men about to board a ship from Alexandria to Jerusalem, and she asked to join them, offering her body as fare. Once in the Holy Land, seeking more lovers among the faithful gathered to celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, she attempted to cross the threshold of the Temple of the Holy Sepulchre, but she was prevented from doing so by invisible, celestial forces. This caused her
to pause and reflect on her life and see for the first time her own sinfulness. Ashamed but hopeful, she turned to an image of the Virgin Mary placed on the outside of the temple, and asked for forgiveness and the grace to enter the church and worship the Holy Cross. The Virgin granted her request and further instructed her to cross the Jordan River and live out the rest of her life as an anchoress. While living out this command she encountered Zozimas, told him her story and asked him to return to the desert the following season of Lent to administer the sacrament of communion. Shortly after having received the host from Zozimas’ hands, Mary died, and her uncorrupted body waited a year for the monk to return. When Zozimas arrived, he found an inscription on the ground next to her corpse directing him to bury her, a task he accomplished with the miraculous help of a tame lion. Finally, humbled by his encounter with this greatest of sinners who is also a holy woman, he returned to his monastery to share the gift of her story.

This story, translated into Latin in the second half of the eighth century, most likely by Paul the Deacon of Naples, quickly became popular in the West, giving rise to multiple prose and verse renditions in Latin and in many European vernaculars. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, influenced by the rise of Marian devotion, an important development takes place: the story of Zozimas becomes abridged, and the sinner’s relationship to the image of her namesake is emphasized thus making Mary of Egypt, in the words of Duncan Robertson, “the true protagonist in her own saint’s life” (“Poem and Spirit” 312). The narrative order is reversed so the tale begins chronologically, as it were, allowing the narrator to amplify the juicy details of Mary’s pre-conversion life, which could not be told when the narrator was the reluctant and remorseful anchoress herself. The Spanish poem that is the focus of the first chapter belongs to this tradition, which influenced subsequent popular
retellings of the story in romances, pliegos sueltos, and even Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s seventeenth-century play La gitana de Menfis, the object of study of chapter three. That said, the learned Latin tradition also had a strong foothold through the wide diffusion of the anthologies of saints’ lives compiled by the Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1526-1611) and the Dominican Alonso de Villegas (1569-1603).

The general outline of the legend of Mary of Egypt as sketched out above shares obvious elements with the life of the Magdalene and of other so-called holy harlots. However, it differs from those of her sinner-saint sisters on two important accounts. First, the purity of the Egyptian’s will and wanton pleasure breaks the association of sexual promiscuity (lujuria) with opulence (lujo) that is implicit in the legends of Mary Magdalene and Pelagia and explicit in a panoply of early modern manuals of conduct, sermons, poetry, plays, and painting. At one point or another, all versions of the life of Saint Mary of Egypt make clear that she seeks sex, not for money, sustenance, or material comfort, but in pursuit of her own passion. The second remarkable trait of the Egyptian’s vita is that she is the only one not saved through a male intercessor, but through the direct and constant intervention of the Virgin Mary, or more precisely, images of her namesake whether as icon or as apparition. It is in this seemingly indiscriminate grace, which to the eyes of men appear as gratuitous as Mary’s sexual openness once was, that my work finds a useful convergence of aesthetics and theology.

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1 María Helena Sánchez Ortega makes precisely this argument in Pecadoras de verano arrepentidas en invierno. As an historian, her goal is to identify a cultural pattern that would explain a whole range of representational and social practices, therefore, she is primarily attuned to the similarities among the pecadoras, leaving little room for distinctions, such as the one I try to trace between Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt.
GRACE, RELIGION, AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Grace, as the philosopher and anthropologist Marcel Hénaff reminds us, is linked to charisma, to the Greek *kharis*, a gift, which may denote charm and seduction, but also what is indivisible from a person, her aura. Applied to discourse, grace becomes a feature of rhetoric identified with the “the energy of the speaker’s conviction, the rhythm of his speech, the clarity of his discourse, but also to the very deep certainty that it is an indispensable sensible joy that makes possible the sharing of thought, and without which any discourse would remain abstract and indifferent to its reception.” More generally, Hénaff identifies the quality of *kharis* with a*esthesis*, the creation of a shared sensibility, thus providing a more hopeful and creative vision of charisma than its Platonic version, which decries the mechanical fabrication of false illusions and production of desired effects on the audience. It is precisely this relational nuance that I want to recuperate through the engagement with visual and verbal expressions of the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt.

The Latin *gratia* picks up on a late development of the Greek use of *kharis* to mean a gift that does not require countergifts but gratitude. Christianity’s genius could be said to reside in its amplification of the sense of *gratia* as an extreme form of generosity. In positing, as Hénaff puts it, “a single god who envelops every human being with unconditional love

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2 I quote from Hénaff’s intervention in the dialogue on beauty posted on the French literary web journal <www.mouvement-transitions.com>: “Cette grâce […] tient à l’énergie de la conviction du locuteur, au rythme de son dire, à la clarté de son discours, mais aussi à cette certitude si profonde que la communauté de pensée passe par un partage des sentiments, par une joie sensible sans laquelle les discours restent abstraits et indifférents à la réponse des destinataires.” The argument he sketches there is found in a more developed form in the central chapter “Paradoxes of Grace” of his *The Price of Truth*, where he argues that language of grace (a purely generous divine or human gift that requires no reciprocity) coincided with the fading away of tribal allegiances based on gift-exchange. Here and elsewhere, all translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
without any distinction of status, gender, or nation, who becomes one of them, dies for them, and opens his kingdom to them” (267), Christianity also made possible a new founding of human relations grounded on the promise of universality guaranteed by God’s unconditional gift of himself to all people rather than based on tribal relations established through a reciprocal exchange of gifts.

The subsequent controversies over grace are well-known, and this is not the place to rehearse them again in detail. Instead, my goal is to pull out the strands present in the history of grace that would allow me to challenge the widespread contemporary conception of both art and religion as self-enclosed spheres operating solipsistically: religion believed to always say the same thing, and the aesthetic object believed to always speak only of itself. That challenge, as hinted in the definition of *aesthesis* in the previous paragraph, is mounted from a perspective that privileges the relational in our approach to matters of artistic expression and belief. To understand what that means, I need to say a little more about grace and justification. Justification refers generally to the transformation through God’s grace of the sinner from unrighteousness to kinship with God. The controversy over the doctrine of

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3 In the fifth century, Pelagius denied the necessary intervention of divine grace in the performance of good deeds and the achievement of salvation, an argument that was countered by Saint Augustine and was ultimately condemned as heretical. Ten centuries later the role of grace and human free will would divide Catholics and Protestants with the latter maintaining that redemption is a gift of God’s grace, attainable by faith not by deeds. The Council of Trent defined the Catholic Church’s position declaring unequivocally that human freedom is not foreclosed by grace. However, left unattended was the matter of how, specifically, grace and free will work together, and this omission opened the door to fierce debates within Catholicism between Jesuits and Dominicans; Augustianism and Thomism. In a succinct account of these controversies, Henry W. Sullivan notes that by the late sixteenth-century, “the debate on grace even became a topic of tavern-room oratory” (30). By the time of the publication of Sebastián de Covarrubias’ lexicon, the *Tesoro de la lengua castellana* (1611), the humanist demurely skirts the issue. After quoting Aquinas briefly under his description of the word *gracia*, as pertains to theology, Covarrubias states that “no es de mi instituto en esta obra seguir las materias, consulte scholasticos” [it is not within my competence or the objective in this work to treat these matters; consult the scholars].
justification, as explained by the contemporary theologian Alejandro García-Rivera, may also be understood in terms of presence, what he calls the “forgotten aesthetic dimension” (109). From this perspective, justification is not only a matter of sin and forgiveness, but also of making visible the invisible to the eyes of God and of his creatures. For Protestants, justification occurs in the presence of God (coram Deo), in a one-way relationship where “Christ’s righteousness is solely responsible for our being made just” (108), and conversely, human righteousness can only be truly perceived by God. In contrast, the Catholic position separates justification into an act (God’s gift of grace) and a habit, that is to say, the constant participation in Christ’s righteousness by imitating his life in one’s own. This imitation then becomes a public testimony of grace, coram hominibus, before the presence of men.

Similarly, the aesthetic (as understood in the following pages) is not defined by a private experience of the beautiful. It is less a matter of taste or judgment than a matter of being moved and of participating in the creation of a community of shared sensibility that Hénaff recognized in kharis and grace. By the same token, beauty is not simply synonymous with the attractive and pleasing, but leaves room for the unexpected, including the grotesque, as I will try to show through the paintings of Jusepe de Ribera in chapter two. García-Rivera describes how graphic images of human suffering may also be the domain of the beautiful thus: “theology discerns the beautiful in the face of a crucified man through the lens of the community that gathers around the foot of his cross; it is the communal dimension of art that allows the beautiful to shine through the most tragic depictions of the human condition” (5). This insight allows us to reconsider the role of Zozimas in the legend of Mary of Egypt. He is no longer simply a foil to her story — the representative of steadfast, masculine monastic virtue opposing Mary’s feminine, previously promiscuous yet always peripatetic life — but
he becomes also the necessary witness of her transformation: the public that justifies her not only in the eyes of God but of men as well. This is why Zozimas is entrusted with the dissemination of her wondrous life, not because his tale can contain her, but on the contrary because his words can put it again into circulation for the benefit of all who would listen.

It is from this perspective that Promiscuous Grace counters Émile Mâle’s location of beauty and piety in the Magdalene’s “solitude” with the public abandon with which the Egyptian gave herself first to the pleasures of the flesh and then of the spirit. From Sophronius’ fifth century Life of Mary of Egypt, where Virginia Burrus posits Mary as a figure “as vast — and as uncompromisingly elemental in her passions — as the desert itself” (147) to Montalbán’s seventeenth-century play, La gitana de Menfis, the legend of Mary of Egypt enables narrative and religious alternatives to an economy of possession and exclusivity.

RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AND GENDER

Grace is mediated in the legend of Mary of Egypt by her namesake, the virginal Mother of God, thus making her story as Patricia Cox Miller has put it, “the most consistently feminine of the holy harlots” (426). It is no surprise then that gender has been a very productive category of analysis. Material from Late Antiquity has been studied by Miller, focusing on the representational paradox of the holy woman in the legends of Pelagia and Mary the Egyptian, and more provocatively by Burrus whose chapter on the holy harlots has the explicitly feminist goal of “rescuing” a feminine agency founded upon, and celebratory of, the “sexual saturation of ‘woman’” (197) found in misogynous religious discourse. Simon

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4 On the link of abandon and the concept of literature as gift, see Hélène Merlin-Kajman.
Gaunt’s influential *Gender and Genre* showed the complex ways in which French medieval hagiography proved complicit with cultural attitudes that demand the willing submission of feminine protagonists to violence. In a Spanish context, Julian Weiss has focused on the coincidence of pollution and purity in the body of the penitent and how that ambivalence reflects a wider anxiety about social changes in the thirteenth century, while Andrew Beresford’s examination of five lives of holy harlots concludes that an important element they share is the representation of masculine responses to unfettered feminine sexuality.

The early modern fascination with these saints was no less keen. Enriqueta Zafra’s *Prostituidas por el texto* teases out, for example, a comparison between the exemplarity of the holy harlots and the popularity of picaresque narrative. And from a more historical perspective, María Helena Sánchez Ortega reads the proliferation of literature (religious, moralistic, historical, and imaginative) in ways that echo Gaunt’s findings: the stories of repentant sexual sinners condemn women to purge their sins with a rigorous asceticism that would destroy their bodies and the threat they posed to men.

*Promiscuous Grace* borrows insights from the scholarship just described, but without making gender its privileged category of analysis. This is not say, of course, that I downplay the role of gender. After all, the legend itself, in its many iterations, is organized by the juxtaposition of Mary and Zozimas: two modes of being in the world, of experiencing holiness, of testifying to that experience, and of thinking about the relationship of the spiritual to the creaturely. Gender is therefore present as a constellation of signifying systems at the core of this material, whether in its visual or textual manifestations. In other words, gender, like grace, entails a relational aesthetics, but whereas grace focuses on the communal
dimension of artistic expression, gender is above all a category enabling us to think about difference.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

In a synthetic article on the “Centrality of Margins” of medieval hagiography, Amy Ogden warned against a tendency in hagiographic studies to paint with too broad a brush at the risk of flattening the texture of the historical responses of the genre to socio-political developments. In each of the chapters that follow, I have tried to be attentive to the specific context of the material it discusses: a poem from the thirteenth century, Baroque paintings by Jusepe de Ribera, and a seventeenth-century hagiographic drama by Juan Pérez de Montalbán. However, I should like to warn the reader who seeks in these pages a historical claim about the diachronic changes in attitudes to prostitution, feminine forms of sanctity, or religious practices, that he will be disappointed. What I do offer is a response to Ogden’s challenge at the end of that same article, “to take hagiography and its stated aims more seriously” (15) — seriously as artistic expressions and as manifestations of what García-Rivera calls living theology.

The first chapter, “Incarnational Poetics,” focuses on Vida de Santa María Egipciaca (c. 1215), read in the context of Old French rhymed versions that influenced the composition of the Castilian poem as well as later vernacular and Latin prose versions of the legend. I study the parallels in the poem between legitimate persuasion (the obvious goal of any didactic text) and the work of illicit seduction that moralists from Plato to the Geoffrey of Vinsauf often accused rhetoric of performing. Placing the poem’s identification of rhetorical
prowess with sexual permissiveness within the larger context of a distrust of rhetoric, understood from Antiquity as a shifty craft, linked to the cosmetic rather than the true, the wanton rather than the faithful, I highlight the gender implications of the dichotomy persuasion / seduction in light of Mary’s rhetorical skills in the poem. Ultimately, I show that pleasure, understood here as rhetorical sweetness, the sensual, and the body are not negated in the poem, but reclaimed through the recognition of their value and indeed centrality to Christianity itself in the mystery of Incarnation, which is also essential in the poem.

The art of persuasion—of moving the audience to hold a certain belief or take a specific course of action through the appeal to reason, emotion, or character—often depended on the orator’s descriptive capacity to make his listeners see objects, people, places or situations. And yet, precisely because of their evocative power, images were also widely regarded with suspicion as potentially deceptive and seductive falsehoods, as short circuits on the pathway between sight and belief, as it were. In chapter two, “A Different Kind of Beauty,” I consider the visual representations of Mary of Egypt, focusing on Ribera’s portraits of the penitent saint and the question of decorum in the representation of female sainthood. I do so first, by tracing medieval and early modern anxieties regarding the function of religious images, including the place of beauty in a religious representational context as present in texts such as the eight-century *Libri Carolini*, and Francisco Pacheco’s 1649 *Arte de la pintura*. More specifically, I explore how those anxieties are amplified when the subject of representation is female. Then, I turn to four paintings of Mary of Egypt by Jusepe de Ribera all done between 1640 and 1651. I argue, by comparing the treatment of Mary to similar portraits of male anchorites and to her more famous penitent sister, Mary Magdalene, that Ribera recognized in Mary of Egypt a figure of paradox (following the logic
of both $X$ and $Y$) rather than of contrast (either $X$ or $Y$), and that the attraction to this particular saint stems from that convergence of beauty and ugliness, saintliness and human failure. The paradoxical conjunction of opposites touches the limits of what can be represented and breaks with decorum. From that break, Ribera’s depictions of Mary of Egypt emerge as an attempt to make visible a new kind of beauty: the beauty of the aged female body made holy, and which renders desire inoperative without turning the body into a repellent, unintelligible grotesquerie.

After having examined the tensions between craft and devotional content in textual and visual contexts, the final chapter, “The Drama of Belief,” considers what happens when word and image come alive on stage, as it were. I show how Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s hagiographic play *La gitana de Menfis, Santa María Egypciaca* (c. 1638) highlights the agon between the sensuous, carnal beauty of the unrepentant Mary and the divine word, whose beauty she deems inferior. Parallel to the question of beauty and seduction, I study the function of the profane elements introduced by the playwright in order to turn hagiography into spectacle. More specifically, I offer the figure of the *gracioso*—the funny sidekick, typical to Spanish drama, and the thorn in the side of moralists who condemned hagiographic theatre—as the necessary complement to Mary’s apotheosis. Although my understanding of the complementary nature of the profane elements in the play is inspired by Jacques Derrida’s subtle exposition of the “dangerous supplement,” I insist on the complementary nature of the relationship in order to show that in hagiographic drama decisively, *il y a du hors texte*. I focus on the representation of the miraculous in *Gitana*, specifically on the spectacular excess that is often understood as parodic and therefore subversive, to propose a
different conceptualization of parody, via Giorgio Agamben, one that privileges both dissonance and contiguity.

In all three chapters, I illuminate the web of relations that sustains each version of the legend: between sacred and profane, beauty and deformity, tradition and innovation, doctrinal content and sensual form. This relational approach leads to a more general reconsideration of both aesthetics and religion as spaces of active cultural negotiation rather than as neutral, closed, and self-referential spheres. What follows will be then, as much a study of profanations as their enactment. But profanation is not defilement, destruction, or even deconstruction. If the logic of the sacred mandates the separation of objects or practices from the domain of human use to dedicate them exclusively to the gods, that of profanation reassigns them to common use. *Promiscuous Grace* thus tries to offer an alternative to the methodological impasse created when works from the past that explicitly engage religion are seen as simply affirming or subverting doxa, or simply giving way to secular forms.
Incarnational Poetics 
and the Vida de Santa María Egipciaca

“El Mío Tresoro”

In a pivotal moment of the Spanish verse Vida de Santa María Egipciaca (VSME), a young Mary, proud of her beauty and bored with the men she has already seduced in Alexandria, approaches a group of young male pilgrims about to set sail for Jerusalem, hoping to convince them to take her along. She hails them in God’s name and introduces herself as a “fembra deserrada” (338), a forlorn foreigner in Alexandria, lost and impecunious. Finally, appealing to the men’s duty to perform charitable deeds on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she makes the following offer:

Iuro vos por Dios verdadero,

non he conmigo más de un dinero.

Fevos aquí el mió tresoro,

todo mi argente e todo mi oro.

Si en la nave me quisiéredes meter,

servir vos é de volonter… (345-48, my emphasis)¹

¹ [I swear to you by the true God / That I have with me only one coin. / Here is my treasure, / All my silver and gold. / If you will agree to let me board the boat, / I will serve you gladly.] I quote from Carlos Alvar’s 1970-72 critical edition of the Vida de Santa María Egipciaca (VSME from now on) and give reference to the poem’s line number, while the English
The phrase highlighted in this quotation, “el mió tresoro” that she offers to her interlocutors, serves a demonstrative function and could easily be understood to refer to Mary’s own body — a body whose beauty was catalogued in detail by the poet some hundred lines earlier (205-52) and whose desirability was attested by the bloody feuds among her lovers (171-80).

However, this utterance is also a subtle rhetorical performance on the part of Mary, who had earlier been rebuffed by another pilgrim when her blunt offer of her body in exchange for passage to Jerusalem, “[y]o … he buen cuerpo; / est’ le daré a gran baldón” (310-11) [‘I have a good body’ she said; / ‘I will give it freely’ (126)], was received with laughter and horror as the stranger ran away from Mary’s sinful madness, her “follía” (315). In contrast, the second time she approaches the pilgrims, she takes measure of her audience and addresses them as good men (“semejádesme buenos omnes” 336) who should respond to her distress on account of their Christian duty towards the unfortunate. She takes on a more demure disposition than in her previous exchange by casting herself in this speech less as a footloose temptress than as a damsel in distress. Additionally, as a lonely, miserable stranger in the city, she asks the pilgrims to take her onboard as an act of charity (357) or of almsgiving, which, in turn, will assure them a swift voyage (354-55). Consequently, the success of Mary’s speech depends partly on maintaining the ambiguity of the deictic, which at once points to but does not spell out the nature of her treasure and of the services she so willingly offers.

Andrew Beresford (“‘Encendida del ardor’”) highlights the contrast between the gallant decorum of Mary’s words in the poem and the more audacious articulations of this quotations correspond to the page number of Hugh Feiss’ translation (occasionally altered slightly to be closer to the original).
passage that can be found in two fourteenth-century texts, the prose *Estoria de Santa María Egiciaca* and the Spanish translation of Paul the Deacon’s ninth-century Latin version of the legend. However, while for Beresford the euphemisms Mary deploys are symptomatic of how the poem emphasizes her promiscuity rather than prostitution (48-52), I wish to highlight Mary’s rhetorical savviness to suggest that the uncomfortable proximity of persuasion to seduction is a central concern in the poem. As if to highlight this proximity, the ambiguity of Mary’s words give way immediately to unequivocal seductive acts once she and the pilgrims are embarked, “Primerament los va tentando, / después los va abraçando, / E luego s’ va con ellos echando” (369-71) [First she tempts them, / Then she embraces them. / And then she goes to bed with them (128).]

Mary’s repeated requests to board the ship correspond, significantly, to the first time Mary herself speaks in the poem. Before this point, the narrator had conveyed to the audience her various responses to other people’s entreaties, such as when we are told that she held in little esteem her mother’s advice (125). Mary’s command of words thus seems to be highlighted in this episode, including her clever mobilization of *ethos* and *pathos* (two of the three persuasive appeals sanctioned by rhetorical treatises) to persuade her audience to believe her and to act accordingly. In the context of such a staging, the extradiegetic audience can see in her invitation to the pilgrims to witness Mary’s treasure a self-assured reference that suggests simultaneously the value of her body *and* her words.  

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2 The analogy of treasure to language, of words and coins, is a commonplace, already identifiable in classical rhetorical treatises that assumed a parallel between the composition and interpretation of texts and economics, as both disciplines sought the best management of linguistic and domestic property. See Eden, especially chapter 3 on the classical and patristic tradition, and Astell for a comparison of medieval and modern treatments of the *topos*. On the association of Mary’s body to currency as symptomatic of civic and spiritual disturbances
This instance is but one of many in the poem where the permeability of the boundary separating legitimate persuasion from illicit seduction is brought to the fore. This chapter takes such an ambiguity as a point of departure to show how the *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca* engages in a highly self-conscious examination of the potential convergence of words and bodies, of rhetoric and the erotic, linked to a wider debate on the role that beautiful words and images should play in the creation and dissemination of religious texts.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Recent work in medieval hagiography has focused on the association of bodies and words, particularly how gendered attitudes and conceptions of the body play an important part in how holiness is constructed and transmitted. Virginia Burrus’ *The Sex Lives of Saints* focuses on the seventh-century Greek *Life of St Mary of Egypt* by Sophronius in conjunction with the legends of the other so-called holy harlots in order to polemicize notions of early Christian asceticism as staunchly anti-erotic or as irrelevant to the history of sexuality, while E. Ernesto Delgado (“Ascetas y penitentes”) traces the Late Antiquity debates over the value of virginity, asceticism, and monasticism which informed Sophronius’ creation of a new model of female sanctity in the figure of Mary. Simon Gaunt’s seminal *Gender and Genre* examines how an understanding of female sanctity as dependent on her capacity to overcome her corporeality serves to mediate gender relations for the audiences of the various French adaptations of the legend of Mary of Egypt, including the earliest known version, which is also the closest source for the Spanish text. Focusing on the anonymous Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, Andrew P. Scheill studies the delimitation and transgression of geographic, somatic, and hermeneutical boundaries. Finally, in a medieval Iberian context this approach has proven particularly fruitful in the study of the hagiographical works of Gonzalo de Berceo. Jill Ross traces the ways in which Berceo harnesses the masculine act of writing to the feminine power of the Virgin’s body in his collection of Marian miracles. Similarly, Julian Weiss has shown how in Berceo’s *Poema de Santa Oria*, the power relationship between female saint and male confessor / author is symptomatic of the complex relation between orality and the written word (“Writing, Sanctity” also in *Intellectuals and Ideologies* 67-82). His treatment of the *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca*, however, is less concerned with the subtleties of authority and authorship in order to focus on how Mary’s body “channels the aspirations and fears of an urban world perceived to be both vulnerable and self-destructive” (*Intellectuals and Ideologies* 94). Mary Jane Kelley’s study of the correlation of linguistic acts to the ethical quality of the characters in Berceo’s *oeuvre* does not consider gender explicitly, although the background of postlapsarian sign theory against which she reads Berceo cannot be divorced from gendered perceptions of fallen and redeemed language as present, for example, in Augustine’s reading of the Fall whereby sin is understood to enter the world through “a subversion of the art of rhetoric” (Jaeger 112), first by the serpent’s
IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Razón or Fabla?

The question of the efficacy of words is not asked exclusively of Mary’s eloquence. It is in fact manifest already in the opening of the poem where a contrast is posited between razón and fabla. The poem begins with the following direct address to the reader:

Oit, varones, huna razón

en que non ha si verdat non.

Escuchat de corazón,

si ayades de Dios perdón.

Toda es fecha de verdat

non a ý ren de falsedat.

………………

Si escucharedes esta palabra,

Más vos valdrá que huna fabla. (1-6; 15-16)⁴

Razón is, of course, related to reason, and according to Kasten and Cody’s Tentative Dictionary of Medieval Spanish, it can also refer to the faculty of discourse, to argument, persuasion, and doctrine, in other words, to honest speech. Fabla, on the other hand, has its roots in the Latin fabula, and refers to the faculty of speech in general and particularly to

pleasing and moving words and then by Eve’s equally seductive voice and persuasive words (verbo suasorio).

⁴ Listen, disciples [varones = males], to a story [razón] / Which contains nothing but the truth. / Listen with your heart, / If you would have God’s mercy. / It is all truth, / There is no falsehood at all. […] If you listen to this story / It will do you more good than any fable (117).
storytelling and speech-making, but it often carries the connotation of a fictitious story not based on fact.\(^5\)

The prologue would initially appear to follow a conventional distinction between, on the one hand, the razón of the poet as hagiographer, the salvific content and didactic intent of his words, and on the other, the vanity of the fablas or romances told by the poet as entertainer, such as those of the Arthurian cycle, which would have been familiar to the poem’s audience.\(^6\) Ramón Menéndez Pidal, following Edmond Faral, writes that “[e]l cantor de vidas de santos proclama su arte como más digno que el de los demás juglares, incluso los de gesta; los asuntos piadosos que trata le permiten desprezar las mentiras del rey Artus […] y dejar a un lado las historias de Ogier y de Roldán. […] El cantor de vidas santas funda su superioridad en el provecho moral que procura a sus oyentes” (348-49).\(^7\) Speaking

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\(^5\) Isidore of Seville’s discussion of rhetoric in the *Etymologies* follows a distinction drawn by pseudo-Cicero in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* where fabula refers to untrue narratives, historia to ancient and true matters, and argumentum to fabricated stories that are nonetheless believable. In a specifically medieval Castilian context, see Barry Taylor for a review of the different nuances of fabla, particularly in its intersection with literary fiction, and Jesús Montoya Martínez (“Retórica medieval”) on the adaptation of classical rhetoric by medieval Christian writers.

\(^6\) Quoting from Alfonso X’s *Crónica General*, Menéndez Pidal glosses fabla as “los relatos heroicos de los juglares” (349).

\(^7\) [The singer of saints’ lives declares his art as more dignified and worthy than that of the other jongleurs, including those who sing of historical matters. Religious subjects allow him to disdain the lies of King Arthur […] and to dismiss the stories of Ogier and Roland. […] the singer of holy lives grounds his superiority on the moral profit it provides his listeners]. On the connection of romance and hagiography specifically with respect to the legend of Mary of Egypt, see Duncan Robertson’s articles on the twelfth-century French poem (“Poem and Spirit” and “Literary Experience”), Michèle Schiavone de Cruz-Sáenz (“Texto Juglaresco u Obra de Clercia”) who concludes that the Spanish poem “representa una redacción … lírico-artística, obra de clerecía y mester de juglaría en su sentido más respetado y erudito” (275-81), and John Maier’s study of heroic modes in the prose *Estoria de María Egipciaca*. More polemically, Aldo Ruffinatto argues that the poem belongs fully to a profane narrative tradition rather than clerkly hagiography. Among the many studies on the intersection of romance and hagiography in a medieval Spanish context, three are of particular relevance to the *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca*, although they do not treat the
specifically about the poem’s opening, Manuel Alvar laments that the Spanish text is a mediocre paraphrasing of the French, but he pauses to remark on the Spanish poet’s disdain of heroic poetry as manifested in the significant interpolation of the couplet “Si escucharedes esta palabra / mas vos valdrá que huna fabla” (*Vida* 109) [If you listen to this story [word] / It will do you more good than any fable (117)].

Although scholars before and after Alvar have long noted that the verses that serve as prologue to the poem follow closely the content and structure of those found in the earliest known French manuscripts of the *Vie de Sainte Marie l’Égyptienne*, it is more appropriate to speak of the Spanish text as a reworking of previous material rather than as a straightforward translation. For example, the attempt to establish a rapport with the audience through direct address, a gesture borrowed from oral performance, is present in the French, but the Spanish poet intensifies the effect by replacing the seigniorial title of “[o]iez sagnor” with the less hierarchical “varones” (Beresford, “Función del prólogo” 259-60). Similarly, while the French poem draws attention to its oral performance through the occasional repetition of

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poem directly but study the Spanish *Libro de Apolonio*, a text that belongs to the same manuscript as our poem: see Marina S. Brownlee (“Writing and Scripture”), Patricia E. Grieve (“Building Christian Narrative”), and Ronald E. Surtz (“Medieval Hagiography”).

8 The most recent study on the relationship of the Spanish and French medieval verse accounts of the legend is by Michèle Schiavone de Cruz-Sáenz, (*Life of Saint Mary*) who suggests that the Spanish *VSME* is an adaptation of a French poem now lost but very close to the late twelfth-century manuscript (B) found in the Bodleian library, which she edits alongside the Spanish text. She convincingly argues that seeing the relationship of the Bodleian manuscript and the Spanish text can help modern readers reassess the contributions of the Spanish poet (most likely a Castilian monk trained by a French order in Spain in the early part of the thirteenth-century) which had been obscured by scholarship based on a comparison with later manuscripts such as the one housed in the Corpus Christi library in Oxford (C). All references to the *Vie de Sainte Marie l’Égyptienne* are to the edition in Cruz-Sáenz. For specific comparisons of the Spanish and French prologues, see Menéndez Pidal (347-49) and Alvar (*Vida* I, 109-12), both of whom conclude that the poems partake of learned and popular traditions, while Beresford (“Función del prólogo”) studies in detail the Spanish prologue’s emphasis on the themes of sin, repentance, and salvation to make an argument about the poetic integrity of all three texts that make up manuscript K-III-4.
listening verbs such as oiez and escouter, the tally rises in the Spanish text to no less than six in the first fifteen lines. This score in itself is not remarkable given that the poem was most likely meant to be either recited by memory or read aloud to an audience where the accentuation of the act of listening could be a way of setting the stage for the poem, so to speak, and as such in line with minstrel conventions.\(^9\) The poet of the Vida de Santa María Egipciaca incorporates certain practices from juglaría all while maintaining that his “palabra” (15) [story/word] should be linked to the honesty, truthfulness and propriety of the razón of the opening line rather than to the fabrications of counterfeit fablas [fables]. The Spanish poet-translator’s pride in the spiritual profit that his work can be expected to provide for his audience is present in yet another interpolation he makes to the prologue, where we read the bold declaration that listening to the poem is nothing less than a way to God’s forgiveness, “Escuchat de coraçon sí ayades de Dios perdón” (3-4) [Listen with your heart, / If you would have God’s mercy (117)].\(^10\)

Razón and fabla thus seem to institute the first of a long list of dichotomies that arguably structure the poem: razón / fabla, male / female, clerical / lay, virtue / sin, and

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\(^9\) Roger Walker’s study of the differences between the thirteenth-century verse Vida and the fourteenth-century prose Estoria de Santa María Egipciaca discusses the oral features of the poem (including repetitions, summaries and the presence of longer and more detailed descriptions than those found in the prose version) and speculates that its intended listeners would have included religious as well as lay people (L-LV). It is important to note, however, as G. B. Gybbon-Monypenny warns, that while the presence in a medieval text of listening verbs and formulas of direct address to an audience may suggest an oral performance, they certainly should not be taken as evidence against a poem’s textuality. See also Cruz-Sáenz (“Texto Juglaresco”), and Ellen Swanberg for a reading of the poem through the lens of orality and the adoption of lyric traits.

\(^{10}\) The logic of the exchange of God’s favor for the listeners’ attention becomes rather circular in the following stanza where we read that “Todos aquellos que a Dios amarán / estas palabras escucharán [...] / bien sé que de voluntat la oirán / aquellos que a Dios amarán; / essos que a Dios amarán, / gran gualardón end’ reçibirán” (7-14). [All those who would love God / Will listen to these words. / To those who give no thought to God, / Will receive great benefit from it. / If you listen to this story / It will do you more good than any fable (117).
finally, true speech and its concomitant effects (remembrance of religious duty, good actions, and salvation) versus the distraction and pleasure offered by false song which may result in spiritual damnation. And yet, the reference to fablas, to the popular stories dealing with the courageous feats of knights performed on behalf of the beautiful ladies they served, does more than simply serve as a foil to the poem about to begin. At their core, these stories are tales about adventure, desire, love, and lust, thus topically not terribly different from the exploits of a wandering, wanton woman which our poet offers up to replace them. The specter of fabla, of the possibility that even this earnest hagiographic poem may be beholden to fiction’s pleasures, dangers and temptations haunts the prologue and the poem as a whole, thus suggesting that the key terms fabla and razón may stand in relation to each other less as exact opposites than as the subconscious does to consciousness.

This suggestion underscores the distinctive way in which profane and religious elements share the same poetic space in the poem, a coexistence that troubled its classification at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹ I do not wish to align my reading with those that would see in the poem a profane form that would trump its didactic and spiritual aspirations, but neither do I think that an approach that would deny the pleasures of the text can do justice to the literary, philosophical and theological complexities of the

¹¹ See Ruffinatto’s catalogue of descriptives of the poem variously as “‘narración de asunto piadoso’ [narrative of religious theme] (Menéndez Pelayo), ‘vidas de santos en lucha con los cantares de gesta’ [saints’ lives in competition with songs of heroic deeds] (Menéndez Pidal), ‘juglaría religiosa’ [religious jonglerie] (García López)” (108-09). Most recent scholarship, however, accepts the poem as a hagiographical text that in form and content clearly belongs to the learned mester de clerecía tradition (Díaz Plaja; Weiss), all while dialoguing and incorporating aspects from romance.
As we shall see, an important nexus of these three fields resides in how beauty is understood to operate within the poem.

**Beauty and the saints**

The lines immediately following the call for a distinction between the poet’s word and the world’s fabla introduce the topic (Mary of Egypt) and theme (God’s forgiveness) of the poem, but focusing on the former, and putting an emphasis on Mary’s beauty:

De huna duenya que auedes oida,
quier’ vos comptar toda su vida:
de santa María Egipçiana,
que fue huna duenya muy loçana
et de su cuerpo muy loçana
quando era mançeba e ninya.

Beltad le dio Nuestro Sennyor
porque fue fermosa pecador.

Mas la merçet del Criador
después le fizo grant amor. (17-26)  

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12 See Ruffinatto’s comparison of VSME to the hagiographic works of Gonzalo de Berceo for an articulation of the most extreme form of the first position. For him, VSME constitutes at best, a pseudo-hagiographic poem since the narrative itself (not counting the prologue and epilogue) lacks a religious and didactic drive; instead, he claims, “lo que prevalence en la narración de la vida de esta figura legendaria de santa no es el eventual aspecto edificante, sino el tono marcadamente aventurero de la acción y la dinámica interna de sus partes; una perspectiva, por lo demás, exquisitamente literaria” (109) [what prevails in the narrative of this legendary saint’s life is not the later edifying aspect, but the significantly adventurous tone of the action and the internal dynamics of its parts—a perspective that is apart from that exquisitely literary]. At the other end of the spectrum we find Lynn Rice Cortina’s allegorical reading of Mary’s portrait as a sinner, and Connie L. Scarborough (“Vitalidad”) who reads in both VSME and the prose Estoria a condemnation of physical beauty as incarnated in Mary.
There is no doubt that beauty is the primary attribute of Mary; in nine lines her beauty is mentioned at least four times, although at this point it remains rhetorically underdeveloped, less described than indicated through the abstract adjectives loçana, fermosa. Although such an emphasis arguably serves a titillating function, stoking the curiosity of the poem’s audience, it is also clear that her beauty is presented as a gift from God, though one that was wasted away or perverted.

Beauty and high lineage are typical attributes of female saints, particularly of martyred virgins, such as that other celebrated female Egyptian convert, Catherine of Alexandria, who struggled against her own kin and suffered the torments inflicted upon her by the tyrant Maxentius rather than commit double adultery by breaking her vow of chastity to Christ and adoring the emperor’s false idols. In a classic article on saints’ lives and female readers, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne noted that in a vernacular English context, the virgin martyr becomes a privileged figure of female sainthood in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and in those stories, the female virgin martyr is inevitably presented as young, beautiful, wealthy and of noble blood.

In the narrative of Catherine’s life, beauty functioned as a sign by which her special relationship to Christ was made manifest. For example, in William Caxton’s translation of

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13 About a lady of whom you’ve heard / I wish to tell you her whole life: / Of Saint Mary of Egypt, / Who was a lady of great beauty, / And of her beautiful body, / When she was a girl, a child. / Our Lord gave her great beauty, / Although she was a comely sinner. / The mercy of the Creator / Later bore her great love (118).

14 On the Biblical foundations of idolatry as a form of adultery in a Judeo-Christian context, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit (9-36), and Julia R. Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard for a discussion of the Lacanian implications of the alignment of the second commandment (against idolatry) and the seventh (against adultery) for the structuring of the subject through language (“Subject of Religion” 77-82; 87-92).

15 See also Claire M. Waters (“Dangerous Beauty”) who points out that in virgin martyr legends, such as Sts. Catherine, Agnes and Lucy, their beauty functions as a sign pointing to their steadfast faith and purity, a visible index of their spiritual beauty.
Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, Catherine is herself described as “so fair of visage and so well formed in her members that all the people enjoyed in her beauty,” and it was fitting that she yearned for a husband “so full of beauty that angels have joy to behold him.” It is not surprising then that Christ, in turn, “desireth her beauty and loveth her chastity among all the virgins on the earth.”

Catherine’s situation stands as a significant contrast to Mary’s, where beauty does not signal back to her creator but instead serves her own ends. The description of her early years makes this explicit, as her licentiousness is attributed to her excessive “faith” in her own youthful charms which makes her impervious to any thought of a spiritual reckoning at the end of her days:

Porque era tanto bella e genta,
mucho fiaba en su juventa;
tanto amaba fer sus plaçeres,
que non ha cura d’otros aberes
mas despender e desbaldir,

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16 I quote from William Caxton’s 1483 translation of Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend* available online through the Internet Medieval Sourcebook; there are no page numbers. I chose this particular version because in contrast to many other narratives of Catherine’s life and passion (including Ryan’s modern English translation), Caxton interpolates the significant episode of Catherine’s conversion to Christianity and her spiritual betrothal to Christ, events that are often implicit rather than fully narrativized elsewhere. However, the importance of Catherine’s beauty remains central to most versions of the legend, including the fourteenth-century Spanish retelling from a French version found in the same manuscript collection as the *Estoria de Santa Maria Egipciaca*, Escorial h-I-13, edited by Hermann Knust alongside French and Latin related texts (231-314). Emily C. Francomano takes that text along with Álvaro de Luna’s fifteenth-century *Libro de las virtuosas y claras mugeres* to analyze how both texts take a typically female negative attribute, constant chatter, and turn it into a positive quality in Catherine’s praise-worthy eloquence.
It follows then that Mary’s most important attribute in the poem after her beauty is lust, as expressed in the epithet, “María plena de tan gran luxuria” (88; 100) [Mary, so full of lewdness (120)] which recalls in negative terms that of her namesake, the Virgin Mary’s *gratia plena*.

Mary’s beauty is harnessed to sinfulness when the Spanish poet identifies her as “fermosa pecador” (24) [beautiful sinner (117)] at the beginning of the poem. This initial characterization of Mary (20-26) is, as Andrew Beresford has indicated, the Spanish poet’s contribution, and it is significant because it attempts to universalize Mary as an archetypical sinner rather than focus on the particularity of the social and spiritual transgression of her lust (“Encendida del ardor” 49 and “Función del prólogo” 259). Beresford’s interpretation of Mary’s characterization puts weight on the noun “pecador” as a periphrasis that distinctively avoids naming and condemning Mary as a prostitute and presents her instead as an archetype of sin. I would like to suggest that the adjective is equally significant. Not only does

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17 [Since she was so beautiful and affectionate / She put great faith in her youthfulness. / She so loved to follow her fancies / That she gave no thought to other things / Beyond spending and having a good time, / For she was not mindful of death. (120)]

18 One should note that the presentation of Mary in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* presents a contrast with other holy harlot tales since it highlights her reputation as a sinner and penitent rather than her profession or her beauty for that matter. The first sentence reads, in José Manuel Macías’ edition: “Hacia el año 270, en tiempos del emperador Claudio, María Egipciaca, conocida popularmente con el nombre de la pecadora, se retiró al desierto en el que vivió cuarenta y siete años entregada a muy duras penitencias” (vol.1, 237; emphasis in the original) [Mary the Egyptian, who is called the Sinner, led a most austere life in the desert for forty-seven years, beginning about the year of the Lord 270 in the time of Claudius” (Golden Legend vol. 2, 227)]. For contrast, see the incipit of St. Thais, “Fue Tais una prostituta de extraordinaria belleza…” (vol. 2, 655) [Thais was a woman of such beauty… (Golden Legend vol. 2, 234)], or the more elaborate introduction to St. Pelagia, “Pelagia, joven bellísima, dueña de incalculable riquezas y bienes de fortuna, ambiciosa, presumida y entregada en cuerpo y alma a la lascivia, fue en su tiempo la mujer más famosa y popular de Antioquía” (vol.1, 652) [Pelagia was first among the women in the city of Antioch—first in
“fermosa” carry the inflection of gender that the rhyme scheme required be erased from the noun, but it also reveals the thematic preoccupation of the poem with the question of what could be termed the good usage of beauty: how can beauty be divorced from sin, prevented from becoming an end in itself and instead become a meaningful sign pointing back to God? Returning the emphasis on the adjective is not necessarily at odds with Beresford’s point about the importance of Mary’s characterization in the poem as paradigmatic sinner rather than common prostitute. On the contrary, acknowledging the specificity of Mary’s attribute “fermosa” as a qualifier for “pecador” allows us to understand better how her sinfulness can be generalized: the inability or unwillingness to put beauty to good use is the challenge faced by our protagonist, the men and women she meets, and significantly, by the poem itself and its audience.

possessions and wealth, and in beauty of form. She was also ostentatious and vain in her bearing, and licentious in mind and body (Golden Legend vol.2, 230). The phrase “the good use of beauty” echoes Susan Ashbrook Harvey’s “the good use of the senses” in her study of how early Christian writings, rituals, and practices regarded the bodily senses, and particularly that of smell, as legitimate instruments of human-divine interaction. A similar project of sketching out the place of sensuous beauty in medieval thought is at the heart of Umberto Eco’s précis, Beauty and Art in the Middle Ages, where he insists on the existence of an experience of beauty that reveals a love of the sensible world alongside the better-known medieval conception of beauty as an abstract appreciation of the transcendental values of “moral harmony and metaphysical splendor” (5). He cites, for example, Alcuin of York’s treatise on rhetoric where “beautiful forms, sweet tastes, harmonious sounds, fragrant smells, objects pleasant to the touch, and finite joys and honors” are presented both as easier to love than the rigors of religion (and thus potentially capable of drawing attention away from their divine source), and as a promising means of apprehending “the eternal beauty, sweetness, harmony, fragrance and joys” that are God’s own.

I am grateful to Ronald E. Surtz for pointing out that the description “fermosa pecador” might also be applied to the poem itself being a thing of beauty, since poetry, being the meaningful and ornamental arrangement of words, is by definition “formed,” and in the sense of formositas, always beautiful. It is not without interest to note that, in fact, formositas is a type of beauty considered by medical treatises to be a cause of love-sickness (amor hereos) when the psychological or humoral conditions are right. In the Viaticum, Constantine the African writes that “Sometimes the cause of eros is also the contemplation of beauty. For if the soul gazes at a form similar to itself it goes mad in order to satisfy its will” (“Aliquando
We can begin to see then that the insistence of the poet in demarcating a distinction between razón and fabla is symptomatic of a certain unease in the efforts to separate speech supposed to function as a path to God’s forgiveness from vain or deleterious speech. In another instance of this ambiguity, when Mary finishes her plea to the pilgrims, the poet refers to it as her razón (359). In the poem, the use of razón to denote an act of speech is typically reserved for prayers such as the one Gozimás utters at the start of his Lenten sojourn in the desert (928) and also to Mary’s final words to God when she asks for her reward after forty-seven years of penance, where, significantly, the rhyme razón / galardón (1277-78) echoes the key terms of the prologue razón, corazón, perdón, galardón.²¹

The anxiety that underlies the difficulty of separating fablas from razones finds a parallel in the concern expressed in the debates concerning the role of images in Christian worship, and more precisely in the troubling similarity of icons (visual or material artifacts that point to a divine referent) to idols (man-made objects that short-circuit the access to the transcendence promised by representation and ask instead to be meaningful in and of themselves).²² Ultimately, this common apprehension harks back to a more general distrust

etiam eros causa pulchra est formositas considerata. Quam si in sibi consimili forma conspiciat, quasi insanit anima in ea ad voluntatem explendam.” In Mary Frances Wack “Hereos morbo” 327-28). See also Michael Solomon on the uses of fiction (fabulae) in kindling or extinguishing lovesickness (Literature of Misogyny 57-64).

²¹ On two other occasions, razón is linked to prayer through rhyme, although the word itself refers to a just and reasonable action rather than an utterance: in ll. 1038-39, when Mary attempts to dissuade Zozimás from asking for her blessing (“tú me pides bendición / mas cuido no es razón” [You ask for blessing / But I think that it is not right (147)]), and again in dialogue with the monk who asks her to keep the Church in her prayers (“Mas santa Esglesia es bien con razón / que la metas en tu oración” (1700-01) [But as for mother church it is fitting / That you pray for her (149)]).

²² Tellingly, Abelard objected to the representation of realistic images, sculptures, of the Virgin Mary, because it would be difficult to differentiate them from those of a Venus or Vesta; more precisely, he feared the appropriation of pagan cult practices in Catholic forms
of poetic and artistic creations based on a suspicion of the material and corporeal aspects of composition and performance that link them, on the one hand, to feminine guile and the Fall, and on the other, to the commandment against making images. Augustine famously understood our inability to communicate without the mediation of material words (whether as sounds through air or words on paper) as a consequence of the expulsion from paradise which threw mankind simultaneously into the shamefulness that accompanies sexual awareness and into a theological, epistemological and linguistic “region of unlikeness,” or the gap separating spiritual from phenomenal matters. Language as such is thereby carnally implicated in the sensuality of signs, a sensuality that must be held in check so that what is loved and what brings delight is the truth expressed by words and not the pleasures brought about by the words themselves (Ross, 28-34; Waters Angels 73-95). Similarly, the position of the medieval artificer, of painters and sculptors, was compromised by the “fleshiness” of their work which all the more readily could lead believers astray in worshipping a thing created rather than that which it represents. Furthermore, creation being the domain of the divine meant that artifice in general and the plastic arts in particular, could be seen as reminders of humanity’s postlapsarian state since they are the result of manual work, itself of piety, such as the veneration of life-like, miracle-working sculptures associated with specific temples (Camille 220; 237).

23 I follow here Margaret Ferguson’s reading of Augustine’s key passage in Book VII of the Confessions where the metaphor of the region of unlikeness (regio dissimilitudinis) links linguistic theory and spiritual exile (“Region of Unlikeness” 846). For the connection between the Fall, language and sexuality see Augustine’s reading of Genesis in The City of God as well the interpretation of this reading in Eric Jager’s Tempter’s Voice (51-98) and Marcia Colish, The Mirror of Language (7-54).

24 The tension between the truth expressed by the words and the pleasure taken in the elegant composition and reception of these words may be illustrated by Saint Jerome’s dream of a heavenly tribunal charging him for being not a Christian but a Ciceronian, and the successful release of that tension in Erasmus’ appellation of Jerome “the Christian Cicero” in the preface to his edition of the church father’s works.
sometimes understood theologically as divinely inflicted punishment following the expulsion of humans from paradise (Camille Gothic Idol 35-50).25

The figure of Mary of Egypt embodies beauty gone awry on account of both her dangerous eloquence and of her alluring, desired, and desiring body which, as we shall see, is in fact characterized in the first half of the poem as a sort of idol. Moreover, the story of her miraculous transformation from gorgeous sinner to abject penitent saint, as mediated by an image of the Virgin Mary outside the Temple of the Holy Cross, makes it an ideal vehicle for reflecting on the potential of words and images to transmit a religious message and produce a change of heart — call it a conversion — in the audience.

AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

Eloquence and sensuality

As we have seen, the perils of eloquence and idolatry share a common source in the misguided love of beauty, of an undue appreciation of the superficial, crafted, and material rather than the substantial and transcendent.26 And yet, even as it pained Augustine to acknowledge it, our lives unfold in the “region of unlikeness,” in a state of spiritual and linguistic erring, where communication among humans must pass through “fleshly ears” and the imperfections of a sensory-bound language. The formulation “through fleshly ears”

25 Augustine’s writings are, of course, also instrumental to understanding the power and dangers of vision and visuality as conceived in the Middle Ages. In addition to Michael Camille, see Margaret Miles, “Eye of the Body,” and Cynthia Hahn, Portrayed on the Heart.
26 See for example the distinction Tertullian makes in “On the Apparel of Women” between whatever is born and thereby aligned with the work of God and the artificial, that which is “plastered on” and equated with the work of the devil (ch.5). Marcia Colish (“Cosmetic Theology”) offers a concise account of how early Christian writers from Tertullian to Jerome adapted Stoic ideas on beauty and nature to suit theological concerns and pragmatic ecclesiastic needs.
appears in *On Christian Doctrine* in the context of an analogy of the mystery of Christ’s Incarnation to the paradoxical relationship between thought and speech. For Augustine, thought depends on sensory means to manifest itself all while maintaining its autonomy and integrity beyond its expression:

> It is as when we speak. In order that what we are thinking may reach the mind of the listener through the fleshly ears, that which we have in mind is expressed in words and called speech. But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us (I.13.12).

The foundational mystery of Christianity, of God being at once fully human and divine, also played a central role in the adaptation of pagan rhetoric to Christian purposes. Augustine and the early church fathers inherited from Plato and other writers of Antiquity a suspicion of rhetoric’s troubling attentiveness to form and appearance over content and truth. Moreover, the perceived distance between rhetorical discourse and its subject matter was mapped onto the gap separating eloquence and virtuous ethos. Together, these disjunctions challenged the Socratic ideal of speech as a mirror of the soul by exposing the orator’s dependence on the external stratagems of make-believe, whether literally through the performance of a speech

27 In an article on the uncomfortable debts owed to rhetoric by sacred discourse, Rita Copeland perceptively points out that the accusation that rhetoric possesses no content of its own is, ironically, “the stigma that has ensured its [rhetoric’s] survival” (“Rhetoric and Religious Community” 138). Alexandre Leupin’s account of the “Be-Seeming” of ancient rhetoric notes that in the pursuit of persuasion, “the orator must of necessity do homage to appearance and not to truth, since ‘it is just when an orator gives the impression of absolute truth that he is speaking best’ (Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* IV, ii, 44)” (*Fiction and Incarnation* 19, emphasis in the original). As we shall see, the imperfect congruence of rhetoric and truth also gave rise to conflictive ideas of the value of eloquence.
“in character” or through the deployment of figures of speech and of thought that give body to elegant, coherent, and plausible stories that can convince the audience regardless of truth-content. Rhetoric’s dependence on the artifice of figuration and impersonation in order to give an impression of truth and thus win the audience over, has earned it the disdain of moralists and philosophers from Plato and Quintilian down to the church fathers and Nietzsche. And crucially, as scholars such as Howard Bloch and Marcia Colish have shown, that scorn passes through gendered tropes that align truth and rightful eloquence with natural masculine virtue while showy, elaborate discourse is associated with unnatural corporeality — read effeminacy — and sexual deviancy associated with homosexuality or prostitution.

The association and condemnation of effeminate excess with ostentatious ornamentation in words and appearance, lust, and idolatry is often a topic in the works of early Christian writers. Howard Bloch, for instance, has worked out in detail the logic of such a chain of associations, primarily through the example of Tertullian, in whose works the Biblical account of the creation of Eve metonymically from Adam’s rib, her submission to the serpent’s temptation, and her own subsequent seduction of Adam come together to

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28 A forceful articulation of this disparity may be found in Jody Enders’ study of rhetoric and drama. She writes, “[d]elivery thus imposed on the spoken word interpretations that were more readily perceptible than the logic of the deductive syllogism or inductive example […] it actually persuaded before proof, the ethical core of rhetoric” (emphasis in the original; “Dramatic Rhetoric” 65).

29 In addition to the groundbreaking work of Colish and Bloch, see also the introduction to Eric Gunderson’s Staging Masculinity, which focuses on Roman performance, and Claire M. Waters’ Angels and Earthly Creatures, especially chapters 4-5 where she discusses how the classical legacy, percolated through the works of Tertullian and Augustine, placed medieval preaching theory and practices in an ambiguous position lodged between the physicality of the preacher’s body and the spiritual content of his message. For a study of how the Classical and Patristic figuration of rhetoric as feminine is played out in medieval Iberian literary production, see Jill Ross’ Figuring the Feminine. Her fine introduction also extends the discussion of gendered troping to post-medieval philosophers, including Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler.
expose artifice (from the literary to the sartorial) as a reenactment of the Fall, in so far as it implies prideful criticism of God’s original work.\textsuperscript{30} And yet, it is important to remember that the Incarnation rendered problematic the unambiguous contempt of the flesh, thus opening the way for a validation, albeit limited, of the body and the bodily aspects of rhetoric. Seen in this light, Augustine’s analogy between speech and the Incarnation — in its suggestion that immaterial Spirit and Thought are revealed and made present through Flesh and the materiality of words “without suffering any deterioration in [them]selves” (I.13.12) — makes possible an appreciation for the body that serves as integument, as a covering, that paradoxically reveals what otherwise would remain imperceptible.

Many readers of Augustine have pointed out that such a legitimation of the bodily does not necessarily upset the hierarchy that places spirit over it. In fact, for those critics, Augustine’s acceptance of sensory-bound experience (including that of human communication) occurs within a carefully delimited context, which grants it, at best, the provisional status of the useful means toward the greater end in the knowledge of God.\textsuperscript{31} In this vein, Margaret Ferguson writes that “for Augustine the Incarnation does not redeem language itself; rather, the Incarnation guarantees the \textit{end} of language because it promises the

\textsuperscript{30} The brief version of this argument can be found in “Medieval Misogyny,” while the full exploration of how classical and early medieval anxiety about feminine wiles parallel concerns with the potentially deceptive nature of rhetoric, what Bloch calls the “estheticization of gender,” takes up a full chapter in his book \textit{Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love} (37-63).

\textsuperscript{31} The language of usefulness is, of course, Augustine’s (the distinction between things to be used \textit{uti} and things to be enjoyed \textit{frui} outlined in the first book of \textit{On Christian Doctrine}). For a discussion on how \textit{uti} and \textit{frui} map onto the distinction between things (\textit{res}) and signs (\textit{signum}), see Rowan Williams for whom both conceptual pairs are better understood dialogically rather than in strict polar opposition. Eric Gregory’s chapter, “Love as Political Virtue,” in \textit{Politics and the Order of Love}, provides a helpful overview of scholarship that has questioned a dogmatic interpretation of the distinction between \textit{frui} and \textit{uti}, particularly in relationship to Augustinian ethics and politics.
possibility of an ultimate transcendence of time. Augustine’s rhetoric is finally a ‘rhetoric of silence’” (861, emphasis in the original). Similarly, though from a less deconstructive starting point, Joseph Anthony Mazzeo concludes that many of Augustine’s works chronicle the saint’s learning of the meaning of silence, where “the mind is in immediate contact with reality” (187). Such a view does not discard the body, beauty, or the arts, but it does place them in a hierarchy where these external expressions will eventually give way to the “intelligible, the eternal, and the ‘silent’” (196).

An alternative to this ultimate rhetoric of silence, however, emerges when the incorporation of rhetoric into Christian ministry is understood as demanding a radical shift in perspective rather than simply subordinating the use of material means to spiritual ends. Rowan Williams’ sensitive reading of On Christian Doctrine shows how Augustine’s acceptance of the limitations of language entails accepting human imperfection and embracing our own creatureliness, and his article works out the consequences of the humility implicit in the Incarnation for Augustinian sign theory and ethics. If, as Williams writes, “the scope of Christ’s love lies precisely in his own gratuitous acceptance of the limits of history: what is uniquely res, the eternal wisdom of God, becomes uniquely and entirely signum, a worldly thing meaning what it is not” (144), then striving for possession of unmediated knowledge of God represents an act of un-Christian hubris. Moreover, the metaphoricity inherent to the realm of signs — the understanding that on a human level finality of meaning is always deferred — calls for the humility of spirit to accept our position and that of the world as incomplete signs, incapable of bearing or conferring fullness of meaning once and for all. The recognition of this fluidity liberates us from “the threat of an idolatry of signs” (Williams 148), from believing that signs afford direct possession (of knowledge, of the
world, of each other), and delivers us instead to dialogue and to a relationship to language and to other human beings understood as an ongoing process driven by desire, “not a triumphant moment of penetration and mastery, but an extended play of invitation and exploration” (142). This model of incarnational language, focused on process, desire and the usefulness of pleasure, makes possible a poetics that does not seek its own end in silence, but rather depends on the continuation of conversation; or to quote Jean Leclercq’s beautiful conclusion to his study of monastic culture, we can come to understand “literary style as an act of homage to God” (257).

Lest we think that this insight is restricted to theology, James J. Murphy, coming to Augustine from a rhetorical angle, makes a similar point when he reads *On Christian Doctrine* as more ambitious than a “mere rejection of the Second Sophistic.” Augustine, for Murphy, does no less than provide an influential justification of the integration of pagan learning to Christianity by identifying and responding to two distinct forms of “rhetorical heresy” (409). The first corresponds to the “sin of the sophist,” or the accusation that rhetoric neglects moral content in favor of beautiful form. This concern, as we have seen, carried within it the seed for a more pernicious problem, for as Justin Martyr warned, rhetoric’s love of words risks to slide into idolatry (in Murphy 402). The second is a subtle inversion of the first, though no less pernicious. *On Christian Doctrine* thus seeks to rebuke what Murphy terms a “Platonic rhetorical heresy,” namely, the folly of imagining that the message alone could be conveyed without any attention to form. To this end, Murphy argues, Augustine urged seeking an agreement of matter and form, of doctrine and eloquence in Christian hermeneutics and preaching.
Hagiography and the dream of a redeemed language

The difficulty of achieving the balance sought by Augustine — that is, of making sure that the superficial, sensory and sensual aspects of rhetoric do not mask deleterious content or, even worse, renounce their place as signs and attempt to become things — lies at the heart of the ambivalence regarding eloquence in medieval texts. On the one hand, when words are employed judiciously, the art of speaking well can serve as a marker of virtuous and heroic character, as occurs in the case of the paradigmatic epic hero, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, praised in the opening of the Poema de mio Cid (c. 1200) for his prudent speech, “fabló Mio Çid bien e tan mesurado” (l. 7) [The Cid spoke well and wisely].\(^{32}\) On the other hand, eloquence for its own sake, or when divorced from ethical content becomes seductive, deceitful, and meretricious. This darker, more negative perception is perhaps best exemplified in Fernando de Rojas’ Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea (1499). In that work, Celestina, a procuress of cosmetics and nubile girls, becomes the very embodiment of eloquence as pandering, and the stain of rhetorical impropriety extends virtually to all other characters.\(^{33}\)

The question of the value and function of eloquence is, for practical and philosophical reasons, also a central concern of vernacular hagiography. Pragmatically, as saints’ lives became by the thirteenth century one among many other forms of expression in courtly circuits and in the marketplace, there was a greater need on the part of poets, performers, and lawmakers to distinguish between proper and improper stories. As we have seen, when the poet of VSME insists on the distinction of his work, his palabra, from vain fablas, he is

\(^{32}\) On mesura as a rhetorical value and its ethical implications and importance in establishing the heroic character of el Cid, see Francisco López Estrada (“Personajes” 114-19); more generally, on eloquence and oratory in the poem, see Ermano Caldera’s detailed study.

\(^{33}\) Charles Fraker’s study of rhetoric in Rojas’ Tragicomedia notes, for example, that “rarely does a character become eloquent and moralizing without some sort of malice aforethought, broad or discreet” (Genre and Rhetoric 41).
making a claim for its superiority based on the spiritual profit that the listener may reap from his song. These claims place the poem along the line of the contemporary self-conscious declarations found in other *mester de clerecía* works, such as the anonymous *Libro de Apolonio*, whose only surviving Spanish version in meter was copied in the same manuscript as *VSME*. These works emphasized the novelty and great care of their poetic craft and they presented themselves as mediators between bookish authority and their lay audience. More formally, canon XVI of the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) singled out public entertainers, including those who trafficked in dishonest songs, and threatened them with nothing less than excommunication while instructing the clergy not to associate with them.

In Castile, Alfonso X’s *Siete partidas* (c. 1256) also distinguished legitimate entertainers who sang for their own pleasure or to bring joy to kings or other noblemen from those jongleurs who sang wanton songs for money (Musgrave 131, Montoya Martínez “Juglar” 455).

On a more philosophical level, hagiography tested the tenet of Christian epistemology which, through the concept of God as *logos*, understood as linguistic “both the knowledge of God and the process by which human beings arrive at that knowledge” (Kelley 66). Central

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34 On *Apolonio* and the relationship of *mester de clerecía to juglaría*, see Deyermond “Mester es sen peccado” and J.C. Musgrave “Tarsiana and *Juglaría*.” More generally on *mester de clerecía* as a unified poetic school, which would not admit *VSME* among its rank, see Uría Maqua (*Panorama crítico* 26, 166-67); for the opposite, and in my view, convincing perspective, see Julian Weiss (*Intellectuals and Ideologies*). On the coherence of the manuscripts that make up k-III-4, see Deyermond (“Emoción y ética”), Beresford (“Manuscript Unity”) and the last part of Brownlee (“Writing and Scripture”).

35 For the text of the relevant sections of the decree and a discussion of thirteenth-century attitudes towards the various types of *ioculatores*, see Helen F. Rubel.

36 Similarly, Thomas Chabham’s early thirteenth-century penitential noted that only those who sang of saints and princely deeds (“gesta principum et uitas sanctorum”) to bring solace to men’s souls were to be considered honest singers (Rubel 232-33). For a comparison to the situation in France, see Brigitte Cazelles’ concise account of the function of hagiography in the development of vernacular imaginative fiction and the subsequent “competition” between religious and “secular” writing (*Lady as Saint* 3-42).
to the question of the efficacy of words in relaying a spiritual message is the ekphrastic function of language, also known as *enargeia*, and its accompanying pleasures and dangers. Medieval and classical manuals of rhetoric encouraged the use of vivid language, especially to present an argument *visually* in order to persuade the listener. Indeed, as Nicolette Zeeman notes, medieval grammarians use the word *imago* to refer to rhetorical tropes, and commentators speak of narrative texts as “mentally seen” (44). However, as we have seen, this passage through the senses — indeed, conceived etymologically as sensual and pleasurable (*suadere*, in the sense of “to advise”) is understood literally as making something pleasant or sweet to someone (*OED*, “persuade”) — is not without its problems. Foremost, too sharp a focus on the poetic craft and its dependence on the sensory risks turning the poem itself into a “creature” or an idol, a man-made artifact that goes beyond persuasion and seduces its audience without actually fulfilling its promise of transcendence.

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37 Pre-modern ekphrasis encompasses a wider range of practices of figuration than the modern common understanding of ekphrasis as limited to the verbal representation of a visual object, usually a work of art. Ruth Webb’s work on classical and early medieval theories and practices of ekphrasis has shown how more than mere description, the injunction to bring the subject matter vividly (*enargos*) before the eyes aimed to involve the listener emotionally, imaginatively, and cognitively. Pre-modern ekphrasis can be thus understood as both the means of depicting actions in words (a specific rhetorical exercise) and the force acting upon a listener (*enargeia*); in contrast, description “confined (theoretically) to the object, is itself treated as an object to be dissected and analysed by the critic” (Webb 86). On *enargeia* as an organizing principle for monastic practices of reading, composition and meditation, see Mary Carruthers (116-70) and, although he does not use the Greek term, Leclercq’s account of imagination’s central role in sacred learning corresponds to the powers of *enargeia* (71-88).

38 The etymology of poetry as making or creating resonated in medieval rhetorical treatises such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova*, where the act of composition is likened to a blacksmith’s craft several times. On the figuration of texts as idols in medieval theories of poetry and cultural authority, see Nicolette Zeeman, who argues that the specter of textual idolatry can be interpreted as a manifestation of “the anxieties of a highly archival culture about its own textual inheritances, especially non-Christian ones” (“Idol of the Text” 46).
The fear of creating textual idols may help explain why medieval hagiographic texts often seem to opt for a sort of sublation of eloquence along the lines of the Augustinian dream of a transparent language, the rhetoric of silence. Brigitte Cazelles’ study of French hagiographic poems of the thirteenth-century notes that the path to holiness for both men and women passed through “estrangement, abnegation, quest for silence and solitude, [which] serve, in their case, as shields that protect them from temptation, thereby guaranteeing their access to God” (22, my emphasis). A more optimistic version of the quest for transparency can be found in the works of the thirteenth-century Spanish cleric Gonzalo de Berceo. Mary Jane Kelley’s study traces, for example, the hagiographer’s aspirations to a redeemed language, a language where words and things, ethos and eloquence coincide.39 This is evident in Berceo’s portrayal of saintliness where a character’s “buenas razones” are good on religious and stylistic grounds, just as easily qualified as “verdadera” as “fermosa” (in Kelley 71), and bad characters do not simply speak falsehoods and incite sinful behavior but do so in corrupt language (“lengua errada”; “mucha orrura” 77). In so doing, Berceo extends a verbal dimension to what Harriet Goldberg described as the style of Christian literary portraiture whose emphasis on the exemplary colors character depictions with an “ethically didactic” brush (326).40

39 Saintliness, in Berceo’s works, is recognizable through the characters’ proper use of language, and conversely, proper speech — whether it be the saints’ divinely inspired words or the cleric’s learned, didactic, well-crafted poems — is often presented as a pathway to heaven (“Ascendant Eloquence” 68).
40 Goldberg’s corpus are medieval didactic works, ranging from the pastoral-cum-debate poem Razón de Amor (c. 1205), the Christian chivalric novel Libro del caballero Zifar (c. 1300), Don Juan Manuel’s Conde Lucanor (1330s) to the historiographic Primera crónica general (c. 1274) and Fernán Pérez de Guzmán’s Generaciones y semblanzas (1450). Her ultimate concern is to show that individualistic verbal portraiture is a trait borrowed from the Arabic tradition.
In this linguistic ecology, where the goal is to “redeem” language by attempting to suspend the ambiguity of signs that resulted from the Fall, it is not surprising that success is presented as either falling into meaningful silence (St. Oria) or being divinely inspired through no linguistic intervention (St. Millán’s dream vision). Although, as Kelley notes, silence and visions are not the exclusive privilege of any one gender, not all silences are equal. While silence is a feature of Domingo’s childhood, and as such a preparatory stage for his later eloquence and efficient prayers, Oria’s habit of withholding speech, indeed of clenching her lips, remains even after her heavenly visions. Julian Weiss’ reading of the Poema de Santa Oria takes into consideration the gendered inflections of her story, focusing on how her silence and extreme cloistering serve as “metaphor for the victory over disorderly fleshliness and the recovery of the transcendental unity of body and spirit” which makes possible “a voice untainted by carnality” (“Writing, Sanctity” 458). This cleansed language then serves as the point of departure for the transformation of Oria’s particular vision into scripture (first by her confessor, then by Berceo himself) that partakes in her holiness as it makes it available to the community.

Female asceticism and silence, however, are not the only paths to sainthood. Preacher saints, such as Mary Magdalene or Catherine of Alexandria, present interesting models of female eloquence, which while still beauty-bound, work towards Christian ends. This beauty, as many critics have noted, serves both to attract and distract their listeners, and it is in both cases linked to their rhetorical prowess. Mary Magdalene, for example, is introduced in the

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41 On the issue of gendered eloquence in the Magdalene and Catherine legends, in Latin and in English, see Waters Angels and Earthly Creatures, 96-120; on the female reception of Anglo-Norman and Middle English lives of virgin martyrs (including Catherine of Alexandria), and particularly the representation of their beauty and eloquence, see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. Cazelles’ introduction to the anthology of French hagiographic romances
legend found in the late fourteenth, or early fifteenth-century, Escorial manuscript h-I-13, as she arrived at Marseilles in time to interrupt the pagans’ idol-worshipping:

E en la mañana, llegó la mala gente de la villa por fazer sacrificio a los ydolos.

E quando ellos llegaron, levantárase ya la Magdalena. Ella era muy fermosa e de buen donaire, e muy sesuda, e de muy buena palabra e muy arreziada. E comenzó a pedricular las palabras de la vida e de la salut. Asy que todos se maravillaron de la su beldat e de las sus sesudas palabras, de como las mostrava sesudamente [sabrosamente]. (28)42

Her beauty attracted the villagers’ attention, the same way it had once attracted the attention of men, but this time instead of inciting lustful thoughts or actions, her beauty delivers prudent words of salvation in a prudent or pleasurable manner.43 The congruence of beauty and prudence is ascribed by tradition to the Magdalene’s penitent contact with Christ, “E non

addresses the troubled relationship of female speech and beauty to sanctity in general, and particularly in the case of St. Catherine (54-59). In a Spanish context, see Emily C. Francomano (“Lady, you are quite a chatterbox”).

42 [And that morning, the town’s bad people came to make their sacrifice to the idols. And when they got there, the Magdalene had already been up. She was very beautiful and graceful, and very prudent and eloquent and very firm. And she began to preach words of life and salvation. And everyone was in awe of her beauty and of her prudent words and of how she displayed them prudently [pleasurably]]. I quote from John K. Walsh and Billy B. Thompson’s collated edition of h-I-13 and k-II-12 in The Myth of the Magdalen in Early Spanish Literature. The text in brackets in the quotation above corresponds to what can be read in k-II-12. H-I-13 contains five saints’ lives in prose (Mary Magdalene, Martha, Mary of Egypt, and Catherine of Alexandria) and four pious romances (Plaçidas, Guillelme, Otas de Roma, La emperatrís de Roma, and Carlos Maynes), all of them stories of pious, faithful women who are tested and after a period of suffering or penance are redeemed in the end. More recently, Thomas D. Spaccarelli has argued that there is further evidence for the coherence of the collection in the theme of hospitality, which he argues would have been apposite for a collection of stories intended to be read to pilgrims on the road to Santiago (A Medieval Pilgrim’s Companion).

43 The version of Mary Magdalene’s life copied in the later manuscript k-II-12 avoids the repetition of the last quoted sentence “sesudas palabras, de como las mostava sesudamente” by changing the final adverb with sabrosamente, pleasurably.
devedes maravillar sy la boca de la Magdalena bien fablava e sesudamente, ca ella avía besado los pies de Jesu Cristo” (28) [And do not be surprised if the mouth of the Magdalene spoke well and prudently for it had kissed the feel of Christ]. This aetiology did not seem to serve as a blanket justification of female preaching, or indeed of female speech in general, but it has been interpreted as a way of validating the use of potentially seductive rhetoric by male preachers (Waters Angels and Earthly Creatures 103; Winstead 101).

Similarly, when Catherine confronts the idolatrous emperor Maxentius, he falls silent, in awe of her beauty and eloquence, “callose e escuchola bien e fue maravillado de su beldat e de su parescer e del afincamiento de sus palabras” (Knust 241) [He fell silent and listened carefully to her and was enchanted by her beauty and semblance and of the eloquence of her words]. However, as a pagan idolater, he is unable to see past the surface of Catherine’s words and body, and instead he attempts to win her over by deploying his own good speech [“buenas palabras” (Knust 241)]. Catherine remains impervious to his flattery, and throughout the multiple debates with the emperor and his gang of philosophers she remains true to her message, delivering it at each moment with greater conviction and in words inspired by God (Knust 251-52). Although in the legend, her verbal persuasion coupled with the good will of her audience brought about by her beautiful demeanor converted the philosophers, the empress, and countless witnesses to her disputation and her martyrdom, the legend makes clear that love of even Catherine’s holy beauty for its sake would be no different from idolatry. On her way to decapitation, the townspeople urge the virgin to ply her will to the Emperor’s and thus protect “la maravilla de tu beldat” (307) [the wonder of your beauty], to which she responded: “Tollet vuestros vanos duelos que fasedes de mi beldat

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"que non val’ nada" (308) [Dismiss your vain mourning over my lost beauty for it is worthless].

Not incidentally, the target of these beautiful saints’ preaching is in each case an idolatrous governor who must be persuaded of the vanity of his idols. Tertullian denounced idolatry as synonymous with all other sins, such as murder, adultery, fornication, fraud, vanity, etc; idolatry is thus made to encompass “the concupiscences of the world” (“On Idolatry,” Ante-Nicene Fathers, III), including lasciviousness but also “the circumstance of dress and ornament.” Significantly, then, in the case of Catherine, her resistance to the idolater is at once a rejection of his pagan gods and of his sexual advances; the virgin martyr must resist the temptation to adulterate her faith or her body if she is to achieve sainthood.

Omitted from h-I-13 is the moralizing conclusion drawn by Jacobus de Voragine, where her eloquence, chastity, constancy, and wisdom are praised:

[…]
cinco cosas especialmente dignas de admiración caracterizaron a esta santa: su sabiduría, su elocuencia, su fortaleza, su purísima castidad y los muchos privilegios con que Dios quiso honrarla….[H]ay cinco cosas que hacen sumamente difícil la perseverancia en la guarda de la castidad, a saber: la abundancia de riquezas […], determinadas ocasiones, aptas de suyo para arrastrar a las personas que en ellas se encuentran hacia el pecado de la lascivia; la edad juvenil, en la que la presión de la lujuria es más fuerte; la libertad, poco amiga de frenos; y la belleza, que por sí es provocativa. (vol. 2, 773-74)45

45 [This commentary is also missing from the Ryan’s English translation of Voragine. However, it is present in William Caxton’s translation: It is to be noted that this blessed virgin S. Katherine seemeth and appeareth marvellous in five things: first, in wisdom, secondly, in eloquence, thirdly, in constancy, fourthly, in cleanness of chastity, and fifthly, in privilege of dignity. […] For there be five things in which chastity may perish, that is in
This conclusion, Waters argues, picks up Tertullian’s association of idolatry with femininity, lasciviousness, eloquence, and beauty to show how female preacher-saints deploy “feminine allure with similarly beautiful speech the better to destroy the idolatrous attraction to verbal or physical beauty for its own sake” (103) in what amounts to another version of hagiography’s iconoclastic tendencies.

What does the *Vida de Santa María Egipciaca* contribute to this legacy? As seen in the previous section, it is clear that the poem is concerned with working through the difficulty of distinguishing profitable *razones* from vain *fablas*. But does it also fall in line with what one could call iconoclastic readings of hagiography? That is to say, are beauty and eloquence present in the poem only to be overcome or even destroyed? I would suggest that *VSME* takes a different direction, and by explicitly thematizing the connection of words and bodies, the poem opts on the side of humility, not claiming any prelapsarian language, but rather by embracing the carnality of discourse as sanctioned by the mystery of the Incarnation as precisely that which makes persuasion possible by engaging the senses and the body.

**IDOLATRY, PORTRAITURE, AND INCARNATIONAL POETRY**

*Buena fablador, cuerpo gençor*

Let us return to the scene of Mary’s encounter with the pilgrims quoted in the opening of this chapter, this time paying as close attention to the poet’s way with words as to the sinner-
saint’s. The poem follows the so-called Western development of the legend where the focus is on Mary’s life, from her years in Egypt to her conversion in Jerusalem and penitence in the desert. This tradition situates the encounter with the pilgrims immediately after the audience has indulged in a colorful portrait of Mary and her clothing and preceding the description of Mary’s abandon to debauchery aboard the pilgrim ship.\(^4\) I shall treat at greater length the importance of the portrait in its relationship to idolatry in the next section, but for now, the concluding lines of the rhetorical set piece comprised by the descriptions of Mary’s body and her attire merit closer analysis to see how the poem conflates eloquence and the erotic.

As we saw in Mary’s interaction with the pilgrims, among her charms is the gift of eloquent speech — a gift that, in this poem, is associated with the beauty of her body. In addition to the ambiguity of Mary’s allusion to her treasure in her exchange with the pilgrims, the concluding lines of the poem’s detailed portrait of her as a young sinner makes a similar point by making the loveliness of her body echo her honeyed words in the rhymed adjective-noun phrases that characterize her:

\[\text{Tanto era} \quad \text{buena fablador}\]
\[\quad \text{e tanto habié el} \quad \text{cuerpo gençor},\]
\[\quad \text{que un fijo de emperador}\]

\(^4\) The Western versions of the legend date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Latin as well as vernacular languages. They focus on the transformation of Mary from sinner to anchorite, and the role of Zozimás diminishes to that of witness and interpreter of her life (cf. Dembowski and Robertson “Poem and Spirit” for the French and Craddock “Apuntes,” de Cruz-Sáenz \textit{Life of St. Mary of Egypt}, and Snow “Notes” for the development of the Spanish legend). Belonging to a tradition, however, does not imply that there are no differences between versions. The prose \textit{Estoria}, also a Western text, for example, follows its French source and renders in a simple declarative sentence what is in the poem a colorful description of Mary, but it still places the encounter with the pilgrims immediately after stating that “Grant beldade ella avía … ella se guisava bien e bestía de los mejores paños e de los mas fermosos que podía fallar” (Walker 6) [She had great beauty … she was well adorned and wore the best and most beautiful clothes she could find].
la prendia por uxor. (249-52, my emphasis)\textsuperscript{47}

A comparison with the French poem is instructive. The corresponding lines in both compositions immediately follow the dismay expressed by Alexandrians upon seeing such a noble woman lead such a licentious life:

\textit{Car a toz respondoit raison}

\textit{Tant ert de bele afaitison}

\textit{que li fiz d’un empereor}

\textit{la poist prendre par honor.} (203-06)\textsuperscript{48}

Mary’s speech here, her \textit{raison}, is limited to rationalizing or offering a response to the public gossiping that follows her scandalous activities, while in the Spanish version, the descriptive “buena fablador” makes a stronger claim for her rhetorical skills. Similarly, the concreteness of the “cuerpo gençor” has replaced the rather vague “bele afaitison,” glossed by Cruz-Sáenz as “beautiful manner” (217).

This characterization of Mary is all the more peculiar given that it precedes her first linguistic intervention in the poem where the audience will experience first-hand just how dangerous is the combination of a “buena fablador” in a “cuerpo gençor.” The episode with the pilgrims marks a double turning point in the story. At the level of plot, it is a convenient and verisimilar way to get Mary to Palestine in preparation for her eventual conversion in front of the temple of the Holy Cross. Thematically, it marks Mary’s further degeneration and sinfulness as the debauchery on the ship, we are told, spared not the old, not the wise nor the chaste. The effect is all the stronger because the power of her craft, “su mester” (378) —

\textsuperscript{47} [She was such a good speaker / and she had such a lovely body / that the son of any emperor / would take her as his bride (124)]

\textsuperscript{48} [For she gave an answer to everyone / and her manner was so beautiful / that the son of an emperor / could take her as wife]
which may in this context encompass both verbal and carnal seduction — is not simply declared, but following the rhetorical imperative to bring the subject matter vividly before the eyes, the audience is made witness to the scene. As we shall see in greater detail, in contrast to the Greek and Latin sources that comprise the Eastern tradition, the Western branch of the legend (including VSME), changes the narrative structure to follow a chronological presentation of Mary’s life. This innovation entailed the amplification of Mary’s pre-penitent adventures, including the meticulous portrayal of her beauty and the representation of her seductive actions as if they were happening before the audience’s eyes, thereby engaging their imagination cognitively and affectively.

49 It is not without interest to note that in the Libro de Apolonio, copied in the same codex as VSME, we find a similar ambiguity of the nature of a young woman’s “mester.” The protagonist’s daughter, Tarsiana, having narrowly escaped execution, is kidnapped by pirates and sold at the age of twelve (the same age Mary left her house “pora más fer ssu voluntat” [to better do her own will] in Alexandria) to a brothel. Intent on keeping her virginity, Tarsiana famously bargains with the brothel-keeper to let her ply a different but more profitable trade, “Otro mester sabía qu’es más sin pecado, / que es más ganançioso e es más ondrado” (stanza 422) [She knew of another craft that was without sin / that was more profitable and more honest]. The periphrasis “mester...más sin pecado,” as becomes clear a few stanzas later when Tarsiana dresses up (“rica miente adobada”) and leaves the brothel for the marketplace, refers to juglaria. Tarsiana’s songs about her misadventures were so sweet that she attracted as many men to the marketplace as once her beauty brought to the brothel, “Fenchíense de omnes a priesa los portales, / non les cabi<e>én las plaças, subiënse a los poyales” (stanza 427) [Men would hurry and crowd around the gates / there was no room on the square, they would climb on the stone benches]. Although the poem does not offer the lyrics of her song at this point, one could imagine that the content would include a version of the words she had used earlier to arouse her executioner’s mercy (stanzas 382-83), which are not unlike those of Mary pleading with the pilgrims. On the proximity of juglareas and prostitutas, see J.C. Musgrave, 132-38.

50 Several critics have commented on the fact that the VSME poet amplifies the material translated from his source primarily in the first three quarters of the story (Mary in Alexandria, Mary’s portrait, the episodes with the pilgrims, and her prayer to the Virgin), while cutting about 174 verses from the end (cf. Manuel Alvar (“Fidelidad y discordancias”) for a catalogue of the textual differences between VSME and A. T. Baker’s edition of Vie de Sainte Marie l’Egyptienne; Theodore L. Kassier on rhetorical devices; and Ellen Swanberg on the lyrical devices predominant in the first three-quarters of the text of VSME).
The Eastern, Zozimás-centered narratives place the episode of Mary’s temptation of the pilgrims towards the middle of the story, well after the holiness of both the monk and the anchorite has been ascertained. In that tradition, the bulk of the narrative focuses on his quest for spiritual perfection, and his encounter with a penitent Mary in the desert is meant to instruct him in humility. Upon seeing Mary, Zozimás begs her to reveal her story to him.

Quoting Ecclesiasticus, he essentially asks her to expose her treasure: “¿Qué provecho ay en la sabiduría o en el tesoro ascondido?” (Bussell Thompson 13) [If wisdom is kept hidden and treasure a secret, what profit is there in them? (in Ward 44)], not because he thinks that in so doing Mary will seek fame or adoration but that he may learn from her the ways to holiness. She rebuffs his requests repeatedly, fearful that the filthy words required to speak of her filthy deeds will contaminate the air they share, “porque las mis palabras ensuzian el ayre e a ti” [because my words corrupt both you and the very air], and again “¿quál lengua

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51 The earliest surviving version of the legend is attributed to the seventh-century Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, whose Greek narrative was translated into Latin by Paul the Deacon, Bishop of Naples two centuries later. Their texts form the basis for the Eastern branch of the legend which influenced medieval Iberian versions both in Latin and the vernacular, including a fourteenth-century translation into Spanish of Paul’s text (edited by B. Bussell Thompson), various translations and revisions of the story as it is found in Jacobus de Voragine’s Golden Legend (printed as an appendix to Walsh and Thompson’s edition), and a tenth-century Visigothic Latin vita that deviates in key respects from Paul’s redaction and whose afterlife may have informed the development of the Western branch (cf. Craddock “Apuntes”).

52 In Paul the Deacon’s version: “Ruégote por el Nuestro Señor Jhesu Christo, Dios Verdadero, que déñó nasçer de la Virgen, por el qual sufres aquesta desnuedat, e en cuyo servício has despendido las tus carnes, que non ascondas al tu siervo quién eres […] e que me digas todas las cosas que de ti son, por que yo pueda aver conocimiento de las grandes maravillas del Señor. Ca como dize Salomón, ‘Qué provecho ay en la sabiduría o en el thesoro ascondido?’ (Eccl. 20)” (13). [“I beg you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is indeed our Lord, born of a Virgin, for whose sake you clothed yourself in this nakedness, for whose sake you have wasted your flesh in this way, do not hide who you are from your servant […] tell me everything, so that the wonderful works of God may be manifest, for as it is written, if wisdom is kept hidden and treasure a secret, what profit is there in them? (in Ward 44)]
Podría dezir, o quál oreja podría oýr las suziedades que en el navío e en el camino fize?” (16) [What tongue can say, what ear can hear [the filthy acts I performed] on the ship (in Ward 46, my alteration].

In the end, she yields to the monk’s entreaties and quotes to him her first exchange with the pilgrims on the port of Alexandria: “En verdat, hermano, yo non he preçio alguno. Mas yré e entraré en una nave, e darme hán de comer, aunque non quieran, e yo darles hé a mí mesma, e tomarán el mi cuerpo en preçio del pasaje e del mantenimiento” (15).53 But told from Mary’s retrospective point of view, she is able to at once share with the audience her technique of seduction and to provide a cautionary caption that will prevent them from being affected by it. She concludes that passage saying: “E yo más yva con ellos por fartar la mi luxuria e el mi mal deseo que por devoçión de adorar a la santa cruz” (15).54 Her second, successful approach to the pilgrims is presented, significantly, as reported speech, as if to protect the monk and the audience from the eroticism of the encounter by not employing direct quotation. Mary tells Zozimás: “E metíme entre ellos syn alguna vergüeña e reverençia, segunt era mi costumbre, e díxeles que me levasen consigo adó yvan, e que non les sería enojosa, mas aplazible. E diziéndoles estas palabras e otras más suzias, movílos a grand rrisa. E ellos veyendo el mi gesto e movimiento, syn vergüeña tomáronme e metiéronme en la nave” (16).55

53 [Indeed, brother, I have neither the fare nor any food, but I will go and get into one of the ships that are going and they will take me even if they do not want to. I have a body and that will serve as both fare and food for me (in Ward 45)]
54 [And I went with them more in order to satiate my lust and my evil desire than out of devotion and veneration of the Holy Cross (This particular passage is not in Ward, therefore, this is my translation)]
55 [So as was my costum, I shamelessly pushed into the midst of them and said, “Take me wherever you are going and [having me will not be irritating but pleasurable].” I added more and more shameless [dirty] things and they were all moved to laughter. When they saw [from
Emerging from both *VSME* and the prose translation of Paul the Deacon’s text is an awareness of *enargeia*, of the power of words to make present for an audience objects, events or characters that are absent, and thereby arouse certain emotions in the listener.\(^{56}\) Mary’s exchange with Zozimás in the prose version reveals her fear that her very words will infect the listener, and her moralizing statements before and after speaking of her exploits attempt to curb their noxious effect. Indeed, in the introduction to their edition of the text, Walsh and Thompson note that Mary’s is “an anguished confession in which exclamations of self-deprecation dampen the delight or eroticism of her adventures” (xiii). But there is more than Mary’s own retrospective commentary on her old life that attempts to rein in that eroticism. The narrative structure of the Eastern branch of the legend could be interpreted as participant in the bridling of the text’s latent eroticism. By circumscribing Mary’s life inside the more developed narrative of Zozimás’ search for spiritual perfection, the potentially dangerous description of her sexual conquests is neutralized, since her “suziedades” are framed by the monk’s recognition of her miraculous language: she quotes Biblical passages even though she claims to be wholly uneducated; her words have prophetic power, and the intensity of her (silent) prayer lifts her from the ground.

What are we to make of the lack of such corrective commentaries or restrictions in *VSME*? If the poem conjures for the audience in detail the scene of Mary’s very effective words and actions to persuade the pilgrims to fulfill her desire as well as a description of the effects of her beauty on Alexandrians, both male and female, is lust the only reaction that the

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\(^{56}\) See Ruth Webb’s monograph on the cognitive and affective qualities of *enargeia* and ekphrasis, especially 87-130. The expected response from the audience to narration with *enargeia* can also be physical, as attested by how discourse could heal or infect the listener (cf. Solomon *Literature of Misogyny*, 17-48; 67-93)
poet hopes to induce? Is VSME, as Aldo Ruffinatto has argued, a text that, by virtue of its
dilation of Mary’s erotic exploits, does not belong to a true, didactic, serious hagiographic
tradition? To address these questions, it is necessary to explore two central moments in the
text where the powers of ekphrastic speech are in greatest evidence. We turn now to the
portraits of Mary before her conversion and after many decades of penitence in the desert,
two textual moments that critics agree constitute a central structuring axis of the poem.

**Consorting with idols**

The first portrait of Mary appears in the poem after she has left her home for Alexandria,
“pora más fer su voluntat” (133) [so as to be better able to do her own will], unwilling to
submit to her father’s will. The poem emphasizes Mary’s desire to follow her own will, “con
todos faze su voluntat” (128) [she does her will with everyone], an act that could be read as a
perversion of Jesus calling the apostles to leave behind their loved ones to live according to
the will of God. Mary’s will in this case consists of enjoying the here-and-now without being
mindful of, or more literally without remembering, her own mortality. Mary’s obliviousness
is apparent whether she is in the lap of luxury, settled comfortably in Alexandria where “En
beuer e en comer e follía, / cuidaba noche e día. […] Tanto quiere jugar e reir, / que nol
miembro que ha de morir” (165-70), or in the midst of a storm, “Cuand’ella veye las grandes
ondas, / tan pavorosas e tan fondas […] / non le prendié nengun pavor / nin llama al Criador;
/ antes los [the pilgrims] comiença a confortar / e convídalous a jugar” (379-86).57

Mary’s life, in its lack of concern for the past or future and released from any filial and
societal claims on her, represents a kind of emptiness, which, coupled with the emphasis on

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57 [In drinking and eating and lewdness / She passed day and night. / When she rose from
eating / She went to have sport with them. / So much did she want to play and laugh / That
she forgot she had to die.” (122)
the enthralling nature of her beauty and the response that the people of Alexandria have
towards her, contribute to her presentation in the text as a sort of idol. Mary’s beauty is
reified and emptied of its capacity to point back to its original source in God first by the
prostitutes of Alexandria who received her with “gran honor […] / por la beltat que en ella
vieron” (153-54), and then by the young men of the city, who upon seeing her displayed
(156, 264-65) would fight for the right to be with her (176-80). Indeed, her beauty had a
bewitching effect on them, pulling them away from their civic and religious duties, to the
point of making them commit murder:

Tanto les plaze de la beltat,
que cada día la van veyer
que non se pueden d’ella toller.
Tantas hi van de conpanyas
que los juegos tornan a sanyas;
antre las puertas, en las entradas,
dábanse [los mancebos] grandes espadadas:
la sangre que d’ellos sallía
por medio de la cal corria. (176-80)\textsuperscript{58}

These effects are not unlike those described by the fourteenth-century Dominican preacher
Robert Holcot, whose \textit{Commentary on the Book of Wisdom} warns:

“Turn away thy face from a woman dressed up, and gaze not upon another’s beauty”

[\textit{Ecc. 9}]. These women are creatures of whom the letter says [they are turned into an

\textsuperscript{58} [When she saw the great waves / So huge and deep / And the rain and high winds / Which
accompanied the storms, / She felt no fear, / Nor did she call upon her Creator. / Rather she
began to encourage them:/ She invited them to romp. (128)]
abomination] “and [are] a temptation to the souls of men, and a snare to the feet of the unwise.” For in this mousetrap David was caught, and this idol also seduced the wisdom of Solomon to the worship of idols as we read in 3 Kings 12. These idols are to be fled, and not sought out through curiosity, for as the letter says [Wisdom 14.12], “the beginning of fornication is the devising of idols.” For it is impossible for a curious and lascivious man associating with these idols not to be corrupted by them; indeed, a man, diligently seeking out and considering in his thought the beauty of women so that he makes idols for himself, necessarily prepares for his own fall.

Michael Camille quotes this passage in The Gothic Idol in order to argue for the existence of an iconographical and ideological connection between the sins of luxuria and idolatry since both imply the construction of an image that subsequently becomes the viewer’s object of desire and worship (298-302). It is not unreasonable to think, especially in light of Tertullian’s warning that idolatry encompasses all other sins, that our poet too presents the young men of Alexandria as guilty not just of lust but more gravely guilty of idolatry. In their actions, they are perhaps not all that different from King Solomon, whose lust for foreign women led him to make sacrifices to pagan idols, an act that finds a gruesome counterpart in VSME’s description of the blood flowing through the streets shed for Mary’s sake. The text completes its representation of Mary as an idol with the detail of Mary’s tepid response to the mayhem her presence has brought upon the city, proper to that of a hollow, insensitive statue, “[a] la cativa quando lo vedié, / nulla piedat no le prendié” (181-82) [When she [the wretch] saw the situation / no compassion gripped her (122)].
The rhetorical set piece of Mary’s portrait follows the description of the chaos in the city that resulted from the display of her beauty and the men’s idolatrous response to it.\(^5^9\) This intriguing position in the text begs the question: What is the purpose of presenting to the audience a picture of her dangerous beauty? Does this description not risk enticing the reader to imagine Mary — that is to say, to activate the reader’s cognitive and affective imagination in order to create an “idol in the mind” as it were — and thus put the listener in the position of her unhappy male suitors? These questions are all the more significant because the text identifies the description as a digression, a textual resting place where the poet is doing something that diverges from the poem’s main purpose:

De la beltat de su figura,
como dize la escritura,

ante que siga adelante,
direvos de su semblante. (205-08; emphasis added)\(^6^0\)

Most critics justify the presence of this ekphrastic digression by reading Mary’s body allegorically, where her external beauty is but a mask for a corrupt inside.\(^6^1\) A visual analogy

\(^5^9\) On the tradition of description as rhetorical set piece, in addition to Harriet Goldberg’s “Moslem and Spanish Christian Literary Portraiture,” see Peter L. Podol (“The Stylized Portrait”). More recently, Claudio Da Soller (“Beauty, Evolution, and Medieval Literature”) has argued that the conventional portrayal of female beauty in the Spanish Middle Ages may not be due exclusively to a dependence on rhetorical topos, but it could also draw from prescriptive treatises on cosmetics and female toilery.

\(^6^0\) [Of the beauty of her appearance / As it is described in writing / Before going further / I would say something of her appearance. (123)]

\(^6^1\) This is true whether the text in question is the poem (see among others Deyermond, who notes that “the poem is built on a double contrast: María’s outward youth and beauty is a mask for inner corruption, whereas later her aged, roughened, and hideous body houses the purified soul of a saint; appearance and reality change places” Literary History of Spain, The Middle Ages 70-71; Delgado “Penitencia y eucaristía”; Rice Cortina) or the prose Estoria, which omits the first detailed description, but keeps a brief version of the portrayal of penitent Mary (on the distinctions between both versions, see Walker xxxv; John Maier
to this interpretation is to see Mary’s statuesque perfection as the front side of *Frau Welt* at the Cathedral of Worms (c. 1310; fig. 2), where an idealized female figure conceals a repulsive body inhabited by snakes and other lowly creatures.

Lynn Rice Cortina goes a step further and reads the ekphrastic digression in the poem as “a pause in which the audience could be addressed and alerted to the importance of the portrait [as part of the epideictic tradition … which purported to shower praise or cast blame], achieving thus symbolic depth without disrupting the narration” (42). Her article proceeds to show how, although the description follows rhetorical conventions (i.e. the vertical head to toe organization of body parts, apostrophes to the audience framing the description, as well as the individual descriptions of her features), the portrait’s primary function is symbolic since the comparison of Mary’s body parts to natural elements belong primarily to a Christian *imaginaire*. Mary’s ears, for example, are described as typically white and round; less typical, however, is the comparison made by the Spanish poet of the ears to “leche de ovejas” (214). Cortina reads this detail as pointing simultaneously to the image of Christians as a flock of sheep, the representation of Christ as the Lamb of God, and of heaven as the land of milk and honey (43). Similarly, she traces parallels between the conventional beauty of Mary and the mystical attributes of the eponymous Virgin Mary (43-45).

Although it is difficult to deny the power of allegoresis and the extent to which it permeated medieval interpretative communities, it is important to remember that not every word in a text (scriptural or secular) needed to dissolve into allegory in order to be

writes about the portrait “As in the picture of Dorian Gray, Mary becomes externally what she had been internally: corrupt, repugnant, and vile. […] the external now serves as a mirror for what the internal had been but which is now rejected” 428).
While it may be possible to map almost one to one Mary’s physical attributes to Christian symbols, and to conceive that an audience of male clerics (or more widely of lay pilgrims) would have been able to decode this mapping, the allegorical process cannot do without the literal body. This points to an attitude towards the representation of beauty that is at least ambivalent: the text recognizes the dangers of representation, and possibly even condemns this representation in the latter half of the poem, but not without having first taken some delight in it. I highlight the contingency of any ulterior judgment of this delight in sensual artifice because, as we shall see, the poem is less than clear in its condemnation.

**Beyond iconoclastic readings**

Mary’s portrait in the poem appears framed on one end by the violent chaos that the worship of her beauty caused in Alexandria, and on the other by an elaborate description of her clothing:

El peyor día de la semana
non vistie panyo de lana;
assaz prendié oro & argento
bien se vistié a su talento.
Brial de xamit sse vistié,
manto erminyo cobrié.

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62 See for example, the introduction to the volume on the Middle Ages of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, where Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson note that “It is simply incorrect to claim, as some have supposed, that every single scriptural passage had assigned to it four distinct ‘senses’ or levels of meaning, i.e. the literal, the allegorical, the tropological (or moral) and the anagogical (whereby the mind is lifted up to the celestial goals of the Christian life). Some passages certainly received that treatment, but not all, and St Gregory the Great memorably warned against trying so hard to find profound meaning hidden deep in a passage that one neglected its literal sense, thereby losing that which can be apprehended without difficulty on the surface” (4-5).
Nunqua calçaua outras çapatas
sino de cordobán entretalladas,
pintadas con oro & con plata,
cuerdas de sseda con que las ata. (235-44)\textsuperscript{63}

The portrait itself might be allegorized away as a strategy of the poet to turn Mary from idol of beauty to Christian symbol, but it becomes more difficult to explain the purpose of the detailed description of her clothing.\textsuperscript{64} This is especially true since the Spanish poet severs the explicit connection between her profession and the luxury goods it affords her by omitting four lines that in the French poem present a transition between the description of her body and that of her clothes:

Ele recivoit grans presenz
S’en achatoit chier garnimenz;
Bons dras avoit et avenanz,
Por miez plaissir a ses amanz. (185-88)\textsuperscript{65}

The poet’s silence on Mary’s attire as the result of prostitution separates her from her holy-harlot sisters, such as Pelagia, in whom superlative beauty and the ostentatious display of

\textsuperscript{63} [The worse day of the week / She did not wear clothing of wool. / It took much silver and gold / for her to dress according to her desire. / She wore expensive gowns / Over which she wore an ermine mantel. / She never wore shoes / Unless they were made of cordovan leather. / They were decorated with gold and silver / And cords of silk with which she fastened them. (124)]

\textsuperscript{64} One of the few critical articles that does address this second description is Patricia Grieve’s “Paradise Regained.” She reads the richness of Mary’s clothes as an example of the poem’s presentation of Mary’s body as currency and thereby as a sign of spiritual and civic corruption (139; 141-43).

\textsuperscript{65} [She received great presents / she bought herself expensive clothes / she had good and agreeable bed linens / to better please her lovers]
wealth in the form of rich garments are linked directly to prostitution. It also makes it more difficult to agree with Grieve’s interpretation, which following Averil Cameron’s study of Christianity in Late Antiquity, proposes to see in the description of the clothing a “signal of corruption” (141).

Instead of providing a narrative transition between the two parts of Mary’s description by alluding to the wages of prostitution, the Spanish poet passes from body to clothing through an appeal to the topos of inexpressibility. Unable to give an accurate representation of her beauty, he tells us he will move on to the clothing: “De su beltat dexemos estar, / que non vos lo podría contar. / Contar vos e de los sus vestimentes / e de los sus guarnimentes” (231-34). Taking as cue Alice M. Colby’s study of literary portraiture in the works of Chrétien de Troye, where she notes that the inclusion of a description of a character’s clothes is not unusual in the tradition of romance, I would like to suggest that the significance of the act of dressing up the naked body here can best be illuminated with a comparison to another example of that tradition. The physical description of Mary to the audience shares some traits with the Pygmalion episode in the Roman de la Rose, where the sculptor first carves Galatea’s body, and as his love for her grows, he indulges in dressing up her naked body with luxurious fabrics. Michael Camille’s reading of Pygmalion’s actions highlights that “once again Jean’s poem inverts the convention and sees the dressing not as covering shameful

66 “Santa Pelagia fue de noble linaje e natural de la cibdad de Antiochía, e mugger muy rica e fermosa. E vestiase vanamente de ropas preciosas e era mugger pública e luxuriosa” (Beresford’s edition of “La ystoria de Santa Pelagia” in Holy Harlots 137). I quote from “Ystoria” because by identifying Pelagia as a “public woman,” it makes patent what is merely latent in other versions, including James the Deacon’s Vita Sanctae Pelagiae, Meretricis, where although the title identifies her as “meretricis,” the story actually presents her as an actress. On the meaning of the ambivalence of the identification of Mary of Egypt and Pelagia with prostitution, see Patricia Cox Miller “Is There a Harlot in this Text?” 67 [We have to leave her beauty now— / It is not possible to portray it to you— / To say something of her clothes / And of her adornments. (124)]
nudity but a titillating ritual of pure pleasure” (330). In the Roman de la Rose as in VSME the act of clothing the female naked body, rather than serving to conceal what should not be publicically seen, engages in a compensatory action as the delight in textual and textile artifice is offered as a substitution for not being able to fully seize the beauty of the represented object, or indeed to possess her. In VSME, the poet’s delight in deck ing out Mary’s beautiful body with his beautiful words is made manifest in the choice of amplification for, while he saw fit to erase the association of prostitution with clothing, he added four lines on Mary’s exquisite shoes.  

Unlike the representations of female vanity that also demonstrate its ultimate and fundamental corruption (the image of Frau Welt) or corruptibility (as demonstrated in St. Catherine’s disdain of her perishable beauty), the digressive descriptions of Mary and her clothes do not yet point to a moral teaching. Indeed, these signs are incapable of signifying beyond themselves because the image of Mary presented in the poem until now is still too empty to signify. She is beautiful, and brought forth through beautiful words, almost as if the poet were too enthralled with the frontal side of the statute to turn his gaze towards the rot it may hide. When the poem expresses concern with the effects of her sinful life, it is not in relation to the potential loss of her soul, but rather to express sorrow at how low a woman of

68 Grieve interprets the description of Mary’s luxurious shoes as yet another example of the poem’s conflation of the feminine body with currency and corruption, based on the association of footwear with female sexuality (141; 152). However, as I have tried to show, that iconographic association need not be negative. For a presentation of the cultural polyvalence of the association of shoes and female sexuality, see Kathryn Starkey’s Tristan Slippers, and more generally, John Burt’s study of the iconography of shoes in medieval Spanish literature.
high social standing (*paratge*) has come: “Todos dizien: “¡Qué domatge / desta fembra de paratge!” / De todas cosas semeja sabida, / ¿cómo passa tan mala vida?” (255-58).  

We can now return to the initial question: what is the purpose of the dazzling exhibition of Mary’s attributes and of the poet’s skill? And, if the goal of ekphrasis is to move the audience by producing “appropriate emotion” upon witnessing the scene linguistically painted before them, what is the nature of the emotion aroused here? Lust is an obvious answer. That is, after all, the reaction of the “fiios de los burzeses” who upon seeing Mary fall all over themselves to please and pleasure her (158-64). Similarly, Michael Solomon’s reading of the poem as a hygienic text posits that reading or listening to the poem is meant to stir sexual passion in its male listeners, although ultimately in order to function as a *pharmakon* to those impure thoughts.

The young and lusty Alexandrians have as their ultimate goal possession of Mary (“Todos la hi van corteyar / por el su cuerpo acabar” 160-61 [They all went to court her / and to possess her body]). In Solomon’s account, the audience’s reaction also depends on a goal-oriented relationship to desire (to incite or restrain passion). And yet, full possession or full control of desire — like the full knowledge Augustine yearned for — are not possible in the creaturely realm we inhabit. A less apparent but more complex emotion aroused in the poem’s display of beauty is admiration or wonder. Encompassing simultaneously splendor, astonishment, attraction and dread, *maravilla* appears no less than six times in the poem.

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69 [All said, “It is such a shame / About this woman of noble lineage. / She seems learned about all things. / Why does she live such a life? (124)].

70 Solomon reads *VSME* in the context of medieval medical treatises which presumed a listener/reader’s physical pleasure upon encountering ekphrastic representations of female beauty and actually recommended listening to erotic tales as an antidote to male impotence. Solomon proposes that the function of the first description of Mary of Egypt is indeed to arouse the reader in order to then cleanse this impure desire in the second half of the poem establishing thus “a sexual and textual equilibrium” (“Catarsis sexual” 437, my translation).
often as the poem’s commentary on the expected reaction from the audience to his narration. The poet comments, for example, after the description of Mary’s tempestuous travel to Jerusalem with the pilgrims that “Grant maravilla puede omne aber, / que una fembra tant’ puede fer.” (393-94) [One can wonder greatly, / That one woman had such an impact (128)]. Wonder arouses the audience (male and female); it serves the purpose of maintaining their interest in the narrative through memorable descriptions, and crucially, produces desire and delight but without seeing the fulfillment of desire as the end, that is to say, without the presumption of ultimate possession, whether it is of bodies or meaning. By way of comparison, admiration rather than lust also marks Bishop Nono’s unsuspected response in the legend of St. Pelagia to the courtesan’s ostentatious vanity, where rather than provoke his censure it incites wonder at the care she takes in her apparel and grooming: “E veyéndola un varón muy santo que avía nombre Nono […] començó a llorar muy amargamente porque aquella mujer ponía mayor estudio en plazer al mundo que él ponía en plazer al fazedor de la vida” (Ystoria in Beresford 137)71. If there is indeed something to be learned in the craft and care of pursuing the beautiful, even if only the need for the translation of her “estudio en plazer al mundo” [care to please the world] into his “estudio en plazer al fazedor” [care to please the Creator], how are we to read the portrait of Mary ravaged by time and the hardships of penitence?

It is tempting to see in this description a transformation of Mary from idol of concupiscence to symbol of repentance, for her body, now almost reduced to the proverbial dust, no longer points to itself but gives witness to the creaturely truth that in the end all is

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71 [She was seen by a holy father, Veronus […] who began to weep bitterly because the woman put more care into pleasing the world than he did into pleasing God. (Golden Legend vol. 2, 230)]
vanity, and that true beauty, as Alcuin wrote, is to be found in the love of God. However, this neat transformation is less than convincing.

The second rhetorical set piece is remarkable because it does not simply seek to offer a new and more truthful vision of Mary whose degraded outside and beautiful inside are the inversion of the first and dangerous image of profane external beauty and internal moral corruption. Instead of presenting an easily legible before-and-after sequence of portraits, the description of penitent Mary reads less like a discrete portrait of a single sitter than as a double exposed photograph, so to speak. In other words, the medieval poet doesn’t merely list Mary’s ugly features but first recalls her alluring attributes in their former glory before describing them in their present state of decay. Thus we read that her gleaming white ears, once compared to lamb’s milk are now black and oily, and her previously lily-white complexion is now blackened and wrinkled:

Toda se mudó d’otra figura,
qua non ha panyos nin vestidura.
Perdió las carnes e la color,
que eran blancas como la flor;
los sus cabellos, que eran rubios,
tornáronse blancos e suzios.
Las sus orejas, que eran albas,
muchos eran negras e pegadas […] (720-27)\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} [Her appearance had changed completely. / She had neither clothes nor vesture. / She lost weight and color. / She became white as a flower. / Her hair which had been red / Turned white and grimy. / Her ears which were white / Became very black like tar. […] (138)]
This double exposure is often understood as the righteous satisfaction in the destruction of Mary’s beauty that makes possible her spiritual growth. After remarking the echoes from the first portrait present in the second, E. Ernesto Delgado writes, for example, that “lo detallado del retrato de María penitente es una clara muestra del afán por destacar la corrupción de su cuerpo, en el momento en que su alma ha alcanzado la santidad. Para lograrlo, María ha debido pasar más de cuarenta años en el desierto […] efectuando una progresiva autodestrucción” (“Penitencia y Eucaristía” 38–40). While for Delgado the demolisher, the object of the destruction, and the recipient of the recompense of the destructive act are all one and the same (Mary), Julian Weiss focuses on the response from both Mary’s male admirers and the poem’s male audience. Weiss follows Simon Gaunt’s reading of the French version of the legend where “the men reading this text can enjoy both the titillating spectacle of the adventures of the comely and sexy harlot, and then the physical degradation of that very same body as it is punished, largely for the desire it aroused in them” (Gaunt 219). Taking that analysis a step further, Weiss writes “[the] ‘double pleasure’ in watching both the operations of female libido and its degrading consequences […] can be developed by resituating the portrait of physical degradation back into its full narrative context. This makes it plain that Mary’s body, even after it has become shriveled, sunburnt, and emaciated, remains an object of a highly ambivalent male awe and desire” (Intellectuals and Ideologies 87).

These interpretations fall in line with what I have been calling iconoclastic readings of hagiography, where the destruction of the false idol (Mary’s beauty) is deemed necessary.

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73 [The detail in the portrait of a penitent Mary is a clear sign of the eagerness to highlight the corruption of the body at the very moment that her soul has reached sanctification. To achieve that, Mary had to go through more than forty years in the desert […] performing a progressive self-destruction]
to replace it with the chaste symbol of her repentance (which can then be imagined as the proper beauty of the poem). And yet, it is difficult to deny the signs of artistic prowess, of the poet’s pride in displaying his rhetorical skill to create images both beautiful and repulsive, that are present in the sheer *excess* of two portraits in one.\(^{74}\) Such recognition allows for an alternative to iconoclastic readings, and it follows from the identification of the poet with Mary, that is, with the knowing display of the power of words to move and arouse wonder and desire, rather than with her suitors or with Zozimas, for that matter. In other words, while beauty and (rhetorical) artifice in the poem are acknowledged as potentially dangerous on account of the precariously thin line that separates seduction (Mary’s loveliness) from persuasion (the task of the hagiographer-poet), they are not disavowed in the poem—not even when the subject turns to ascetic ground.

First, the second portrait is slightly longer than the portrait of Mary in Alexandria and of her clothing combined, suggesting that as far as rhetoric goes there is as much skill, if not delight in the representation of ugliness as of beauty.\(^{75}\) Moreover, Mary’s metamorphosis does not necessarily imply an opposition between body and soul, external appearance and internal substance. Patricia Cox Miller’s study of the conceptual paradox of “holy women” in early Christian hagiography points out how even Sophronius’ depiction of Mary of Egypt combined male and female elements into what she calls the grotesquerie of the harlot-saint.\(^{76}\)

\(^{74}\) On the late medieval “visual culture of excess” see Panofsky (*Gothic*), and more recently, Bruce Holsinger’s work on how medievalism influenced Georges Bataille’s study of libidinal economy and cultural production.

\(^{75}\) On the use of specific rhetorical devices in both portraits, see Kassier and Swanberg. More theoretically, on how physical degradation and the spectacle of pain are central to rhetoric, see Jody Enders’ introduction to *Medieval Theatre of Cruelty*.

\(^{76}\) Miller follows Lynda Coon’s reading of the legend’s combination of “the most consistently ‘feminine’ of the holy harlots” whose conversion was brought about not through the intercession of a male cleric but the Virgin Mary herself, with male scriptural echoes: like
More strikingly, Miller notes that, “in the very same sentence in which Mary is cast as the apocalyptic Christ [whose hair was white as wool], she is also cast as the ‘black but comely’ bride of the Song of Songs 1:5-6, with her ‘body black as if scorched by the fierce heat of the sun’” (426). These same grotesque features of white hair, black body may be found in the description in VSME.77

A second important detail that reveals how the poem does not neatly fit an iconoclastic reading has to do with the power of memory. One of the demonic temptations Mary suffered early during her stay in the desert is the remembrance of pleasures past:

el diablo la quiso tentar

e todo lo quisiera remembrar

lo que ella solía amar:

los grandes comeres e los buenos lechos

do solie fer sus deletos.

*Mas tanto fue bien aventurada,*

*que de todo fue olvidada,*

Christ, she walks on water and has powers of prophecy and retrocognition; like Elijah she leads a spiritual life of solitude in the desert; like Saul, she received loaves of bread from a charitable stranger as sustenance for the spiritual transformation to follow (Miller 426; Coon 84-85). However, in contrast to Coon, for whom what is important is the masculinization of Mary’s body as she approaches holiness, for Miller, the co-presence of masculine and feminine features in the representation of Mary partakes of the grotesque’s resistance to legibility; it represents “not a mediation or fusion of opposites but the presentation or realization of a contradiction” (426).

77 Although generally on hirsute matters, the French poem is more graphic, it is interesting to note that in the pre-penitence blason of Mary’s body, the Spanish poet omitted the description of her hair, which is present in the French (“Ne ot el front plus bele crine”), but saw it fit to include the detail of her white hair in the second portrait, and mention it once again when describing the encounter with Zozimás (954-59). On the iconographic importance of Mary’s hair, and particularly, the confusion with Mary Magdalene, see Carlos Alberto Vega “Erotismo y ascetismo.”
The lack of memory or remembrance that had once been responsible for her dissoluteness is now a blessed forgetfulness that allows her to wander the desert unaffected by the devil’s temptations. Although in this the poet follows his source, the detail stands in contrast with other versions of the legend, such Hildebert of Lavardin’s early twelfth-century Latin poem. The ninth canto consists of Mary’s confession to Zozimás, and after accounting for the loss of her clothing and beauty to age and the ravages of the elements, she elaborates on her transformation: “I exchanged hymns for jests, I purged loud / laughter by sorrow, /

Punishment atoned for pleasure, thirst for drunkenness, / Poverty for luxury, toil for leisure, juice for honeyed-wine, / Torture for a soft couch, holy devotion for guilt” (103). Instead of the torture, punishment, and purgation described by Lavardin’s Mary as the rightful corrective to her morally lax past, the poet of VSME states in a surprising couplet not found in the French that “No es de llorar el su pecado / del cuerpo que assí anda lazrado” (778-78).

78 [The devil tried to tempt her / And to remind her of all / That she used to love: / The big dinners and good beds / Where she used to commit her sins. / But she was fortunate / That she had forgotten it all. / All her life long / She did not remember her sin. (140)]

79 While Mary is allowed to forget her sinful past, there is great emphasis in the poem on the remembrance of her personal covenant with the Virgin Mary: “Tanto anda noches e días / e tanto falló ásperas vías; […] / mas no olvidó noche e día / de rogar a santa María. / Toda hora l’ miembra lo quel’ dixiera / e lo que con ella pusiera: / cóm’ la metiera por fiador / ante la imagen del su Senyor” (702-11) [Many days and many nights she traveled. / She found many rough ways […] / But she never forgot night and day / To call upon Holy Mary. / Constantly she remembered what she had said / And what she had proposed to her / When she had entrusted herself to her / Before the image of her Lord. (137-38)].

80 I quote by page number from Ronald Pepin’s translation in Saint Mary of Egypt: Three Medieval Lives in Verse.
In other words, within the logic of the poem, Mary’s suffering body is not the punishment dictated by poetic justice for her “pecado del cuerpo.”

In fact, Mary’s ascetic routine of little food and drink and constant prayer is echoed a few lines later by the holy men of the monastery of St. John. Mary survives on loaves of bread initially so hard that they resemble stones (763), the monks “Comién pan de ordio, que non d’al, / por cierto non echaban sal” (818-19) [They ate barley bread and no other / For certain they added no salt (141)]; she slept on the ground with no other covering than what a tree could provide (695), while the monks “ni yazién en lechos ni en camenyas” (807) [They were did not [rest] on beds or cots. (140)]. Finally, and perhaps most startling is the re-enactment of Mary’s joyful treading on thorns: “cuand’ huna espina le firía, / de sus pecados uno perdía; / e mucho era gozosa / porque sufrié tan dura cosa” (752) [When a thorn wounded her, / One of her sins was expiated (139)] in the monks’ decision to go barefoot “por alimpiarse de sus pecados” (808) [To be cleansed of their sins / They wore no shoes. (141)]

The careful set up of this network of correspondences serves two purposes. On the one hand, it prepares the ground for the competitive humility that will characterize the encounter between Zozimás and Mary later in the poem. On the other, it provides an answer to why Mary would pursue the path of asceticism when her sins have not only been forgiven (626) but, as we saw, also forgotten (781-89): deprivation and suffering are the currency not of punishment but of love, or as the poem puts it “por amor de Dios lo fazién” (817) [They did so for the love of God].

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81 In Hugh Feiss’ translation, “It is not to lament her sin / Of the body that she goes about so afflicted” (in Three Medieval Lives 140)
From diptych to triptych

This chapter has tried to show that finding a rightful place for beauty in ascetic, didactic texts is a central preoccupation in the early thirteenth-century Spanish rhymed version of the life of Mary the Egyptian. I have argued that while VSME is aware of traditional associations of eloquence, beauty, artifice with sinfulness (lust, pride, idolatry) with the female body, it nonetheless forges an alternative to what I have called hagiography’s dream of a redeemed language founded on a “rhetoric of silence” that takes its cue from ascetic readings of Augustine. We saw also in the discussion of Augustine, and particularly Rowan Williams’ elucidation of On Christian Doctrine, that the insistence on the value of rhetorical prowess, of beauty, artifice and the body, finds its justification in the paradox of Christ’s incarnation, which serves as a model for accepting human imperfection and embracing our creatureliness including the creaturely in language.

This spirit of humility and love unites Mary’s, albeit extreme, physical degradation and the monks’ own ascetic practices. Mary’s abject image then, rather than represent the destruction of illicit beauty, the toppling of a dangerous idol, indicates its acceptance. This is not to say, however, that both portraits are somehow “the same.” They are not. But neither are they wholly the reverse image of each other, “as in a photographic negative” (Roberston “Poem and Spirit” 320-22), nor do they hang as the opposing yet interrelated panels, the before and after images of a diptych (Delgado “Eucaristía y penitencia” 37-38, Weiss Intellectuals and ideologies 87). A more nuanced understanding of the relationship of the two portraits emerges when we add a third panel to the diptych, the pivotal intervention of the image of the Virgin Mary at the threshold of the Temple of the Holy Cross. This central panel, which also includes Mary’s lyrical prayer to the Virgin, makes visible how beauty and
the sensual are reclaimed through the recognition of their centrality to Christianity in the mystery of the Incarnation.

Mary’s conversion occurs when, once in Jerusalem, she follows the crowd into the Temple, but is supernaturally denied entrance by angelic sword-yielding knights (446-53). Iconographically, the image of the fierce great knights holding swords to protect an entrance, harks back to illustrations of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, a transgression that was brought about by deceitful eloquence and linked to shameful sexuality. The movement of Mary’s life up to this point had always been forward, away from her family, away from Egypt, always in search of new experiences, but the vision of the angels, “caualleros” immune to her charms, forces her to turn back for the first time in her life. The encounter with these angels provides her a moment of reflection, a pause in her movement forward, which shocks her into a self-reflection that is both cognitive and affective: “aquí comienza a pensar / e de coraçon a llorar” (456-57, my emphasis) [Then she began to ponder/ And to cry from her heart. (130)].

As we have seen, the poem presents Mary as an object of vision, be it as the object of the gaze of the poet, his audience, or, within the text, of the young men that fall in love with her. The external vision of divine retribution, the apparition of the “fieros caualleros” [fierce knights] prompts in Mary an internal vision of herself mediated, significantly, by the external image of the Virgin Mary. This new image makes visible to Egyptian Mary all that she is not but could yet become through grace. She exclaims, “Un nombre abemos yo e ti, / mas mucho eres tú luanye de mí: / Tu María e yo María, / mas non tenemos amas huna via” (533-36) [You and I share a name, / But you are very different from me. / You are Mary and I am Mary / But the two of us have not the same life. (132)]. Wandering Mary finds salvation in
what should be a logical contradiction, the claim that she is both like and unlike the eponymous Virgin.

It is easy to see how the two Marys differ. In the words of the Egyptian, “Tú ameste siempre castidat, / e yo luxuria e malveztad. [...] / Tú eres dueny a mucho omildosa / e yo só pobre e ergullosa, / e de mi cuerpo luxuriosa” (537-43) [You always loved chastity, / And I, lewdness and evil. [...] / You are a most humble lady, / I am poor and haughty / and lecherous in my body. (133)]. And yet, as Matthew’s gospel makes apparent, the Incarnation of Christ through Mary was initially understood by Joseph as adultery. Biblical exegesis and popular tradition saw Mary’s virtue crystallized in her willingness to accept the shame of an adulterous reputation, while Joseph, described in Matthew as a just man, “received the title of cuckold as a blessing” (Winiarski 52). Of course, the taint of sexual defilement in the case of the Holy Mother (punishable by stoning according to Deuteronomic law) was, from our limited human perspective, a misapprehension to be cleared up by an angel who will bid Joseph not to repudiate his chaste-but-pregnant wife. Nonetheless, Mary addresses herself to the Virgin as the figure of God’s chosen lover, and it is on the basis of that unmerited and extravagant love — a love that is as much physical as spiritual — that she asks for mercy: “Nuestro Senyor amó a ti, / e pues Él amó a ti / duenya, abe mercé de mí [...] / En ti preso carn’ el Rey del cielo” (544-49) [Our Lord loved you, / And since he loved you, / Lady, have pity on me. [...] / In you the King of Heaven took flesh (133)].

The Spanish poem follows closely the French here, except that it leaves out the repetition of the image of Mary the Egyptian as God’s spurned lover: “li nostre sire toi amad / e moi chaitive refusad, / mei refusad e amad toi, / dame, eiez (ui) merci de moi!” (479-81, my emphasis) [our Lord loved you / and rejected wretched me, / rejected me and loved you, /
Lady have mercy on me]. This change intensifies the “paradoxical analogy or identification between Mary and the Virgin Mary absolutely opposed and finally one” (“Poem and Spirit” 320) Duncan Robertson recognized in the French poem, and which in the Spanish poem also informs the use of a similar formula to describe the features of both Marys. In the portrait of Mary as courtesan, we are told that she was well-proportioned, “En buena forma fue tajada / nin era gorda nin muy delgada, / nin era luenga nin corta, / mas de mesura bona.” (227-30), where Alvar glosses “tajada” as modeled according to specific measures or canons, as in sculpture [Her figure was well proportioned; / She was neither fat nor very thin. / She was not tall or short, / but just the right height. (124)].82 Outside the temple, after being refused entry, Mary turns her head and sees an image of the Virgin, “la imagen era bien figurada, / en la mesura era tajada” (475-77) [She saw an image of holy Mary. / The image was well fashioned / And well proportioned (131)]. While the ideal of a canonical, well-proportioned figure constitutes perhaps by definition a commonplace, in the context of a poem so aware of the importance of images, I would venture to say that it is not accidental that similar formulations are used to describe both the idol (Mary in Alexandria) and the icon (Virgin Mary), highlighting in both cases their significance as the handiwork of a loving Creator.

As these examples show, paradox is the central device of Mary’s prayer, whether it is to express her own relationship to the Virgin or, as occurs at least six times in nearly 150 lines, of her role in the Incarnation. Mary begins her prayer thus “Ay duenya, dulçe madre, / que en el tu vientre tuviste al tu padre…” (483-84) [O Lady, sweet mother, / Who in your womb carried your father […] (131); and repeats a few lines later, “Creo bien en mi creyención / que Dios fue en tu nascença: / en ti priso humanidat, / tú non perdiste virginidat. /

82 See also Kasten and Cody, sv. “tajado,” who give as first definition “labrado (piedra)” and as sixth definition “formado, proporcionado.”
Grant maravilla fue del padre / que de su fija fizo su madre” (524-28) [I believe, by my faith, / That God was in your giving birth. / From you he took his humanity, / But you did not lose your virginity. / It was a great miracle: the Father / Made his daughter his mother. (132)].

More figuratively, she says “E fue maravillosa cosa / que de la espina sallió la rosa; / et de las rosa fruto sallió / por que todo el mundo salvo” (529-32) [That from the thorn budded the rose; / And from the rose blossomed the fruit / By which the whole world was saved. (132)].

The rose that springs from the thorn is clearly the Virgin Mary who will in turn give birth to the saving fruit that will atone for “la mançana que en boca miso [Adam]” (559), but, in a way, Mary’s conversion too rises as an unexpected rose from the thorns of her previously sinful life. Robertson notes that “[w]hat Mary of Egypt calls upon in the name of the Virgín is not merely a person but an incarnate formal principle, the universal reconciliation of contraries — nothing more and nothing less than poetry itself” (318). I would add that the reason the Virgin can function as an incarnation of poetry is that she was the vehicle that made possible the Incarnation of Christ, which rather than dissolve oppositions such as human / divine, body / spirit, sign / thing embodies them.

Coda

As we have seen, the purpose of the VSME as stated in the prologue is to turn the listeners towards God’s love so they too can become part of “aquellos que a Dios amarán” (7, see also 12, 13) [those who would love God] by awakening the sinner from spiritual slumber (57-60). That difficult task of shaking the audience, convincing and moving them to action cannot be accomplished through logical arguments alone. Those razones require the trappings of eloquence and the seductions of poetry in order to be effective. To that end, vernacular hagiographic works of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (and particularly those
written in verse) turn to lyric and dramatic devices to enhance their sources. As Gaston Paris put it “les auteurs, pour embellir et égayer la matière, se plaisent à décrire les lieux ou les instruments de l’action, à motiver les événements, à analyser les sentiments des personnages, à leur mettre dans la bouche des discours inventés, et se permettent même souvent de leur prêter des actions qu’ils ne trouvent pas dans leur source…” (Gaston Paris in Robertson “Poem and Sprit” 305)\(^83\).

One such embellishment to the life of Mary of Egypt is the addition of a scene where Mary’s mother attempts to convince her daughter to change her wanton ways right before Mary leaves her home for Alexandria. What is remarkable is that \(VSM\) stages the failure of the thirty or so lines that comprise this innovation.

A curious feature of the mother’s oration is its lack of notable rhetorical figures: there is no use of striking images, nor any appeal to emotion. Moreover, the mother delivers a speech that, as Patricia Grieve notes, does not address moral issues but seems more concerned with pragmatic concerns, that is to say, the social and economic threat that Mary’s philandering poses to her parents (“Paradise Regained”139-40):

Por Dios te ruego, fija María,
que tornes a buena via.

Cuando d’esto te abrás partido,
nos te daremos buen marido.

Non es derecho que seyas perdida
por mengua d’aber en nuestra vida.

\(^{83}\) [Authors, to make the story more beautiful and animated, they took pleasure in describing in detail the places or the instruments of action, to provide a motive for events, to analyze the feelings of characters, to put in their mouths made-up speeches, and even allow themselves to lend them actions that were not found in their sources]
Fija, tú eres de grant natura,
¿por qué estás en malaventura?
Que debes aber honor,
como otras de linatge peyor. (109-18)\(^4\)

The mother’s entreaties, however, fail to move Mary, who barely responds to her mother’s tears.

How do we read this failure? Robertson reads it as an inversion of saintly detachment (parallel to St. Alexis), and the echoes of that aloofness are certainly there as if to suggest that Mary had the right constitution for sainthood even while living a life of sin. But given the episode’s early position in the poem, it is also possible to read it as a warning that barren speech alone — speech that only appeals to logic and deploys rational arguments at the expense of the colors of rhetoric — is unable to persuade. The mother’s speech stands in contrast with the lively poem we have read, a poem that, as I hope to have shown, rather than seek its justification in a rhetoric of silence that denies our own incarnation, enacts a defense of the trappings of eloquence, of poetic excess, of the capacity of language to bring to life images of such intensity that they can represent the conversion of the worst sinner and provoke a similar reaction in the audience. Thus we might read the “gualardón” (14), or recompense, offered by the poet to his audience at the beginning of the poem as referring not simply to the salutary effect on its listeners, but also to the poetic artifact that makes that effect possible.

\(^4\) [In God’s name I beg you, daughter Mary, / Turn to the right path. / When you have left your current path / We will give you a good husband. / It is not right that you be lost / For lack of material goods in our life. / Daughter, you are of great lineage. / Why are you in misfortune? / You should have honor / Like others of lesser birth. (120)]
II

A Different Kind of Beauty

SEEING AND BELIEVING

Among the most hauntingly beautiful plastic representations of Mary of Egypt is a half-length portrait by the Valencian painter Jusepe de Ribera, who worked in Italy from 1610 until his death in 1652. The painting, which now hangs in the Museo Civico Gaetano Filangieri in Naples (fig. 1), is somewhat of an anomaly in the tradition of representations of Mary the Egyptian, for it depicts her at a transitional moment sometime after her conversion but before her penitence in the desert has destroyed her famous beauty.⁴ Although luminously painted, avoiding a stark chiaroscuro more typical of Ribera’s earlier work, the canvas is still characterized by austerity, perhaps evident above all in the abstraction of all background detail. The soon-to-be saint is depicted in prayer at a table or makeshift altar,

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¹ The imagery handbook Saints in Art lists long hair and three loaves as identifying attributes of Mary of Egypt, as well as noting that typically she is represented receiving communion from the monk Zozimas after spending forty-seven years as an anchoress in the desert (Georgi 256). For a more thorough description of the iconography of Mary of Egypt, see Alvar (Vida 1, 125-38, and “De arte y literatura”) as well as the reference work of Louis Réau (III.2, 886-88), where he notes that although occasionally she is represented before her conversion, it is more common to see her “en ermite du désert, nue et décharnée. Parfois elle est drapée, comme sainte Agnès, dans une longue chevelure qui retombe en cascade jusqu’à ses pieds. Mais les artistes la costument plus volontiers en ‘femme sauvage’” (885).

² While critics agree that there is a shift from Ribera’s earlier more starkly tenebrist style to a more delicate use of light in the Filangieri Mary of Egypt, the interpretation of its significance alternates from representing an evolution in style away from naturalism towards “a new emotional and sentimental involvement … completely lacking in rhetoric” (Pagano in
her eyes turned upwards as if suddenly made aware of a presence outside the frame. She is still fully clothed, though her garments have begun to fray. A few strands of her dark hair—an important attribute, as it is sometimes charged in narrative accounts of her life with the task of covering up her naked body—peek out from underneath a scarf that otherwise demurely covers it. She is still nourished by the miraculous three loaves of bread she received at the start of her stay in the desert, though in the foreground we see how little is left of the first loaf. Several feminine features—her dark hair, fair skin, plump coral lips—testify to her beauty, though the darker hue of her hands, the dirt under her fingernails, and the circles under her eyes hint at the ravages that penance is still to bring. Ribera highlights the likeness of the saint with the pathos and temporality of a memento mori more commonly associated with vanitas still life painting, a genre that is referenced in the portrait through the skull behind Mary’s joined hands and the crumbling bread loaves arranged on the table.

Writing about this painting in the context of visionary experience and its artistic representations in Spain, Victor Stoichita remarks that “[t]here is no ‘dark beam’ [the rayo de tiniebla of the mystics; in painting, a visible beam of light that paradoxically casts the ‘illuminated’ object into a shadow], but Mary’s bulging eyes show she is scrutinizing the horizon. Does she see something, or nothing? The question remains unanswered” (172). Stoichita’s book studies the different representational solutions found by Golden Age painters to the challenge of giving sensual substance, of rendering visible a “dubious phenomenon of inner sight” (198), that is to say, the experience of religious vision.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the transformation of Mary of Egypt from licentious sinner to holy anchorite as represented on the page or on stage illuminates the

Pérez Sánchez and Spinosa 158) to a technical triumph “carefully modulated to produce the greatest effect of naturalism” (Felton and Jordan 232).
ways in which devotional content and artistic craft are perceived to be at odds. Another way of taking the pulse of that tension is to put pressure on the conjunction that often brings together seeing and believing.\(^3\) In the first two chapters that conjunctive task fell to rhetoric. The art of persuasion — of moving the audience to hold a certain belief or take a specific course of action through the appeal to reason, emotion, or character — often depended on the orator’s descriptive capacity to make his listeners see objects, people, places or situations.\(^4\) And yet, precisely because of their evocative power, images were also widely regarded with suspicion as potentially deceptive and seductive falsehoods — short circuits on the pathway between sight and belief, as it were. Rhetorical images are central to hagiography in general, but precisely on account of that prominence, they must be held in check. As Cynthia Hahn reminds us, “[h]agiographic narrative aimed to move its audience in a specific way, avoiding mere pleasure for a deeper spiritual effect” (31). In the specific case of Mary of Egypt, because her conversion is itself brought about through her interaction with an image of the Virgin Mary, images — rhetorical and pictorial — are of utmost importance for thinking about images in the medieval and early modern periods.

\(^3\) The proverbial association of seeing and believing has deep roots in classical and Biblical traditions. This fertile soil includes, for example, the ancient dictum that the eyes are better witnesses than the ears (see for example, Herodotus I.8 “men’s ears are more mistrustful than their eyes”) and the philosophical-physiological assertion that sight was “the noblest of the senses” present in Plato’s *Timaeus* and Aristotle’s *De Anima* and *Metaphysics*. The primacy of sight is reinforced by the Judeo-Christian association of God and light that can be found in Genesis and the Psalms, and more precisely seeing with believing in John 20.8: “Then that other disciple also went in, who came first to the sepulchre: and he saw and believed *vidit et credit* in the Vulgate.” For a study of how vision plays a privileged yet equally denigrated role in Western culture, see Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes*. Although his ultimate aim is to understand French twentieth-century theoretical interest in the vision / logos divide, the first chapter reviews premodern conceptions of the visual.

\(^4\) On the power of visualization in ancient rhetoric and the function of emotion see Ruth Webb *Ekphrasis*; for an overview of how that tradition influenced medieval cognitive and creative practices, see Mary Carruthers *Book of Memory*. 77
Indeed, Mary of Egypt’s story was evoked in the Seventh Ecumenical Council (also known as the Second Council of Nicaea, which took place in 787). Its fourth session sought to present a theological justification for the veneration of images by reading and commenting long quotations from the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers. Among these, Peter the Reader offered the life of St. Mary of Egypt as an example, focusing dramatically on the miracle of her conversion, which was brought about through the intercession of an image of the Virgin Mary. Responding to Peter’s reading, John, Legate of the East, spoke from his experience and observed approvingly that “a similar image I have seen in the holy city of Christ our God, and have often worshipped it” (212). Almost eight centuries later, Francisco Pacheco (1564-1654), painter, scholar, and perhaps the most influential writer on art of the Spanish Golden Age, would pick up the anecdote in his El arte de la pintura (1649), in the chapter “Del fin de la pintura y de las imagines y de su fruto y la autoridad que tienen en la iglesia católica” [On the Aim of Painting and of Holy Images and on the Good they Do and their Authority in the Catholic Church]. There, Pacheco justified painting by aligning it with rhetoric’s power to move and persuade people to turn to, obey, and subject themselves to God. Illustrating the power of religious images, he includes a brief retelling of Mary of Egypt’s conversion, this time attributed to both the image of the Virgin Mary at the threshold of the temple and to the Holy Cross Mary the Egyptian wants to adore (257-58).  

In this chapter I will attempt to do two things. First, I will trace medieval and early modern anxieties regarding the function of religious images, including the place of beauty in a religious representational context, and more precisely how those anxieties are amplified

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5 Pacheco’s subtle shift of emphasis from the Virgin to the Cross is consistent with the view of the Virgin and the saints as intercessors before God on behalf of men rather than as themselves agents of grace.
when the subject of representation is female. Second, I will examine the representation of female sainthood in four paintings of Mary of Egypt by Jusepe de Ribera all done between 1640 and 1651. I shall argue, by comparing the treatment of Mary to similar portraits of male anchorites and to her more famous penitent sister, Mary Magdalene, that the Egyptian’s identity, predicated on the triangulation of beauty, decay, and the divine, serves as a particularly productive vehicle for reflecting on the question of representation in general, and of the function of beauty in the depiction of holiness. More precisely, I would like to suggest that Ribera recognized in Mary of Egypt, as we saw in the Filangieri portrait of the saint (fig. 1), a figure of paradox (following the logic of both X and Y) rather than of contrast (either X or Y), and that our attraction to this particular saint stems from that convergence of beauty and ugliness, saintliness and human failure. The paradoxical conjunction of opposites touches the limits of what can be represented and breaks with decorum. I would further propose that Ribera’s depictions of Mary of Egypt indeed attempt to make visible a new kind of beauty: the beauty of the aged female body, made holy, and which renders desire inoperative without turning the body into a repellent, unintelligible grotesquerie.

**DOUBLE TAKE**

Ribera’s portrait of the contemplative Mary of Egypt draws on the tradition of vanitas for recognizable symbols of the transience of human life and, as we shall see, more subtly for the expression of a tension between the moralizing aim of the genre and the fact that painting

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6 The four paintings, listed in chronological order, are: *St. Mary of Egypt* (c. 1640, Museo del Prado, Madrid; fig. 4b), *St. Mary of Egypt* (1641, Musée Favre, Montpellier; fig. 5), *St. Mary of Egypt* (1651, Museo Civico Gaetano Filangieri, Naples; fig. 1), and finally, *St. Mary the Egyptian in Ecstasy* (1640 or 1651, private collection of Juan Antonio Pérez Simón; figs. 8, 9). To avoid confusion, in my discussion I will refer to the paintings by their current location rather than by title.
remains an object of visual pleasure. The most obvious iconographic link between *vanitas* and Ribera’s portrait is the skull that sits prominently on the table where the penitent has set down her remaining sustenance. By the sixteenth century, the image of a skull had been lexicalized and became by itself (that is, as a skull severed from the rest of the skeleton) a symbol of the transitory nature of creaturely existence, a defining feature of *vanitas*.

On this account, the skull becomes an attribute of eremitic and penitent saints such as Jerome, Francis of Assisi, or Mary Magdalene. Mary of Egypt’s body itself captures the ravages of time, so that its imperfections — the darker, wrinkled skin; unkempt hair, dirty fingernails, etc. — articulate aloud the skull’s tacit warning about “the vanity of vanities.” As will be explored in greater detail in a later section, it is significant that the visual representations of the Egyptian pose a contrast to the images of a still buxom penitent Magdalene.

It is therefore not surprising that the two saints were often paired. The early twentieth-century art historian Elías Tormo y Monzó has suggested, for example, that an earlier rendition of the Egyptian penitent saint by Ribera (Museo del Prado, c. 1640; figs. 6a, 6b) was meant to hang next to a portrait of the Magdalene as to symbolize, respectively, old

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7 See Liana De Girolami Cheney for a study of the visual sources for the emblematic meaning of the skull in sixteenth-century Dutch painting, including the late medieval tradition of the *Danse macabre*. Ingvar Bergström has studied how the *vanitas*, easily recognizable by the presence of a skull, is “the most obviously symbolical genre within still-life painting, and its intention, as already implied in its name, is to moralize on the vanities of the world, on the search for power, on acquisitiveness, etc.” and its symbolism migrated into other genres such as portraiture (“Disguised Symbolism” 345; “Masters of the Vanitas” 154-58).

8 On the presence of the skull in portraiture in relation to gender, see Girolami Cheney 118-19, and Palma Martínez-Burgos García (“Meditación”) on the link between *vanitas* and the popularity of depictions of anchorites.

9 Comparing this portrait of Mary of Egypt to a Magdalene by El Greco, Ellis Waterhouse highlights that “[b]oth painters often treated the same devotional subject matter, notably the mood of penitence, and, while Greco’s Magdalen (Worcester, Mass.) still has about it a good deal of Helena Rubenstein, this element is decidedly lacking in Ribera’s St Mary of Egypt (Museo Filangieri, Naples)” (248).
age and youth (in Felton “The Paintings of Ribera” 58). One could take that suggestion a step further and imagine that together these paintings constituted a memento mori cycle of sorts, reminding the viewer of the ineluctable passage of time and its transformation of earthly beauty into decay. To understand how the figure of Mary of Egypt took on the inflections of memento mori artistic creations, we must make an extended but important detour back through the medieval rhymed Vida.

In chapter one we saw how the thirteenth-century verse rendition of Mary’s life is structured around two rhetorical portraits, where the first corresponds to Mary’s extraordinary beauty, described in loving detail following the conventions of courtly romance. This image has often been read allegorically, whereby Mary’s external beauty is significant and meaningful only in so far as it points to her internal moral corruption. A visual analogy to this analysis is to see Mary’s statuesque perfection as the front side of the Frau Welt sculpture (c.1310) gracing the south portal of the cathedral of Worms (fig. 2), where a female figure of idealized beauty fronts a repulsive back side teeming with toads and worms. Iconographically, this image draws from medieval representations of Venus, Luxuria, and Voluptas, and it partakes of Christianity’s ascetic culture where the inevitable deterioration of the flesh is understood as a sign of humanity’s intrinsic sinfulness.10 The second rhetorical portrait corresponds to Mary of Egypt’s shrivelled body after spending forty-seven years atoning for her sins in the desert, and by a similar interpretative logic, it is often read as an

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10 On the iconography of Frau Welt, see Wolfgang Stammer’s classic monograph (56-66); for a study of its relationship to the theme of vanitas in its specifically Christian inflection, which understood death and the corruption of the body as punishment for human sinfulness rather than as part of natural life cycle, see Kathleen Cohen (77-83). More recently, Paul Binski has compared Frau Welt to “a human equivalent to Eve’s rotten apple, superficially plausible and tempting but eaten from behind and from within by worms” (139), as he focused on the coincidence of lust and death in macabre art (135-36; 159, 163).
inverse make-over, where the before of sinfulness and beauty is replaced by the after of sanctity and the grotesque.\footnote{\cite{Zizek}}

But what would happen if we heeded the warning of Virginia Burrus, an historian of early Christianity, who, in writing about the Late Antique lives of the so-called holy harlots (Mary of Egypt, Pelagia and Mary, niece of Abraham), cautioned against the temptation to frame “‘sinfulness and sanctity’ as mutually exclusive, oppositional binary terms” especially since often the passage from one state to the other “retroactively neutralized” the sex of the sinner-saint as the ‘harlot’ becomes a universal symbol of sin and repentance? (130-31). Hers is a polemical move intending to reinscribe the body and its pleasures in the history of sexuality charted by Foucault, which assigned to Christianity an ascetic, anti-erotic role, but the insight is worth carrying over to the study of late medieval and early modern “sex lives of saints.”

Thinking together sinfulness and sanctity makes it possible, for example, to recognize that the description of penitent Mary reads less like the opposite portrait of the first than as a double exposed photograph. Or to put it less anachronistically, the poem’s repetition of the earlier portrait of seductive Mary within the description of the toll taken on her beauty by time and severe penance, can be understood to be akin to the illustration of the legend of the

\footnote{Slavoj Žižek, coming from a psychoanalytic angle, conceptualizes in spatial rather than temporal terms the transformation characteristic of figures such as \textit{Frau Welt} from object of desire and fantasy (the distant beloved) into “the disgusting substance of life” (her repellent proximity). \textit{Frau Welt}, alongside Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Schumann’s Clara and feminine characters in the films of David Lynch and Krzysztof Kieślowski, exemplify the minimum amount of distance and idealization necessary for human interaction. More specifically, speaking about \textit{Frau Welt}, Žižek writes that “the gap that separates beauty from ugliness [a gap that is for him related to perspective or spatial disposition rather than representing an unbridgeable chasm] is thus the very gap that separates reality from the Real: what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to be able to sustain the horror of the Real” (66-67), where the Real is a holding term for all that which remains beyond language and representation.}
“Three Living and the Three Dead” made for the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (fig. 3). This legend circulated widely in Europe from roughly the thirteenth century onwards as text (in sermons, poems, hagiographical accounts, etc.) or image (crude engravings survive alongside elaborate manuscript illuminations, and the motif was also often found painted on church and churchyard walls and occasionally even as urban graffiti). \(^{12}\) Thematically, the legend centers around the eerie encounter between three young men of high standing (recognizable in fig. 3 by their crowns and the hunting bird perched on the arm of the young man furthest to the right) and three corpses in different stages of decomposition.

As in the double portrait of Mary of Egypt, repetition is central to the structure of the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead. Visually, the bodies of the dead mirror the positioning of the living. The middle figure in both constellations, for example, recoils ever so slightly from the encounter, while those furthest from the frame separating the two groups (to the far left of the living and the far right of the dead) stand at a little distance from the other two and have set their gaze elsewhere: the young king’s eyes are fixed on a point beyond the frame of the dead while the naked corpse’s empty eye sockets stare straight at us.

\(^{12}\) For a review of the literature regarding the diffusion of the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, particularly in its influence on the development of the genre of the *danse macabre*, see Víctor Infantes, while the collective volume *Vifs nous sommes*... offers a review of the extant mural paintings in Europe. For a study specifically on the Robert de Lisle Psalter, see Lucy Freeman Sandler. With respect to the dearth of known textual and pictorial examples of the legend in the Iberian peninsula, Margherita Morreale has suggested that it may be due to a lack of interest in or knowledge of the topic among Spanish bibliographers rather than any “objective absence” of material (259). In addition to the examples cited by Morreale, there is a remarkable illumination of the legend in the *Book of Hours of Juana I of Castile* (f. 158v). It follows late Italian models in representing an aggressive encounter between the living and the dead, and more originally, only two of the aristocratic living are male. The third is a woman, also on horseback, who occupies the foreground, and in contrast to her companions who are depicted fleeing in panic from the taunting by the three skeletons, she stares regally back at the viewer, seemingly unmoved by the commotion behind her (see the commentary by Carlos Miranda García-Tejedor to the facsimile of the book for contextualizing details of this artifact).
The image’s didactic message is also formulated along a carefully crafted repetition, often voiced by the dead as a version of the warning appearing in the de Lisle Psalter as “I was well fair. Such shall you be. For God’s love beware by me” and in the Psalter and Hours of Bonne de Luxembourg as “What you are we were and what we are you will be.” The mirroring of “what you are” and “what we are” offers an uncanny reflection of past and future onto the present, but it does not seem, however, to throw into confusion the two distinct temporal realms. Similarly, the pregnant pause separating “I was well fair” from “Such shall you be” appears to emphasize the present moment, the simultaneous now of the corpse’s enunciation and the reception of his message by the three living kings within the illumination but also by whoever is reading the book.

This interpretation follows Paul Binski’s focus on visual doubling as the uncanny repetition that does not completely reflect its model. However, I take distance from his view of the representation of the legend as “a classic instance of a moment of instability between two temporal realms, a sudden breach of existential boundaries between two worlds, which confuses the animate and the inanimate” (138). Rather than confusion which implies the collapse of difference, I would suggest that difference is maintained, and what is highlighted is contiguity — a sharing of the same spatial plane and a convergence of different temporalities in the always contingent present moment of the viewer. The engagement of the viewer is thus crucial to understanding the illustration of the Three Living and the Three Dead, and the use of striking images is one way to achieve that goal. As Binski has noted with regard to the legend and to the macabre more generally, the representation of extremes,

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13 The quotation above is from the Psalter and Hours of Bonne de Luxembourg, as cited in Camille’s *Gothic Art* (154). The Psalter dates from the first half of the fourteenth century and was illustrated by Jean Le Noir and his workshop.
of those “moments of passage from intactness to decay, and from decay to annihilation” (152), mobilizes the viewer to reflect upon the vanity of worldly grandeur and moves her to make amends in life.

As we have seen, imaginative extremes of beauty and decay and the reaction they provoke in the audience are also an essential feature of the life of St. Mary of Egypt. The medieval poem is as eloquent in its depiction of the ulterior decomposition of Mary’s beauty as the manuscript illumination is in its illustration of the wilting glory of the Three Living. Typically, the meticulousness of this depiction has been interpreted as the necessary destruction of Mary’s previous charms performing the task of unmasking the corruption of all flesh and thereby chastising those who had fallen for her illusory beauty. Similarly, analyses of the Three Living and the Three Dead also concentrate on the “central theme [of] humanity’s misguided pursuit of transitory pleasures” (Smith 152). While the focus on the didactic aspect of these works is certainly important, the articulation of the message is not the end of the story. The work of interpretation of these objects must also take into account their investment in lavish artistry, visible in the poet’s delight in displaying his rhetorical skill to create images both beautiful and repulsive and the sumptuous execution of the illumination where attention has been paid even to the delicate background framing the dead.

As with the better-known vanitas paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these medieval artifacts may also appear to modern eyes to dwell in the “fatal contradiction”

14 Kathryn Smith’s study of the interaction of text and image in the De Lisle Hours shows how the manuscript’s illustration of the Three Living and the Three Dead sets the tone of contrition for the rest of the manuscript, serving as “a thematic, devotional counterpoint to the hagiographic pictures [of St Nicholas of Bari who famously brought back to life three murdered children], or as an introduction to the Ages of Man cycle. Moreover, the diptych-like arrangement of the pictures of the Three Living and the Three Dead establishes a framework for reading the juxtaposed Passion and Ages of Man cycles” (157).
Norman Bryson describes in writing about early modern Dutch *vanitas*. In both cases, there seems to be a disjunction between the constative function of signs (i.e., the didactic injunction to see beyond the riches of this world) and the performative (the material support that makes the message intelligible, that is, the undeniable visual pleasure that painting offers all while censuring it). He writes, “[h]owever much *vanitas* pieces may try to deny it, they cannot escape being pictures, that is, indulgences” (116), thus elaborating on a malaise already present in Ingvar Bergström’s classic study of Dutch *vanitas*, whose excursus on the pocket-watch searches an alternative interpretation to the timepiece as a *tempus fugit* motif. Bergström finds a solution in emblems that use a pocket-watch as a symbol of temperance, and he concludes that “[t]he watch became a slightly moralizing ingredient in still-life art, which by its presence could protect painters against the accusation that their paintings tempted people to gluttony and an extravagant life” (“Masters of the *Vanitas*” 190). Similarly, focusing on the textual and visual tradition of the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead in England, Ashby Kinch has argued that in order to fully understand those macabre representations, critics must pay closer attention to form and how the “representation of humility has that paradoxical effect in aristocratic art of making an ostentatious display of self-abasement” (62). In other words, instead of being understood as unhelpful incongruity, contradiction is here cast under the generative sign of paradox.

How do we then understand the function of that paradox? I do not intend to argue that the focus on artistry in the medieval verse *Vida* of Mary of Egypt or in Ribera’s paintings somehow subvert or undermine their ultimately religious purpose. Rather, I want to suggest that we cannot fully understand the extent of their intellectual engagement with those didactic aims if we simply assume that the artistry of these artifacts is seamlessly subsumed
into the message. In the case of the medieval poem, a critical awareness of the paradox renders visible the poem’s commitment to what I called in the first chapter its “Incarnational poetics,” thus crafting an alternative to iconoclastic readings that would deny a role to beauty and artifice in religious didactic literature.

Dutch vanitas paintings, according to Bryson, dwell on the incommensurability of sensual images and the transcendent truth they seek to convey, less in order to condemn painting for its hypocrisy or moral incongruity than to emphasize human limitation: “The transcendent can be sensed only in the inability to reach it, and in that conflicted, agonistic relation between the constative (sacred truth) and the performative (the inertia of things, ensnarement by things) the representation embodies its own failure and of vanitas” (120). We observe here paradox at work: the lesson at the heart of all vanitas painting is conveyed through the failure of attaining access to the divine which is successfully portrayed.

Bryson’s perceptive interpretation, as he is careful to point out, makes sense in the context of a Calvinist insistence on the primacy of logos (standing in for Scripture, reading and reason) over figuration and visualization. However, as we shall see, the tension between artistic craft and moral content is not limited to a Protestant aesthetic. Indeed, that tension had also been central to the development of medieval image theory, which in turn would later influence the polemic against images of the Reformation and the response by the Council of Trent, which provides the immediate context for Jusepe de Ribera’s paintings of Mary of Egypt.

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15 On the relationship of constative and performative semiotic functions in painting and the implications of this disjunction for Catholic and Protestant image theory through a consideration of Ignatius of Loyola and Jean Calvin, see Bryson pp. 117-20.
MATERIALITY AND SUBJECT MATTER

The seeming simplicity of the Council of Trent’s affirmation of the place of images in religion on its last session in 1563 belies the complex history of debates about images and visual representations of beauty in the long history of the Christian Church. Umberto Eco’s précis of medieval aesthetic ideas, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, written originally in 1959 but not translated into English until 1986, insists on the existence of an experience of beauty that reveals a love of the sensible world alongside the better-known medieval conception of beauty as an abstract appreciation of the transcendental values of “moral harmony and metaphysical splendor” (5). The awareness of sensuous beauty, however, remains embedded in discussions of how it relates to the divine. Behind many of these debates lies the anxiety that perceptible beauty, precisely because it is easily apprehended by the senses (described, for example, in Alcuin of York’s treatise on rhetoric as “the love of beautiful forms, sweet tastes, harmonious sounds, fragrant smells, objects pleasant to the touch, and finite joys and honors”), can seduce the unsuspecting faithful with its promise of enjoyment in the here and now, and turn him or her away from seeking “the eternal beauty, sweetness, harmony, fragrance and joys” that are God’s own.16 At stake then is the question of how to turn the potentially dangerous sweetness of a beauty that points only to itself into spiritual sustenance.

That question is central to the distinction between idols and legitimate religious representations. It is difficult to speak of the function of images in the Middle Ages without

16 “Quid facilius est quam amare species pulchras, dulces sapores, sonos suaves, odores flagrantes, tactus iocundos, honores et felicitates saeculi? Haecine amare facile est animae, quae velut volatilis umbra recedunt, et Deum non amare, qui est aeterna pulchritudo, aeterna dulcedo, aeterna suavitas, aeterna flagrantia, aeterna iocunditas, perpetuus honor, indeficiens felicitas?” (partial translation into English in Eco 5; Latin text from Halm 550).
evoking the debates on iconoclasm that helped shape the religious and aesthetic sensibilities of the period. Perhaps the most famous formulation of the defense of images is Pope Gregory the Great’s suggestion in a letter to the iconoclastic Bishop Serenus of Marseilles that:

“Images are used in churches so that those who cannot read or write may at least read on the walls by seeing there what they cannot read in a book […] It is one thing to adore painting; quite another thing to learn from the story of the painting what ought to be adored.” 17

A century later, when the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Second Council of Nicaea) was called in 787 to resolve the question of the veneration of holy images, the fourth session opened with a quotation from St. Gregory of Nyssa’s sermon “On the Divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit” where he described his reaction to a painting of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in these terms: “I have seen many times the likeness of this suffering in painting, and I have not [been able to] walk past it without tears, so vividly does the art of painting bring forth the story [historical matter] to the eyes.” 18

17 Pope Gregory wrote in fact two letters to Serenus on the subject of the destruction of Christian images. I quote from the first one (Book IX, epistle 105), which is gentler in tone. When Serenus failed to stop the destruction of images, suggesting that the first letter had been a forgery, Pope Gregory wrote a second more forceful one (Book XI, epistle XIII), reiterating the right and proper function of images in the Church’s proselytizing efforts among non-Christians [gentes], and insinuating that Serenus’s zeal might be the result of hubris, “it had been reported to us that, inflamed with inconsiderate zeal, thou hadst broken images of saints, as though under the plea that they ought not to be adored. And indeed in that thou forbadest them to be adored, we altogether praise thee; but we blame thee for having broken them. Say, brother, what priest has ever been heard of as doing what thou hast done? If nothing else, should not even this thought have restrained thee, so as not to despise other brethren, supposing thyself only to be holy and wise?” (in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace 2, 13).

18 St. Gregory’s sermon in the original Greek can be found in Patrologiae Graecae vol. 46 col. 472. I have not yet found an authoritative English rendition of this sermon, so the translation given is my own from the Latin found in the same volume of PG: “Saepe numero miserabilis hujius rei imaginem in pictura vidi, nec abscque lacrymis spectaculum praeterii, adeo perspicue atque evidenter ars pingendi oculis rem gestam subiecit.” See also Mendham’s edition and translation of the Seventh General Council (132-33).
Together these quotations highlight two important points of tension in the debate on art and beauty in a religious context. First, Gregory the Great’s defense of images seems to depend on the separation of subject matter (devotional content) from materiality (artistic craft). And yet, the affective and effective value of images as a potential ‘Bible for the illiterate’ depends on the very inseparability of matter and material. Moreover, as the second quotation suggests, the image of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is moving because it is a sensory manifestation of the biblical story, not in spite of its appeal to the senses. Indeed, Basil, Bishop of Ancyra, argued at the Second Council of Nicaea that “oft times the father had read this history [of the sacrifice of Isaac], and yet perhaps he never wept; but no sooner does he see the picture than he can no longer forbear.” Extrapolating from that comment, John, Legate of the East, declared “if a picture thus caused tears of edification to flow from so illustrious a teacher, how much more likely is it to bring compunction and edification to the uninstructed and ignorant?”

The argument against seeing images as themselves participating of the divine was made forcefully in the *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum*, four books written by order of Charlemagne intended as a refutation of what his court believed to be the conclusions of the Second Council of Nicaea regarding sacred images. When the Acts of the Council were translated into Latin, one of the clerics charged with the task proceeded to do so using Greek-

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19 On the influence and transformations of Gregory’s pronouncement in the later Middle Ages, see Lawrence G. Duggan, who ultimately argues that the phrase is misunderstood when it is made to express the belief that “images can do more than remind and deepen what one already knows” (248). Writing about the notion that images can act as a didactic alternative to writing, Peter Brown suggests that Gregory’s dictum represents a perceptual shift from a “Late Antiquity period eye” (33) that assumes an affective and participatory relationship to images to a later more distanced “vision” where the viewer is able to “project the mind upon them [striking images and Biblical scenes upon church walls], as *picturae*, as images that carried specific messages that demanded to be ‘read’” (32).
Latin glossaries without paying attention to nuances, thus introducing serious problems such as the use of *adoratio* for both *proskynesis* (veneration of icons and relics) and *latreia* (the worship due only to God). This faulty translation reached Charlemagne’s court and it was received poorly on account of its perceived radical acceptance of a seemingly indiscriminate worship of images. To add insult to injury, the translation’s poorly phrased Latin alienated its Carolingean readers. Writing then against the supposed sanction by the Council of Eastern Christianity’s approval of the worship of images themselves as sacred, Theodulf mobilizes the following anecdote:

A man who venerates pictures [qui imagines adorant] was shown two pictures of beautiful women [feminarum pulchrarum] without any captions, which someone had thrown away, caring little for them. Someone said to him: one of these is the picture of Mary and should not be thrown away, and the other is of Venus, and should at all costs be thrown away. The man turned to the artist and asked which [was which], for they were completely alike. [The painter supplied the pictures with captions]. The picture with the caption: Mother of God, was raised, venerated, and kissed, and the other, because it had the caption: Venus, was maligned, scorned and cursed, although both were equal in shape and color and were made of identical material, and differed only in caption.\(^\text{21}\)

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\(^{20}\) For a full consideration of the context leading up to the drafting of the *Opus Caroli* (also known as *Libri carolini*), the controversy over its authorship, convincing evidence that the primary author was the Visigothic bishop Theodulf of Orleans, its textual history, and a summary of the Byzantine and Western views on images, see Ann Freeman (“An Introduction” 2-74). Thomas F. X. Noble’s *Images, iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* has a very useful summary of the organization and content of the *Opus Caroli* (180-206).

\(^{21}\) Latin text and English translation in Władysław Tatarkiewicz (100). See also his introduction to Carolingian aesthetics 91-99.
This argument also turns on the separation of the sensory perception of the beauty portrayed and its ultimate purpose. The two images of beautiful women were exactly the same in figure and technique; the difference is literally inscribed from the outside when the names are seemingly assigned at random by the painter.

The fact that the same hand that created the ambiguous artifacts is given the authority to turn one into a pagan idol and the other into a representation of the Holy Virgin speaks less of the role of the painter as a simulacrum of God the Creator than it serves to highlight that the paintings are nothing but manufactured objects.\textsuperscript{22} Earlier in the text we read plainly that the value of images can only be assessed on account of their materiality as “precious, more precious, most precious” but never “holy, holier, holiest” (in Freeman “Scripture and Image” 164). No mystical illumination immanent to the painting or residing in the hand of the painter differentiates Venus from Mary here, which makes them both the target of an iconoclast’s contempt (the anonymous “someone … caring little for them” who had thrown them away).

\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, the labels that were supposed to separate the hateful pagan idol from the

\textsuperscript{22} On the classical and biblical sources that informed the medieval topic of God as maker (\textit{deus artifex}), and their influence, particularly on Spanish seventeenth-century theories of art, see Curtius (544-71). Although in the Renaissance, the association of artists with the creative powers of God became an argument for treating painting in particular as a liberal art rather than a manual craft, the context of the passage above would seem to highlight instead the painter’s usurpation of that divine power at the expense of “that which ought to be adored”, and therefore a rejection of Byzantine investment of icon painters with the capacity to channel to the image the divinity of the prototype. Misgivings about painting and sculpture surface as late as the twelfth century; as Michael Camille writes in \textit{The Gothic Idol}, it was not unusual for medieval painting and sculpture to be viewed with some suspicion for being reminders of negative associations of manual work, perceived as divinely inflicted punishment following the expulsion of humans from paradise (35-50).

\textsuperscript{23} Both Freeman and Tatarkiewicz note that the position of the \textit{Opus Caroli} may seem initially similar to that of Eastern iconoclasts who advocated the destruction of all religious images, but upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the Western response “is a minimalist view of images, and thoroughly materialistic” (Freeman “Scripture and Images” 164), and “their attitude to art is simpler, more down to earth” (Tatarkiewicz 97). In other
revered icon do little to curb the iconophile’s enthusiasm, which could still be construed as idolatrous. After all, the man-made image is put on a pedestal, kissed, and venerated, thus belying the hope that Christians would not confuse saint and image, that beauty meant to represent the divine is substantially different from idols, and that the viewer would maintain an intellectual response to images (in keeping with “the chaste act of reading” that painting is supposed to emulate) rather than “get physical” (Brown 23).

In the previous book, Theodulf considers specifically the extent to which beauty (or lack of it) might lead the believer astray. Since pictures are made by humans whose talents range from insignificant to excellent, the question arises: Which images are more worthy of being honored, those which “resemble their models … and shine with newness” or those that do not and are “shapeless [deformes] … and decrepit with age [vetustate fatescentes]”? As it turns out, that was a trick question: “For if we give the more valuable ones [in technique and material] greater veneration, this means that we are venerating the work and the quality of the material, and not the fervor of devotion. And if we venerate the less valuable ones, those which least resemble what they wish to attain, it is unjust — because they are excellent neither in work nor in material, nor are they known to resemble persons” (in Tatarkiewicz 105-06). In other words, there is danger in either case. Privileging beauty risks confusing subject matter (the saint, Biblical story, etc.) and the materiality of the representation so that it seems as if holiness resides in the latter rather than in the prototype that inspired the image

words, Theodulf spells out a limited defense of images which does not engage the Byzantine metaphysics of the image, but remains grounded on pragmatism: “We allow pictures of the saints for anyone who should wish to make them…. We do not force anyone to venerate them against his will; but neither do we allow them to be broken or destroyed, if anyone should want to do so” (in Tatarkiewicz 104). Images do not partake in the holiness of what they depict, but they could play the limited role of aids to religious instruction by arousing the viewer’s memory of events [ad memoriam rerum gestarum] and serving as ornaments in churches [venustatem parietur] (Tatarkiewicz 106; Freeman “Scripture and Images” 173).
and to which it is supposed to refer. And yet, obliviousness to beauty also has its dangers, not the least of which is the risk that painting will go beyond its mandate to commemorate sacred res gestae and will instead deceive the believer by crafting grotesque chimeras, images of divinity drawn from unrealistic and unreal shapes.²⁴

In conclusion, the visual representation of beauty is perceived as potentially dangerous because on the one hand, the representation of religious content might not be altogether clear or legible, as in the case of the Venus-Mary paintings, and on the other, as immediately apprehended sensual objects, these images enthrall the viewer and elicit a powerful emotional response, ranging from the improper kissing of Mary’s image to the more acceptable anecdote of St. Gregory’s weeping in front of a painting of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. How then is this beauty held in check? The extreme answer is to destroy it (the fate of Venus), but more often than not, the hope was to contain its excess by appealing to the story — or the caption — that ought to lead the viewer, in turn, towards the divine.²⁵

²⁴ On Theodulf and the fear of “painterly license” see Freeman “Scripture and Images” 176-82. Francisco Pacheco would return to this question in El arte de la pintura (1649) when he examines the aims of painting as an art form first generally and then more specifically as sacred art. He explains that in the Classical world, the goal of painting was imitation: “representar la cosa que pretende con valentía y propiedad posible, que de algunos es llamada el alma de la pintura, porque la hace que paresca viva; de manera que la hermosura y variedad de colores y otros ornatos son cosas accesorías” (248) [“The end of painting will be, by means of imitation, to represent a given subject with all the power and propriety possible. Some people call this the soul of painting, because it makes it seem alive, so that the beauty and variety of colors and other embellishments become of secondary importance” in Enggass and Brown 162]. He then proceeds to quote Aristotle’s preference for a simply drawn image that is nonetheless very close to its model (“muy parecida a la verdad”) over a more ornate, colorful one that bears little resemblance to it. Christian art, he concludes, must aim not only to be a believable imitation of its subject, but also thereby to promote virtue, through which art is ennobled and receives a new perfection (“la arte sola, antes se ensalza y engrandece y recibe nueva perfección” 249).

²⁵ It would be tempting to see in the appeal to narrative a victory of word over image, of scripture over painting, that foreshadows Protestant (and particularly Calvinist) subjection of visio to logos, but that would imply projecting modern notions of literacy backwards. For
Nearly eight centuries later, when the debate over the function of images once again raged in Europe, the Catholic Church’s official response as outlined in the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent reaffirmed the position that images were not to be adored like pagan idols but given “due honor and veneration” on account of the prototype which those images represent rather than for any inherent quality (235). Moreover, the decree specified that images had a concretely didactic function, and consequently, the focus turned to orthodoxy or how to ensure that the lesson would not be lost on even the least sophisticated of the flock. The notion of decorum, of the proper and accepted manner of representation, is defined by faithfulness to the truth of scripture, discouraging the representation of apocryphal stories, promoting adherence to a verisimilar principle by which saints and Biblical characters should not be dressed in contemporary dress, and guarding in particular against any ostentatious apparel in the representation of female saints. Alfonso Rodríguez G. de Ceballos’ introduction to Sacred Spain details the importance of decorum in the wake of attacks on religious images by various Protestant thinkers, and he concludes that “[l]ack of decorum was understood to be the tendency to mix the religious and the profane, such as covering sacred images in modern dress, jewelry, and all manner of adornments, thereby reducing respect for them and confusing them with secular portraits” (25). He notes, for example, Michael Camille turns to the Venus-Mary anecdote in the Opus Caroli to show how “on the very basic level of recognition, literacy meant being able to distinguish between true and false images,” and yet, he is quick to point out that in many other cases, “if they [inscriptions] rescued the image from ambiguity, they did so often in an allusive and complex Latin” (“Seeing and Reading” 33-34), implying that the relationship of text and image is not transparent, but still dependent on “the total experience of communication involving sight, sound, action and physical expression” (43). More generally, on the significance of the Opus Caroli in medieval debates regarding images and the negotiation of conflict between papal and monarchic powers, see Ann Freeman (“Carolingian Orthodoxy”), and for the revival of the text in the context of the Reformation, see James R. Payton’s “Calvin and the Libri Carolini.”
example, that often the representation of female saints and the Virgin received meticulous
treatment in many diocesan synods and in various treatises, such as the 1654 Synod of
Salamanca which specified that the head of Our Lady “is not adorned profanely with curls or
other hair embellishments ... but is covered by her wimple [tocas], with all possible decency
and reverence” (27). And more explicitly, Father Bernardino de Villegas complained in the
_Vida de Santa Lutgarda_ (1635) that the finely decked out images of female saints and the
Virgin contributed to the pursuit of frivolities by the female faithful, who seek to imitate the
finery they see portrayed rather than follow their holy example.  

Images must therefore be instructive and move to virtue without any recourse to
anything that could be construed as indecent or profane:

Moreover, in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of
images, every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished; finally, all
lasciviousness be avoided; in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned
with a beauty exciting to lust; nor the celebration of the saints, and the visitation of
relics be by any perverted into revellings and drunkenness; as if festivals are
celebrated to the honour of the saints by luxury and wantonness.

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26 For a more detailed account of how the concept of decorum developed from a largely
aesthetic quality concerned with historical representational accuracy in the fifteenth and early
sixteenth centuries to a later understanding of decorum that insisted on moral and didactic
aspects, see Palma Martínez-Burgos García’s article, “El decoro” as well as the section on
_imágenes de vestir_ in _Idolos e imágenes_ (270-80), where she distinguishes the polemic over
the clothing of religious statues for processional purposes from the condemnation of
ostentatious clothing by clergy, highlighting that what is at stake in preventing statues from
borrowing clothing from patrons is maintaining the distinction between sacred and profane
realms, “en última instancia, se quiere evitar esa cotidianidad excesiva a la que se lleva a las
imágenes sagradas a través de unos vestidos, posturas y aderezos que recordaban demasiado
a modas concretas” (272). On how the Council of Trent affected artistic production and
religious practices in Spain, see Alain Saint-Saëns’ _Art and Faith._
In fine, let so great care and diligence be used herein by bishops, as that there be nothing seen that is disorderly, or that is unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing indecorous, seeing that holiness becometh the house of God. (Council of Trent, Twenty-fifth Session 236-37).

To put it simply, what is at stake in the creation of images is their legibility: saints and their stories should be recognized easily and painted in such a way that they represent their subject matter accurately and in a dignified manner.27

It is with this in mind that we can return now to the evocative image of Ribera’s still young penitent Mary of Egypt (fig. 1), with which the chapter opened. More precisely, let us return to Victor Stoichita’s attention to her upward-turned gaze. The art historian begins his interpretation of the painting by noting that whatever it is that holds the female figure’s attention, it remains out of sight for the viewer. This leads him to wonder whether she sees something or nothing. Further, he asks the speculative question that if Mary’s bodily gestures do betray her contact with a divine force that exceeds the frame of the painting, “without already knowing that this is Mary of Egypt, how can we be sure that the beatific woman portrayed is not one of the many mystics, illuminati, whose claims of communication with the divine through visions, were contested by the Catholic church?” (172). Stoichita admits that it is wiser to imagine the female figure as Mary of Egypt, but acknowledging that in doing so “we are definitely according her the qualities of a codified rhetorical representation. The code, in a painting destined to have an indisputable impact on the spectator, is without a

27 In this sense, even the famous polemic against Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, which predated but still shed light on the Tridentine position on religious images, was as much about the depiction of nudity as the painter’s failure to adhere to decorum, painting angels without wings, saints without halos, and an Olympian-looking, beardless Christ (Rodríguez Ceballos 19; Martínez-Burgos García “El decoro” 92-94).
doubt well hidden by the artist” (172). If the code is well hidden, then one could add a further question to his inquiry: How can we know that this woman is a saint and not a kitchen maid, or worse, a prostitute?

The question is not an academic one, but rather gets to the heart of an anxiety of representation of sacred matter in general, which becomes heightened when coupled with female beauty. As with the anecdote of the scandalous actress playing the Virgin or Mary Magdalene, often repeated in polemical texts against theatrical performance, there seems to be an analogous fear of the illegibility of the represented female body. The Venus-Mary anecdote of the *Opus Caroli* is perhaps the most lucid example, but it is certainly not the only one. In the *Opus orandi Deum* (c. 1524), Erasmus defends the proper use of images in churches, if “nothing be in evidence but that which is worthy of Christ,” which leads him to lament that “the saints are not depicted in a form which is worthy of them — as when a painter, commissioned to portray the Virgin Mary or St. Agatha, occasionally patterns his figure after a lascivious little whore, or when he, commissioned to portray Christ or St. Paul, takes as his model some drunken rascal” (in Panofsky “Erasmus” 208).

This issue also resurfaces in the discussions of the common practice of what could be called the pictorial translation of pagan models into Christian images. In that context, the analogy of Venus and the Virgin is often remarked upon; approvingly, by Albrecht Dürer who wrote that “just as they [artists from Antiquity] employed Venus as the most beautiful woman, so will we chastely present the same lovely figure as the most pure Virgin, mother of God” (in Panofsky “Erasmus” 213-14), and with significantly less alacrity by Erasmus, who condemns the practice in the *Dialogus Ciceronianus*: “What if someone today were to render the Virgin Mary in the same manner as Apelles had painted the Venus Anadyomede
rising from the sea, as Boticelli’s famous *Birth of Venus*, celebrated by all writers, or St. Thecla in the form in which he had painted Laïs [a famous Roman courtesan]? Would you say that such painter was similar to Apelles? I don’t think so.” (in Panofsky “Erasmus” 213).

In Spain, the Jesuit ascetic preacher Bernardino de Villegas would also advice against the excess luxury in the representation of female saints:

¡Qué cosa más indecente que vna Imagen de nuestra Señora con saya entera, ropa, copete, valona, arandela, gargantilla, y cosas semejantes; y que unas vírgenes vestidas tan profanamente con tantos dijes y galas que no traen más las damas más bizarras del mundo! Que a veces duda un hombre si adora a Santa Lucía o a Santa Catalina o si apartará los ojos por no ver la profanidad de los trajes, porque en sus vestidos y adornos *no parecen santas del cielo sino damas del mundo*, y a no estar Santa Catalina con su espada en la mano y Santa Lucía con sus ojos en el plato, por lo que toca a su vestido y traje galán con que las visten, nadie dijera que eran santas ni vírgenes honestísimas. (IV. 18, 431; my emphasis) 28

Following Villegas’ logic, the iconographic signature of Saint Mary of Egypt, the three loaves of bread that miraculously sustain her throughout much of her time as an anchorite, would seem to secure the saint’s identity because of their prominent position in the painting — but only if one blocks out the polysemy of bread. Taken straight, the loaves of bread may

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28 “What more indecent thing than an image of Our Lady in a long gown with a train, copete, Walloon collar, ruff, choker, and similar things, and holy virgins dressed so profanely and with so many jewels and so much finery, worn only by the most bizarre ladies in the world, [that sometimes one doubts whether to adore Saint Lucy or Saint Catherine or to turn one’s gaze away as to avoid seeing the profane irreverence of their attire because in their clothes and ornaments they do not appear to be heavenly saints but worldly ladies], and if Saint Catherine does not carry her sword in her hand and Saint Lucy her eyes on a platter, from the dress and fancy clothing they are wearing, no one would know that they were the saints or chaste virgins that they are.” (English translation in Rodríguez G. de Ceballos 27; parenthetical addition and emphasis are my own)
prefigure the administration of the sacrament of the Eucharist by the monk Zozimas at the end of Mary’s stay in the desert. Profanely, and given our saint’s colorful erotic past, the sexual connotations of bread come to the fore.²⁹

The figure of Mary of Egypt, partaking as much of a sinful nature as a saintly one, embodies the anxieties over images that I have traced from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. Moreover, from the beginning, her legend emphasized the active role played by an image of the Virgin Mary in her own conversion at the narthex of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem — a church that was itself believed to have been the site of the transformation into a Christian temple of a pagan shrine to Venus.³⁰ All of this makes her an important, though often unexamined figure in the discussions over beauty and representation in religious art. More precisely, as we shall see, she embodies a representational alternative to the seductiveness of Venus and the asceticism of the anchorites. This third way is best illuminated in comparison with the Egyptian’s more famous predecessor, Mary Magdalene.

²⁹ From the Middle Ages to at least the seventeenth-century, bread was used as a euphemism for vagina and baker-girl for prostitute (cf. Vasvari who studied at length the polysemy of Juan Ruiz’s “Cruz cruzada, panadera”). Taking up again the subject of obscenity in Spanish cazurro poetry, Márquez Villanueva writes, “Since remote times cereals had symbolized life and fertility for the people of the Mediterranean basin, and this helped to turn the idea of bread into its most desirable embodiment. Bread (pan) became erotic and was used as a lexicalized metaphor for pudendum muliebris, as proven by its use in popular Spanish and other languages from the Middle Ages to this day” (95).

³⁰ According to The Catholic Encyclopedia, the narthex refers to a section located on the west end of a church that is separated from the nave by a low wall and reserved for those not admitted to full worship such as catechumens and penitents (Cram “narthex”). On Constantine’s reclaiming the cave where “the impure spirit whom they call Venus” as the site of the Holy Sepulcher and the subsequent erection of a church, see Eusebius’ Life of Constantine (III. 26)
NEITHER VENUS NOR VENERABLE OLD MEN

Penitent saints were all the rage in seventeenth-century Catholic countries, and as the early modern historian Alain Saint-Saëns put it, “rare were the painters of the period who failed to depict the penitent Magdalen” (Art and Faith 32). The surge of what Palma Martínez Burgos-García called “una auténtica inflación de santos penitentes” (Ut pictura natura” 19) can be explained partly by the Council of Trent’s reaffirmation of the importance of the sacraments, especially Penance and the Holy Eucharist, but the image of the penitent saint touched a cultural nerve that went beyond Tridentine ideology. The narrative arc from sinfulness to repentance and redemption of many saints’ lives resonated not only with the struggles of central Golden Age literary characters but also with notable Spaniards such as the playwright Lope de Vega’s wavering between erotic dalliance and religious fervour in his own life, as Javier Portús has noted (“Indecencia” 68-69). What’s more, the attractiveness of that narrative entered into collusion with the popularity of spiritual manuals that recommended sustained meditation on Christ’s Passion and one’s own death. This collusion resulted in the highlighting of penitential episodes in the lives of saints such as Mary Magdalene, whose previous iconography had focused on scenes related to the Passion.

31 On the importance of penitent culture in early modern Spain, see Saint-Saëns (Art and Faith 29-106), and for an account of the progressive institutional distrust of eremitic practices, see his “Apology and Denigration”. On the use of the legend of the Magdalene as the prime exemplum of penitence already in medieval preaching, particularly in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council’s reformulation of penitential theology, see Katherine L. Jansen’s Making of the Magdalen (200-44). For a general account of the medieval and early modern iconography of Mary Magdalene, see Réau (846-59) and Émile Mâle specifically for her rise in the seventeenth-century as a symbol of penitence, (67-72). For more recent work on the Magdalene, including helpful bibliographies, see Susan Haskins’ encyclopedic study of material from early Christianity to the twentieth century which focuses on how the legend refracts the changing cultural attitudes towards women and sexuality, and Marilena Mosco’s 1986 richly illustrated catalogue of the exhibition La Maddalena tra sacro e profano which includes essays by leading scholars on various aspects of the saint’s iconography from the thirteenth to the twentieth century.
(witnessing the Crucifixion, witnessing Christ’s Resurrection, etc.), and it also contributed to turning into ascetic penitents many saints who previously had not figured obviously among the ranks of repentant desert dwellers.\textsuperscript{32}

The high esteem for the motif of eremitic saints meant that these images were often collected or commissioned as part of a series, such as the set of thirty-five anchorite paintings by an unknown Dutch artist in the Convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, where Mary of Egypt is the only female.\textsuperscript{33} However, the saintly gathering is not limited to churches. In 1658, Don Jerónimo de la Torre owned no less than eight paintings of desert saints, and the seventeenth-century inventory of the collection of the Marquis de los Llanos lists four saints’ portraits by Ribera (John the Baptist, an elderly saint possibly identified as Bartholomew, Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt, all now at the Museo del Prado, which can give us a sense of what the series may have looked like). All the figures are painted in mid-ground; the landscape is craggy with meditation-inducing caves, unimposing trees, and imposing skies in

\textsuperscript{32} Martínez Burgos-García has studied, for example, the changing representations of St. Jerome from the early Renaissance vision of the Church Father as a proto-humanist in his study to Baroque penitent in the wilderness depicted striking his often naked breast with a rock in order to atone for his sins (“Meditación” 152-72). In a different article, she also pointed out that there was a surge in literary and visual representations of St. Peter weeping over his denial of Christ as well as of Sts. Dominic and Francis praying in a desert landscape accompanied by a crucifix and skull (“Ut pictura natura” 19, 23-24). On the development of an iconography of penitent St. Peter in relation to Mary Magdalen in an Italian context, with particular emphasis on Caravaggio, see Mormando.

\textsuperscript{33} Ana García Sanz and Juan Martínez Cuesta write with respect to this series that initially there was great enthusiasm for paintings depicting dramatic episodes from the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary, but soon those images gave way to new themes, most notably the representation of meditational landscapes with saints (291). They place the series in the context of the popular Maerten de Vos’ prints of eremitic figures, collected in four or five volumes, which circulated widely in Europe and inspired Federigo Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, to commission a series of anchorite paintings from Jan Brueghel and Paul Bril as well as those in the Descalzas Reales Convent. The painting of St. Mary of Egypt is drawn from de Vos’ \textit{Solitudo sive viate foeminarum anachoritarum}, and it features the saint receiving communion from the hand of Zozimas in the foreground, while in the background the monk buries the saint aided by a lion.
The pairing of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Egypt was not uncommon, as evidenced not only in the Prado series but also in the anonymous twin canvases of the life and death of both Marys that hang in the Cusco Cathedral in Peru, or Tintoretto’s two large paintings of each Mary meant to hang together at the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice.35

And yet, in spite of the similarities between the two saints, one can draw an important distinction between them. Her flesh is rarely depicted as having experienced the ravages of eremitic life, this although, famously, for Émile Mâle, Mary Magdalene was an archetypical image of Counter-Reformation penitential culture, the very image of “cette beauté qui

34 In a recent monograph on Ribera, Javier Portús notes that of the 364 paintings recently attributed to the Valencian artist, three hundred treat a religious theme. Many of these represent saints in isolation and were meant for private collections. For a more detailed study of Ribera’s commissions in Italy and Spain, see Alonso E. Pérez Sánchez (“Ribera and Spain 35-49).

35 The association of the Magdalene and Mary of Egypt goes back a long way. In the *Speculum historiale*, Vincent of Beauvais (c. 1190-1264?) tells the story of a vision that Peter of Clairvaux had while working alone in the monastery. The abbot, disconcerted by seeing three “most beautiful women” approaching him, asked them if they did not know that women were not allowed in. At this reproach, the most beautiful lady replied that she was the Virgin Mary and her attendants Mary Magdalene and Mary of Egypt before disappearing again (XXIX.32; quoted in Katherine A. Smith 184). Several scholars have studied the similarities between these two saints. Réau’s iconographic study of the two Marys notes, for example, that while the legend of Mary Magdalene’s sea journey from Jerusalem to Marseilles, and her thirty-year retirement to the solitude of Sainte-Baume to atone for her sins was “traced in the manner of the legend of saint Mary of Egypt” (847, my translation), the Egyptian shares with the Magdalene the flowing locks of hair that covered her nakedness in the desert (886; see also his description of other known image pairings of the two Marys, 852). The French art historian also assertively dismissed the miracle of the Egyptian’s ecstasy, born to heaven by angels, as stolen from the Magdalene, though more recent work by Alvar (*Vida* 126-27, 136-37 and “De arte y literatura” 82-83) has provided evidence to the contrary. Benedicta Ward, a historian of religion, for her part, noted that it was perhaps due to the confusion between the Marys that the Magdalene’s sins were regarded as sins of the flesh. This last part is important because in the history of the Magdalene’s pictorial representations up until the second half of the sixteenth century, her penitence was a minor theme outnumbered significantly by scenes of her interaction with Christ — even in Provence, the site of her eremitic life. After that, and for reasons outlined above, penitent Magdalenes take center stage, making it often difficult to distinguish one Mary from another, as Pedro de Mena’s sculptures or Tintoretto’s paintings show.
s’évanouissait peu à peu loin des regards des hommes, comme un encens qui brûle pour Dieu seul dans la solitude” (L’art religieux 69).\textsuperscript{36} The Magdalene’s youthfulness and beauty are canonical. With very few notable exceptions, most representations of the Apostle to the Apostles remain sweet, graceful and young.\textsuperscript{37} This is true even when she is depicted after thirty years of penance in a cave near Marseilles, for example in those paintings where she is carried by angels to commune in heaven — images that in tone and iconography have much more in common with Ribera’s influential renditions of the Immaculate Conception (especially the one at the convent of Las Agustinas Recoletas, Salamanca) than with even the closest depictions of Mary of Egypt.

This peculiarity of the Magdalene’s visual history, the fact that her physical beauty remains a constant, even when she is surrounded by the tools of mortification (as in Ribera’s 1636 Assumption of the Magdalene), has not gone unnoticed by modern scholars. Louis Réau remarks, for example, that many images of the saint doing penance in a cave near Sainte-

\textsuperscript{36} [Beauty consuming itself like incense burned before God in solitude far from the eyes of men. (Religious Art 171-72)].
\textsuperscript{37} The best-known of these exceptions might be the poignant wooden sculpture of a withered beauty covered by her own hair done by the fifteenth-century Florentine artist Donatello. This sculpture is commonly identified as Magdalene rather than Mary of Egypt although it does not depict the saint with her jar of ointment (her signature attribute, alluding to her luxurious past as a courtesan as well as the two defining episodes in her vita: her washing of Christ’s feet and bringing perfume to Christ’s tomb). The other two examples of a less than lovely Magdalene that I have come across are Mary Magdalene in the Desert by the seventeenth-century Flemish painter Livio Mehus and his Spanish contemporary Pedro de Orrente’s Penitent Magdalene (both reproduced in María Magdalena: éxtasis y arrepentimiento 132-33; 204-05). On the Mehus painting, Odile Delenda remarked that the saint’s age and visible signs of wasting away are more typical of representations of Mary of Egypt (204). Orrente’s Magdalene shows in detail the sorrow and remorse of the saint, depicted in torn clothing revealing strong arms and legs, and long, undone waves of curly blond hair down her back. For a study of the pictorial representations of the Magdalene in Spain, with particular attention paid to the influence of French paintings in the development of the saint’s iconography, see Benito Navarrete Prieto.
Baume picture her as “significantly less chaste” than before her conversion.\textsuperscript{38} That is the case, for instance, of Orazio Gentileschi’s \textit{Magdalene Repenting} (fig. 8), where the saint reclines languidly in a rocky landscape; her flowing locks and loosely draped cloak draw the viewer’s attention to her uncovered youthful breasts and her feet as her own gaze is directed upwards in ecstasy. From a very different perspective, taking object relations psychological theory as a point of departure, Margaret Miles examines the significance of the early modern textual and visual emphasis on the Magdalene’s penitence all while representing her in the fullness of a “fleshly allure strongly suggest[ive] of her alleged former career” (\textit{Complex Delight} 67-68).\textsuperscript{39} In contrast to Marjorie Malvern, who broadly interpreted the creation of the figure of the Magdalene as Christianity’s attempt to clothe “Venus in sackcloth,” as her

\textsuperscript{38} Réau writes: “On la voit couchée demi-nue ou vêtue uniquement du manteaux d’or de ses cheveux blonds, de sorte que, malgré la tête de mort devant laquelle elle médite, elle est généralement beaucoup moins chaste dans sa penitence que dans ses égarements” [We see her lying down, half-naked or covered simply with the golden mantle of her blond hair, in such a way that, in spite of the skull she uses to meditate, she is generally significantly less chaste in her penitence than in her deviances] (850). It is interesting to note that in spite of staging a contrast between the representations of Mary Magdalene as sinner and penitent, Réau’s taxonomy of Magdalene iconography omits any examples of the former. Similarly, in her 2008 study of “the secularization of the breast,” Margaret Miles notes that “the Magdalen’s activities as a prostitute were not portrayed graphically in text or image until the end of the twentieth century, in the film \textit{The Last Temptation of Christ}” (\textit{Complex} 59). If true, one can trace a contrast with Mary of Egypt, whose seduction of the pilgrims sailing from Alexandria to Jerusalem is known to have been portrayed in church stained glass window cycles found in the thirteenth-century cathedral at Bourges (Clément and Guitard 36-40), at St. Germain l’Auxerrois and in a chapel built in Paris in honor of the Egyptian around the same time by the guild of cloth merchants. That last cycle, depicting the topless saint-to-be on a boat with a pilgrim, so scandalized a priest at the neighboring St. Eustache church that he ordered it be taken down in 1660 (Ottin 359). The chapel itself was destroyed in 1792.

\textsuperscript{39} Miles’ project is to trace the history of the representation of female breasts from a period where they were used as a religious symbol (roughly from 1350 to the end of the seventeenth century) to what she calls its modern secularization as erotic and medical images. Within religious representation, she distinguishes between the Virgin Mary’s single exposed breast, depicted in a nonnaturalistic fashion and always in a maternal context, and the frankly eroticized breast (or more often breasts), of the Magdalene, realistically portrayed peeking out from disheveled clothing (\textit{Complex} 70).
suggestive title puts it, Miles sees instead a figure that celebrates the “ideal of human wholeness” saint and sinner, depicted in the throes of erotic and spiritual passion — a Venus a lo divino, as it were.

The translation of profane Venuses into saintly Magdalenes, Venuses of Divine Love, was not uncommon in the early modern period. A 1632 letter published by a group of Spanish influential clergymen, Copia de los pareceres y censuras de los reverendísimos Padres... sobre el abuso de las figuras y pinturas lascivas, unambiguously condemns the production and possession of profane mythological nudes. However, it makes allowances for turning Venuses into Magdalenes: “la pérdida sería ninguna, antes grande ganancia en transformarse una Venus en Santa María Magdalena, una Diana en Santa María Egipciaca, y otras santas, o como mejor se pueda acomodar” [nothing would be lost, rather a great gain would be made from transforming a Venus into Mary Magdalene, a Diana into Saint Mary of Egypt and other saints, as best suited] (in Martínez-Burgos “Decoro” 97). 40

The difference between the youthful, shapely Magdalene and the gaunt, elderly body of Mary of Egypt is visible in the two Prado paintings by Ribera (fig. 6 a,b). As mentioned earlier, these paintings date from the early 1640s and, together with a St. Bartholomew and St. John, belonged to the collection of the Marquis de los Llanos. They share, according to Craig Felton, the “more restrained style and structurally controlled settings” of Ribera’s mature period: single figures at prayer, set in mid-ground, illuminated from the left and framed by a

40 It would be tempting for modern readers to attribute the call for such transformed Venuses to unsophisticated prudishness or hypocrisy regarding female nudity. However, as Javier Portús shows in a critical article on the importance of historically sensitive “ways of seeing,” nudity is not transparent, and in order to fully understand those partially naked Magdalenes (or more generally how “indecent” or lascivious art was defined in the period) we need to consider not only how religious and sexual practices and attitudes may have changed through time but also what is meant by “seeing.”
cavernous landscape that allows one to see a few trees, mountains and clouds at a distance (58). The tone of the paintings is one of peaceful contemplation in contrast to the anguished melancholy of Ribera’s 1637 *Penitent Magdalene*, also at the Museo del Prado (fig. 11). Both feature the female saint in a prayer pose — the Magdalene kneeling, Mary leaning on a rock — their faces turned slightly towards the viewer, though their eyes are focused on the upper left corner of the painting, attentive to something outside the frame.

And yet, in spite of these similarities, there is no mistaking one saint for the other. The Magdalene’s features are soft and girlish with large liquid eyes and full mouth, her skin pearlescent, fingers long and elegant, and her long tresses golden. She wears a silky red mantle over a brilliant blue chemise that slips off her left shoulder to expose the hairshirt underneath. Hers is a miraculously maintained beauty and youth, not unlike that attributed to souls in heaven or to the Virgin’s uncorrupted body. The sensuality of the painting, visible in the vibrant colors and loose brush strokes, however, is meant to arouse compassion and contrition rather than lust.41 In contrast, Mary of Egypt’s body shows unmistakeable signs of age and penitence in her grayish complexion, tanned wrinkled hands, and her long white hair pulled back in a dishevelled bun. Still, vestiges of the saint’s former beauty are visible: beneath her furrowed brow we can see a pair of dark, lovely, expressive eyes; the wrinkles on her cheeks frame a pair of lips that have lost their color but retain some fullness. Her attire is

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41 Famosly, when shown a partially clothed Magdalene by Titian, the Italian biographer Vasari declared that “although it was so beautiful, it moves one not to lust but to commiseration” (in Aikema 56). In a similar vein, Portús quotes from a poem dedicated to a picture of the Magdalene “que tiene el cuerpo medio desnudo” [that has a half-naked body], where the poet addresses directly the effects of her nudity: “Luego aunque te desnudó, / darte más decencia pudo, / si tu espíritu, aunque mudo,/ más suspende, y pone en calma, / pues cuando arrebata el Alma / no divierte lo desnudo” [Then, although he undressed you, he was able to paint you with greater honesty, and if your spirit, although mute, gives great surprise and calm, it is because when the soul is enraptured, nudity does not delight] (“Indecencia” 78).
a simple, dark, rough cloak that drops from her shoulder to reveal a wizened décolletage and more surprisingly, the saint’s shrunken breast.

That same surprise meets the viewer of the incredible 1641, three-quarter length portrait of Mary of Egypt now at the Musée Fabre in Montpellier (fig. 5), where the contrast with the youthful Magdalene is even more noticeable. Again, we see Mary at prayer in a pose that seems familiar by now; her gaze is fixed beyond the frame, her hands gathered together at her breast and her mouth slightly open in prayer. A warm ray of light illuminates the saint from the left and together with the shadow it casts on her face serves to emphasize her gaunt demeanor, tracing the outline of every wrinkle, of her sunken eyes, and hollow cheeks. Whatever suggestion of softness left in the Prado painting has disappeared here. Even the landscape has hardened with greenery giving way to dramatic rock formations behind the saint that leave visible only a tiny sliver of early evening sky in the upper left corner.42

A slightly smaller copy of the Montpellier painting hung at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, where it horrified the nineteenth-century French writer Stendhal. Upon seeing it, he declared: “horrible vieille, d’autant plus horrible que l’on voit qu’elle a été belle” [a horrible old woman, all the more horrible because we can see that she was beautiful].43 More recently, Nicola Spinosa wrote in Jusepe de Ribera, el Españoleto: “[la Egipcíaca está] representada

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42 The close association of landscape and eremitical saints is a cultural development that Martínez-Burgos has traced in Spain to the popularity of spiritual treatises (i.e., San Juan de la Cruz’ La subida del Monte Carmelo, Alfonso de Orozco’s Vergel de oración, San Pedro de Alcántara’s Vergel spiritual del alma religiosa, etc.) that propose natural sites as real and symbolic aids to meditation (“Ut pictura” 16-19). Writing specifically about the Montpellier Egipcíaca, Denise Maria Pagano noted in the 1992 catalogue description of this painting how “the imposing quality of the figure is heightened by a palette of earth colors, which creates an intimate relationship between the saint and the natural setting that surrounds her” (145).

43 Jean Habert cites Stendhal in his 1989 review of Italian Baroque paintings in Marseilles only to disagree with him: “the bandits’ favourite saint is more fascinating in old age than in youth” (59).
como una anciana entumecida, herida, desgreñada y doliente, una figura que sólo podía
encontrarse en los barrios bajos y en los callejones oscuros de la Nápoles virreinal y española”

[ she is depicted as a stiff, wounded, and sickly old lady with matted hair, a figure that could
only be found in the lower-class districts and dark alleys of the Spanish viceroyalty of
Naples] (62-63). Although Spinosa’s assessment does not go quite as far as the infamous
judgment Lord Byron made of Ribera in Don Juan (“Spagnoletto tainted / His brush with all
the blood of all the sainted” [xiii.71.7-8]), the allusion to the Neapolitan underworld is not far
from the commonplace association of Ribera with dark, sinister subjects. But are horror,
fear, and disgust the only possible reactions to the weathered body of our anchoress? And, is
that body necessarily ugly because it is aged?

Let us look more closely at Mary of Egypt’s peeking, shrivelled breast for some
answers.

Mary’s aged and partially uncovered body is front and center, and her face is turned
directly towards the viewer, thus commanding our attention, though her gaze looks past us,
as if to signal that her thoughts are clearly elsewhere. This frontal position makes her largely
exposed breast even more prominent, a prominence that is underscored by the obtuse angle

44 Harry B. Wehle’s review of the Metropolitan Museum’s acquisition in the 1930s of
Ribera’s lovely Holy Family presents it as an anomaly for those familiar with Ribera’s work
“usually associated either with paintings of half-naked old saints and hermits mortifying their
desiccated bodies or with unforgettable real pictures of martyrdoms in all their shocking
technical detail” (119). Javier Portús, writing in particular with regard to Ribera’s martyrdom
paintings, takes a more nuanced stance: “By contrasting the naked martyr with the dressed
executioner, Ribera endowed the human body with special significance as the scenario of
saintliness. From this moment onward [the 1620s], the description of the skin, of the flesh
and of the body would become a fundamental element in the devotional content of works by
Ribera…. In most cases he depicted flesh as old and wrinkled, the realm of meditation and
penitence, although he also managed to associate corporeal beauty with the ideas of devotion
or martyrdom, as he did in several of his splendid Magdalenas or in his renderings of San
Sebastián” (60, 76). Note, however, that for Portús beauty remains on the side of youthful,
albeit martyred, bodies.
formed by her left hand and forearm as she brings her hands together to pray. And yet, although the breast’s previous roundness can still be guessed, it is not eroticized, as could be said about the image of Gentileschi’s contrite Magdalene (fig. 8). In fact, in this particular painting of the penitent saint, Ribera seems to have taken care to avoid the depiction of body parts that would have had erotic connotations for his contemporaries, namely the feet and calves (Portús “Indecencia” 73-74). This again in contrast to reclining penitent Magdalenes such as Gentileschi’s and Juan Bautista Maíno’s, where the pose reveals shoulders, breast, calves and feet in addition to the saint’s cascade of blond hair. But, importantly, it is also clearly not the Virgin’s nurturing breast nor the heavy, laughable breast of the grotesqueries of the early Renaissance (fig. 9).

The Egyptian’s bare breast, visible in all eremitic portrayals of the saint by Ribera (figs. 4b, 5, 8) challenges what Pilar Pedraza has identified as a central taboo in Western art: the serious representation of the aged female body. In “El anciano y la vieja,” her contribution to a volume on the nude at the Museo del Prado, she writes:

[n]i la gran pintura, ni la publicidad, ni el cine, salvo en casos notables … muestran ancianas desnudas. Por el contrario, la carne de los ancianos varones no se nos hurta

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45 The felicitous side-by-side placement in Portús’ richly illustrated Ribera of a reproduction of this image with the St. Bartholomew of the Prado series allows for a fruitful comparison (fig. 10). Bartholomew is also represented in a frontal pose with a craggy landscape in the background, though he is caught in the act of proudly raising with his left arm the knife associated with his flayed martyrdom. The pose is so dynamic that one can imagine it was that motion that made his cloak slip off his left shoulder and caused his right hand to clutch and cover the left breast that would have been otherwise exposed.

46 On nudity and the complexity of “erotic” viewing in Spanish Golden Age painting, see Javier Portús (“Indecencia” especially 73-74). On Maíno’s several paintings of the Magdalene, see Benito Navarrete Prieto (“Juan Bautista Maíno y la Magdalena”), where he argues that the Spanish painter took the general composition of his painting of the penitent Magdalene from French prints, but concentrated his attention on the delicate realism of the saint’s exposed body.
ni produce el menor desasosiego: el cuerpo del hombre es representable, de la cuna a la sepultura, e incluso su cadáver está consagrado y convertido en símbolo de salvación” (194).

She attributes this disjunction to a constant view within the various understandings from Classical Antiquity to today of the feminine body as inseparable from desire and sexual reproduction. Such an association made possible the representation of young beautiful bodies in the guise of mothers, lovers or Venuses, but left no room for the bodies of women past childbearing age. Indeed, the crone’s body becomes obscene: “cuando el fruto espléndido se pasa, se convierte en objeto abominable y es retirado en silencio de la escena. La vieja se vuelve sospechosa, es bruja, celestina, su cuerpo no sólo se supone feo sino horroroso” (195).

Indeed, some would even say, grotesque.

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47 [Not in painting, advertising, or the movies, except in notable cases … do we find old female nudes. In contrast, the flesh of old men does not shock us or produce the slightest discomfort: the masculine body is representable from cradle to grave, and even his corpse is sacred and a symbol of salvation]

48 [when the magnificent fruit is past its prime, it becomes an abominable object and is silently removed from the stage. The old woman becomes suspicious; she is a witch or a procurress, and her body is not only posited as ugly but horrifying]. Joseph T. Snow’s “Some Literary Portraits of the Old Woman” offers a different account of how the aged female body became an object of opprobrium focusing on the “sea change from pagan and matriarchal societies to Christian and patriarchal ones” (349). More specifically, he traces the symbolic replacement of the feminine triad of Hebe-Hera-Hecate, corresponding to the three life stages of the nubile girl, the mother and wife, and the wise crone, with the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to Snow, this transformation resulted in the splintering of the matriarchal triad so that one single figure, Mary, came to represent both Virgin and Mother, exiling the Crone to invisibility or to the dark realm of the demonic. In this context, it is interesting to note that even the grandmotherly Saint Anne does not always look old. Réau describes her simply as “matronly” (vol. 2, 93) without going into greater detail about her age, and while Mâle’s *L’art religieux* describes the controversies over Saint Joseph’s age (313-25), he says nothing about Saint Anne’s (346-53) Saint Anne may be depicted as older than the teenaged Virgin in paintings with the child Jesus (cf. Dürer’s *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, 1519, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), but she may also appear virtually indistinguishable in age from her daughter (cf. Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin with Child with Saint Anne*, 1508-19, Louvre, Paris as well as El Greco’s *Holy Family with St.*
“GOOD GROTESQUE IS NOVEL BEAUTY”

True grotesque, as Geoffrey Harpham’s exploration of the concept shows, encompasses deformity, not only as aesthetic deviance but literally as that which has no form. Grotesqueries are those creatures or situations beckoning us from the limits of intelligibility. Coupling Harpham’s view of the grotesque with Judith Butler’s feminist reading of Antigone as an anomalous figure that “remains somewhat unthinkable,” Patricia Cox Miller argues that the early Christian Lives of the holy harlots Mary of Egypt and Pelagia are best understood as grotesqueries, as “a contradiction central to the late ancient Christian (male) imagination, a contradiction expressed by the seemingly simple phrase, ‘holy woman’” (423, emphasis in the original). She compares these two narratives with those models of female sainthood that required the subjugation of femininity to holiness as in the stories of transvestite saints such as Thecla or Mary / Marinos, or the tales of “manly women,” notably all those virgins who “destroy the pleasure of the female in themselves” according to Basil of Ancyra (419-25). Miller stresses the fact that in the seventh-century Life of Mary of Egypt, she is never described as a “female man of God” (425), but neither are her femininity or status as a female

Anne and the Infant Baptist, 1595-1600, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), or more simply, of indeterminate age (cf. Georges Latour’s Saint Anne with the Christ Child, 1645-50, Art Gallery of Ontario). Among the most striking representations of a clearly aged St. Anne is Caravaggio’s Madonna dei Palafrenieri, 1605-06, Galleria Borghese, Rome, whose unidealized, wrinkled Anne standing in the shadows makes a sharp contrast to the illuminated, beautiful, young Mary. This painting was rejected at the time because of its lack of decorum, appearing to represent rustic characters rather than exalted figures (Mâle L’art religieux 39). Such a treatment of old age is also a contrast to Ribera’s St. Anne of the Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine, 1648, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where she is still depicted realistically though in a more charitable light. 49 Carlos Alberto Vega studies these and other legends of cross-dressing saints in a medieval Spanish context and from a perspective that emphasizes their ludic and subversive potential (53-132).
saint ever fully affirmed. Instead, she is presented in the text as spectral, as the ghost of a possibility. Thus not unlike the barely visible aged female body.

That ghost also haunts the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially as the rising number of women professing their faith in unorthodox ways as mystics or anchoresses resulted in a renewed questioning of the coupling of women and holiness. Although Tridentian support of conventual life was unambiguous, it did not always mean that royal and ecclesiastic authorities worked actively to suppress untraditional practices. However, it did contribute to a general waning of support and respect of hermits in favor of a new model of sanctity largely based on obedience, communal living, and enclosure for women. And while both male and female hermits could be regarded with skepticism, Alain Saint-Saëns has shown that hermitesses (*ermitañas* or *santeras*, local shrine keepers) faced double hardships: first as “theoretically holy but in fact ever suspicious hermits” and second as daughters of Eve (“Gendered Rejection” 58). This double affliction resulted in particularly aggressive derision from villagers, parish priests, and satirical writers who charged *ermitañas* with promiscuity, vanity and pride, drunkenness, and hypocrisy.

The encounter between the two models of female sanctity might be exemplified in the responses to the cross-dressing eremitism of Catalina de Cardona (1519-77). Cardona was born into a prominent Catalan family as the illegitimate daughter of D. Ramón de Cardona,

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50 According to Alain Saint-Saëns’ estimate, of approximately eight thousand people living as hermits in various shrines and caves in the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the sixteenth century, one in nine were women (in Weber 58-59).
51 Alison Weber and others have warned against the temptation to read such a model of sanctity, which in theory may have had normative ambitions, as descriptive of what happened in practice. Weber offers, for example, a nuanced analysis of how three women negotiated authorities and socio-cultural expectations in order to pursue their own vision of holiness: the nun (Ana de San Agustín), the hermitess (Catalina de Cardona), and the Beata, a religious woman loosely affiliated with a community of other religious women who perform charitable works (Águeda de la Cruz).
general of the Spanish troops in Naples. She was cherished as a mother by Don Juan de Austria, illegitimate half-brother of Philip II, and served as governess to the King’s son Don Carlos and to Rui-Gómez de Silva, Prince of Eboli. In 1562, aided by Father Piña, she procured herself the rough, brown cloth of a hermit (she specified that she wanted her “pañopardo” cut “della maniera de San Francisco de Paula [Italian hermit and founder of the Order of the Minims in Calabria, canonized in 1519]”), had her hair cut, and she abandoned court life for a cave in La Roda (in Cortijo Ocaña 31). There she lived an ascetic life that impressed and inspired her contemporary Teresa of Ávila. In her Libro de las fundaciones, Teresa gives an account of Catalina’s life calling attention to the ermitaña’s own model, Mary the Egypt.\footnote{Saint-Saëns writes of Teresa of Avila’s panegyric of Catalina, “the Carmelite must have felt herself closely related to Catalina Cardona, who herself eulogized Mary the Egyptian and clearly expressed her desire to be called by the only name she thought she deserved [and was used by Voragine to refer to the Egyptian], ‘Sinner’” (“Gendered Rejection” 56). The manuscript narrative of Catalina’s life, as dictated by her to the painter and clergyman Juan de la Miseria gives details of the sustenance of the anchoress that echo those of her Egyptian predecessor such as the long-lasting three loaves of bread she receives as alms and her foraging for herbs to eat: “La madre estuvo en esta cueva/siete años y en este tiempo no comía sino tres onzas de pan cada/(8v) día mojado en agua. Me contaba/con fervoroso espíritu muchas veces como oveja con su boca misma/por tierra pacía y comía yerbas, /las que ella conocía ser buenas de/comer” [Mother Catalina stayed in that cave seven years during which she did not eat except for three ounces of bread, daily, soaked in water. She told me many times, with an ardent spirit, how she had, like a lamb, grazed and eaten herbs with her very mouth; herbs she knew to be good to eat] (in Cortijo Ocaña 31).}

However, the attention Teresa pays to Catalina’s eremitic calling is, according to Weber, ambiguous, betraying both admiration and dismay. After all, Teresa was a strong advocate for the strict enclosure of nuns. Teresa’s ambivalence was resolved by a vision of the Lord telling her: “Do you see all the penance she does? I value your obedience more” (in Weber 60). Weber concludes that the homage Teresa pays to Catalina in the Fundaciones...
sings the end of a model of holiness and “contains an implicit warning to her nuns regarding the dangers of ‘public’ sanctity” (60). That same ‘publicity’ or visibility also earned Catalina explicit criticism and contributed to making her a controversial figure (Saint-Saëns “Gendered Rejection” 56). Efrén de la Madre de Dios, a hagiographer of Teresa of Ávila, for example, excused the enthusiasm of the saint for the hermitess attributing it to the former’s kindness rather than to authentic admiration. For his part, he did not mince his words regarding Catalina, describing her as “a grotesque figure of a female hermit (ermitaño femenino)” a slight that, as Saint-Saëns remarks, studiously avoided the word ermitaña thus denying both her femininity and her access to holiness through eremitical ways.

Against this background, I want to argue, Ribera’s portraits of Mary of Egypt attempt to offer an admissible image of the grotesque impossibility of female sainthood by appealing to the grotesque of the aged feminine body. Grotesque here, however, is no longer simply synonymous with deformity and ugliness, but as George Santayana wrote, it names “the formation of a thing which nature has not, but might conceivably have offered” (159). He goes on to explain that “grotesque” is a matter of temporal perspective. Seen in relationship to the past, to the established type, the grotesque will always fall short of the ideal; Mary the Egyptian will never be the Magdalene. But considering the “inward possibility” of the grotesque from the perspective of the future, of an extension of acceptable forms, it gives rise to novel beauty.53

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53 The title of this section is a quotation from George Santayana’s *The Sense of Beauty*, where he inscribes the grotesque into the structure of fiction, and in particular, the comic, as opposed to the tragic. He writes, “the analogy to the comic is very close, as we can readily conceive that it should be. In the comic we have this same juxtaposition of a new and an old idea, and if the new is not futile and really inconceivable, it may in time establish itself in the mind, and cease to be ludicrous. Good wit is novel truth, as the good grotesque is novel beauty” (159-60).
As a final expression of what that novel beauty looks like, we turn to a very different painting by Ribera, *Saint Mary the Egyptian in Ecstasy* (1640 or 1651, private collection. Fig. 8).\(^{54}\) It is an unusual representation of the penitent saint in at least two respects. First, it differs in both genre and tenor from other well-known paintings by Ribera, usually half- or three-quarter length depictions of Mary in meditation. The painting is on a relatively large canvas (177cm x 123cm), and instead of the image of an individual saint, we witness one of the miracles for which she is known: her levitation during prayer. In other words, instead of the serene portrait of a discrete saint, we have the drama of a history painting. The second remarkable difference from the other works discussed in this chapter follows from the first, namely, the presence of Zozimas, who lies at Mary’s feet with his mouth open, possibly in disbelief. Pedro de Ribadeneira’s *Flos Sanctorum* describes the miracle thus:

> [L]e rogò Zosimas que hiziesse oracion por el, para que Dios le diuesse gracia de acabar bien la vida en su seruicio; y ella por obedecerle se apartò vn poco de èl, y boluiendo el rostro a Oriente, y alçando sus ojos, y manos al cielo, hizo oracion; y mientras que orò, estaaua vn codo leuantada del suelo; de lo qual fue tanto el temor que sobreuino al santo Viejo, que cayò en tierra diziendo: Misericodia Señor, dudando mucho, que fuesse algun espiritu, y no persona humana la que alli oraua” (vol 2. 186).\(^{55}\)

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\(^{54}\) A reproduction of this painting appears under the plain title of *Santa María Egipciaca* in Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez and Nicola Spinosa’s 2003 book *Jusepe de Ribera el Españoleto*, where it is dated circa 1651. More recently, the painting was part of *Du Greco à Dalí: Les grands maîtres espagnols de la collection Pérez Simón*, a special exhibit at the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris, in the spring of 2010 and in the Musée national des beaux arts in Québec in the fall of 2011. In the catalog of that exhibit, the painting is dated to around 1640 and the title reflects an attempt to be more descriptive of the scene depicted.

\(^{55}\) [Zosimas begged her to pray for him, that God would grant him the grace to end his days in his service. To obey him, she moved slightly away from him, and turning her face to the
The monk’s outstretched right hand, however, does not point to the miracle at hand. Instead, his index finger directs our view past the miracle of Mary’s elevated feet, past the awe and wonder of the “present” moment, to a miniscule and hazy scene of the “future” when, according to the legend, he returns a year later to discover Mary’s dead body and is commanded by a mysterious inscription on the ground to give holy burial to the anchorite’s corpse. The tiny scene on the lower left part of the canvas is blurry (fig. 9). The monk has become a rather indistinct shadow-like figure attending to Mary’s luminous and pale body on the ground. Zozimas, who should be understood as a stand-in for the viewer or as the figure within the canvas that instructs the viewer on how to see the painting, surprisingly does not focus his attention on Mary’s levitation nor on the scene of her eventual burial. Instead, his eyes are turned upward, like Mary’s own, looking beyond the frame at the source of the miracle. If one follows the line of their gaze, it becomes clear that they meet at a point above the upper right hand corner of the frame, as if to suggest the existence of different paths to the same destination.

But different does not mean equal. This is clearly Mary’s story and the monk plays a secondary role. Taking advantage of the large format, Mary’s body occupies visually most of the canvas as her levitating body draws a sharp diagonal. In posture, she does not differ much from the half-length portraits. Her hands are clasped in prayer as her gaze is fixed outside the frame. As in the Montpellier painting, Mary is depicted here well after her conversion. Her body is half-covered by the cloak she has borrowed from the visiting monk Zosimas according to the legend. The dark brown mantle, familiar from previous paintings, has

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East and raising her eyes and hands to Heaven, she prayed. And while she prayed she was raised an elbow’s length [approximately 16 inches] above the ground, and the fear that overcame the holy old man was so great that he fell to the ground saying, “Have mercy, Lord,” fearing that it was some spirit rather than a human being that was praying there.
become a cascade of folds enveloping her ascending body, evoking simultaneously the swirling of clouds and the rugged landscape at her feet. The Egyptian’s levitation thus remains grounded, as it were: she is both of the earth and hovering just above it; the implication being that hers is but a temporary manifestation of divine favor, in contrast to the transcendent Assumption of the Virgin Mary or the Magdalene’s ecstatic ascent to heaven.56

The painting is illuminated from the left so that a sharp light falls on Mary’s body, highlighting the exposed parts: the left side of her face, smoother than in the Montpellier painting though still betraying the passing of time; the fallen cloak reveals a well-defined left calf and a strangely muscular yet wrinkled upper body that recalls the athletic asceticism of other male saints (notably Jerome and Paul the Hermit) as depicted by Ribera.57 Mary’s age and the toll taken by her years of penitence are inscribed on her body, but as in the case of her male counterparts, her wrinkles are imbued with dignity, and her body is not the skeletal, beaten figure seen and described by the Count of Circourt at the Musée Espagnol in 1838.58

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56 In his treatise on painting, Francisco Pacheco recommends the depiction of the Virgin Mary in paintings of her Assumption into heaven as a most beautiful maiden, of a much younger age than she would have been [“de mucha menos edad que tenía”] because “virginity maintains beauty and freshness of the body as can be seen in many elderly nuns” (658).

57 Comparing the depiction of old men’s bodies, “carne de Dios,” to old women’s “carne del Diablo,” Pilar Pedraza observes that it has historically been easier to find beauty in the former, in the “anatomías hercúleas” of half-naked patriarchs and anchorites than in the latter. Old women, in the history of Western art, have been relegated to the legions of witches (in Goya, for example), or to allegories of vice and transience, as in the old woman emerging from the darkness to catch the rain of gold in Titian’s otherwise luminous painting of Danaë in the Prado (195-96). The association of old women and greed can also be seen in Ribera’s The Old Usurer (1638, Museo del Prado), which shares the austere palette and commitment to realism of his portraits of Mary the Egyptian, but differs significantly in the depiction of the two women.

58 Ribera’s Assumption of the Magdalene (1636, now at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid) and our St. Mary of Egypt in Ecstasy were shown together in Paris in 1838 at the Musée Espagnol. The painting of the Magdalene, according to the nineteenth-century reviewer of the exhibition, the Count of Circourt, is characterized by a painterly
Instead, her thin and weathered yet still muscular arms and legs proclaim her resilience and wisdom, evocative of the title of a late seventeenth-century prose retelling of the Egipcíaca’s legend by Andrés Sánchez de Villamayor, *La mujer fuerte asombro de los desiertos* (1677). We are far from the visual association of feminine old age and vice.

The depiction of *la mujer fuerte* might lead one to place Mary among the ranks of “spiritual transvestites,” those saints who literally cross-dressed to be able to enter a monastery or live in the desert as anchorites (such as Mary/Marinos, Pelagia/Pelagius) or women whose virtue (especially concerning chastity) makes them the spiritual equivalent of men.\(^59\) This is especially tempting when considering her exposed breast, which in this painting seems to have shriveled so thoroughly as to erase any memory of its previous voluptuousness. Indeed, her half-clad chest does not appear to be much different from those of Ribera’s male penitents such as Saint Jerome or St. Paul the Hermit.\(^60\) And yet, a radiance visible in everything from the saint’s luminous face and silky red robe sinuously curving upwards to the magnificently blue sky and weightless clouds surrounding her. That sense of lightness underscores the fact that the saint has severed all earthly attachments, and the entire composition shines with color and joy. In contrast, the depiction of the Egyptian at prayer is described as muted and melancholic, as if scorched by the desert sun (55-56). The tendency of viewers to interpret artistic images of female asceticism as illustrations of suffering and fragility rather than strength and endurance has been studied and challenged by Martha Levine Dunkelman with respect to Donatello’s fifteenth-century wooden sculpture of Mary Magdalene.

\(^59\) Erin J. Campbell has studied the rising cultural acceptance in Northern Italy during the second half of the sixteenth-century of female old age as a stage with the potential for signifying virtue rather than transience or obsolescence for those women who adhered to a strict code of conduct regarding chastity, dress, and the performance of pious acts. Works by Juan Luis Vives and Lodovico Dolce, she argues, made way for the recognition of the wisdom of old women by describing examples such as the Lord’s approval of Abraham’s complete trust in Sarah’s counsel because she, “as an old woman free of all carnal desires … [she] would not counsel him anything that was childish or shameful, under the instigation of lust” (821).

\(^60\) Francisco Pacheco criticizes what had become by the seventeenth century the typical image of St. Jerome penitent: a largely naked old man striking his breast with a stone. He notes with irritation that the Church Father himself specified in his letters that it was in his
closer look reveals that although the hardships of the desert have diminished her feminine beauty, she is not an entirely a masculinized figure. Her facial features, the delicate nose, large eyes, the curve of her neck, etc., remain elegant and softer than those of her male counterparts. And significantly, her hair — iconographically, an important attribute as it has been allowed to grow long enough to cover her nudity during her years of wandering the desert — is both long and short. The part we can see, what is illuminated, is gray and cropped short, close to her skull, evocative of those female saints who shear their locks as a sign of spiritual conversion and a first step towards cross-dressing (Vega 35). From the right, however, we can just make out a longer, dark mane of hair flow down her concealed shoulder. Her body shows signs of ascetic rigor, most dramatically in her shrunken breast, but that rigor has not erased the traces of her femininity, discernible still on her face, in her long dark hair, and hinted at by her shapely legs. Thus, in the figure of Mary we can see the juxtaposition of manly and feminine features, earthly and ethereal elements, strength and frailty, beauty and decrepitude; and as if to highlight this embrace of opposites, her body is positioned in equal parts exposure and concealment.

youth that he sought the solitude and austerity of the desert in order to quell the impulses of the “lascivious stage” (in Pacheco 691). With respect to Jerome’s sartorial poverty, Pacheco writes “advierto que los santos amaron muncho la honestidad, y no es necesario para darse en el pecho, desnudarlo hasta los zapatos” [I point out that saints loved chastity very much, and it is not necessary to undress him down to his shoes in order to portray him beating his breast] (691). Of all the specific recommendations Pacheco makes regarding the depiction of saints or holy scenes, none addresses directly the representation of female sainthood, except for the Virgin Mary (and in relation to those events in the Virgin’s life where St. Anne also plays a role, such as the Presentation of the Virgin to the Temple or the apocryphal domestic scene of the mother instructing her daughter to read or sew). However, we find the following recommendation on the representation of Mary Magdalene in the 1570 treatise De sanctis imaginibus et picturis by sixteenth-century theologian Johannes Molanus: “The evangelists do not specify that her penitence extended to her manner of dressing, but without a doubt, such a model of perfect penitence would wear the appropriate clothing. Those painters who depict her in sumptuous dresses when she is doing penitence and she drops to her knees holding on the Cross, do so indecently [indecenter]” (LXVI, 121).
Most visibly here, but also true in the other paintings, Ribera’s depiction of Saint Mary of Egypt shatters the spectrum of decorum regarding female sainthood in refusing to be either maternal or amatory, all while affirming the possibility of feminine sanctity. One could say that the grace granted to Mary the Egyptian at the end of her life is not only that of ending her days in holiness, but also that of having escaped the narrow categories of the artistic representation of female bodies structured by the binary logic of desire (coupled to beauty, youthfulness and reproduction) and revulsion (associated with decrepitude, old age and death).

One last word about *St. Mary of Egypt in Ecstasy*. Ribera’s decision to represent the scene of Mary’s prayerful levitation merits some consideration. It is not an episode of the saint’s life that is often represented. Typically sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works that depict Mary and Zozimas together will focus on the moment she receives communion from the monk, while fifteenth-century illustrations of Voragine’s version of the legend depict their first encounter, especially Mary’s request to wear the monk’s cloak as to cover her nudity.\(^6\) Why focus then on the scene of Mary’s levitation? I would suggest that in picturing not only Mary’s miraculous flight but also Zozimas’ reaction to it, more precisely his doubt — let us recall that according to the legend, he fears Mary might be a ghost and he will be gently chastised by her for his disbelief —, Ribera seems to ask his viewers to reflect on their own belief.\(^6\) Thus more than any other, this painting asks that the viewer accept it not as an

\(^{6}\) For a description of the iconography of Mary and Zozimas, see Réau (887-88), and Carlos Alberto Vega for a study of the *Golden Legend* illustrations in Spain with a focus on the tension between word and image, which he argues is indicative of the latent erotic content of certain female saints’ *Lives*.

\(^{6}\) As we shall see in detail in the next chapter, scenes of levitation will also be central to the theatrical staging of saints’ lives, to the delight of the audience and the consternation of Aristotelian preceptors.
image standing in for an event of the past, but as re-enacting the miracle, interpellating us as participatory witnesses of sorts, as “the one who sees the seeing” in the words of Victor Stoichita (198). In this case, what we are called to witness and to assess is not only the reality of the miracle of Mary’s levitation (and her miraculously preserved corpse awaiting burial), but also whether the contradictions and incongruities embodied in Mary can, as Santayana’s grotesque, cease to cause laughter or consternation in order to be believed as a new ideal. Do we, like Zozimas, doubt our eyes or do we believe in this new beauty?
The life of Saint Mary of Egypt was adapted for stage performance in the first half of the seventeenth century by Juan Pérez de Montalbán, an ordained priest, notary for the Spanish Inquisition, and disciple of the prolific playwright Lope de Vega. *La gitana de Menfis, Santa María Egypciaca* [The Gypsy Girl from Memphis, Saint Mary the Egyptian] follows the *comedia nueva*’s three-act structure with most of the first two acts dedicated to Mary’s wanderings and seductions and the last act devoted to her holy life in the desert. This brief plot sketch risks making the play seem imbalanced and even gives credence to the Inquisition’s condemnation of it a century later for painting too attractive a picture of vice and not spending enough time and energy in correcting it. However, that would represent

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1 A censorship report written in 1761 laments that the play “[p]inta en boca de la ramera y de sus cortejos los atractivos todos del vicio del modo más irritante y aun, valiéndose de Zósimas, quiere el autor ponerle un corretivo lo hace con tal debilidad y que no sirve de remedio” (Archivo Histórico Nacional, Inquisición, Madrid, leg. 4421; in Sánchez Ortega 299) [paints through the mouth of the prostitute and her suitors every attractive aspect of vice in the most exasperating manner, and although the author wants to counteract it [vice] deploying Zozimas, he does it so faintly that it provides no remedy]. It is worth pausing on the word *irritante* and its connection both to anger (literally, that which provokes ñíre), and to exacerbation (“exasperar ó immutar grave, y físicamente las cosas” (*Autoridades*), which highlights the inquisitor’s fears that the play affects the audience both physically and psychologically. For a nuanced assessment of the actual role of the Inquisition in censoring plays, see Antonio Roldán Pérez.
too hasty a judgment, for while it is true that more lines may be spent on Mary’s licentious lifestyle, the true wonders of the play, and arguably the reason people would have flocked to see it, all occur in the last third. Among these marvels are no less than four saintly miracles: characters levitate and walk on water; the Host reveals a luminous image of Christ as a child; and last but not least, a man comes back from the dead.

Alongside these diegetic ‘real’ miracles we also find Ventura, the comical false hermit or ermitaño a lo gracioso as the stage directions would have it, who is eager to stage his own kind of miracles. Immediately after the audience together with Zozimas has witnessed Mary’s body rising above the ground as she prays, the stage clears, and Ventura arrives carrying a heavy stone attached to a rope with the intention of faking his own levitation. A humorous exchange takes place then between Ventura and some shepherds who mistake him for Zozimas, whom they had seen walking across the Jordan to reach Mary. How do we interpret this irreverent juxtaposition? Does it call into question, through carnivalesque laughter, the audience’s belief in the presumably more serious miracles, which were also performed through some sort of stage machinery, albeit more sophisticated than Ventura’s? Or even more generally, and dangerously close to the Protestant iconoclastic opinion on the matter, does it question belief in the temporal manifestation of the divine tout court?

Hilaire Kallendorf has written with regard to the comedia de santos in general that “the very genre itself became a laboratory where experiments were conducted to determine how far was ‘too far’ when it came to the inclusion of supernatural devices” (113-14). Indeed, how far was too far in a genre characterized by excess? After having examined in the previous chapters the tensions between craft and devotional content in the textual and visual
tradition of the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt, this final chapter considers what happens when word and image come alive on stage, in a theatrical representation of Mary of Egypt’s life. How does Juan Pérez de Montalbán go about the task of turning hagiography into spectacle? What is the function of those properly theatrical, usually profane, elements at work in the play?

First, I will explore the delicate position of theatre in the wake of the Council of Trent and draw some comparisons with the role of painting examined in greater detail in the previous chapter. Then, more specifically, I want to show how Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s hagiographic play *La gitana de Menfis, Santa María Egypciaca* (c. 1638) highlights the agon between the sensuous, carnal beauty of an unrepentant Mary and the divine word, whose beauty she explicitly deems inferior. Parallel to the question of beauty and seduction, I will study the function of one of the most problematic elements introduced by playwrights in order to turn hagiography into spectacle, namely, the *gracioso* — the funny sidekick, typical to Spanish drama, and the thorn in the side of moralists who condemned hagiographic theatre. Through a close reading of Ventura’s antics, I would like to offer the figure of the *gracioso* as the necessary *complement* to Mary’s apotheosis rather than as its undoing. Ultimately, I want to focus on the representation of the miraculous in *Gitana*, specifically on the spectacular excess that may too easily seem to modern readers as subversive under the guise of destabilizing parody or disruptive carnivalesque, in order to propose a different conceptualization of parody, via Giorgio Agamben, one that privileges both dissonance and contiguity.
Hagiographic drama, as it developed in the seventeenth-century, became a contested site in the polemics over the promise and risk that theatre posed to what moralists called the Christian Republic. Central to this discussion is the question of appearances. On the one hand, appearances — what is apparent to the senses — were considered morally dubious because they are not only the opposite of substance but also somehow working against it by concealing or betraying its truth. That is, for example, the general definition of *apariencia* that we find in Sebastián de Covarrubias’ 1611 *Tesoro*: “Lo que a la vista tiene un buen parecer y puede engañar en lo intrínseco y sustancial” [What seems to the eye to have a good appearance and which may not be faithful to what is essential and substantial]. On the other hand, as José Antonio Maravall rightly identified, foremost in Gracián but present in the work of many of his contemporaries, the dyad appearance-substance also reveals a Baroque epistemology where “conocer es decifrar el juego de apariencias” (397) [to know is to decipher the play of appearances (193)]. In other words, alongside the view of appearance as falsehood, there existed an acceptance of the term as akin to revelation. More recently, Jennifer Herdt’s study of acquired virtue has dedicated a chapter to the European Jesuit theatrical tradition, including works by Lope de Vega, where she points to its capacity to stage the disconnect between reality and appearance — the very hypocrisy for which moralists reproach theatre — in order to “inoculate against the vice of deceptive and self-deceptive virtue” (128). The ultimate purpose of the process of *desengaño*, of the revelation

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2 I translate *engañar* as “being unfaithful” to a principle because the context of the definition seems more neutral than the well-known, morally charged definition of *engaño* as deceit. Indeed, the very same *Tesoro* begins the entry for *engaño* with the description of a dubious tavern where the unsuspecting costumer can be deceived into paying for a hare when what he receives is a cat.
that even what had been considered real is only apparent, however, was not to foster a
detached attitude towards worldly matters but to free the viewer “from idolizing and
absolutizing this world, equipping them thereby to act more effectively within the world”
(135).

The nuance of apariencia linked to revelation may also be observed in Covarrubias’
description of distinctively theatrical apariencias as “ciertas representaciones mudas, que
corrida una cortina, se muestran al pueblo y luego se vuelven a cubrir” [certain silent
representations or images, which are revealed to the public by pulling a curtain aside and
then concealed again]. But what are, exactly, these “silent representations”? They may refer
to the veiling and unveiling of paintings used to enhance the effect of a sermon as part of
what Emilio Orozco Díaz has called “la teatralización del templo,” but they may just as
easily refer to tableaux vivants on stage.3 Furthermore, apariencia was also used as

3 José María Díez Borque cites a 1601 letter describing the celebration of Christ’s Passion in
a Madrid church, which provides context for understanding Covarrubias’ somewhat cryptic
description of apariencias. In the letter, a priest from Seville describes how the sermon for
each Sunday focused on a specific Mystery, and a canvas depicting it was placed on an altar
near the choir of the church covered by a taffeta curtain which was drawn to coincide with a
specific prayer, revealing the image and making a strong impression on the audience:
“apareciendo el retablo cercado de muchas luces y hachas de cera blanca, que convidaba a
devoción y lágrimas” (130) [revealing the altarpiece surrounded by many candles, which
produced great devotion and tears]. The theatricality of the temple was not limited to
sermones con apariencia. To produce a strong emotional reaction in the audience, word,
image, sound and light were all deployed as when the painter Francisco de Herrera requested
to have the presentation of his canvas depicting the transfiguration of Saint Francis to the
cathedral of Seville accompanied by musicians (Damiani 145). Returning to the descriptions
provided by the same Sevillian priest visiting Madrid, we find an example of cantos con
apariencias: “las voces eran regaladísimas y tan a propósito de esta santa devoción […] se
descubría la venerable imagen de un Santísimo Crucifijo que está en el altar mayor,
corriendo dos cortinas de tafetín con pausa y autoridad” (Díez Borque 131) [the voices were
supremely delightful and so apposite to this holy devotion … an image of the Crucifix would
be revealed on the main altar by drawing two curtains slowly and with authority]. For
descriptions of how apariencias were used in the theatrical stagings using actors, see Cécile
interchangeably with *tramoya* to denote various forms of stage machinery that made possible miraculous appearances and disappearances of characters. *Apariencias* were, in fact, so central to hagiographic drama that we often find the form-focused designation *comedia de apariencias*, referring to the genre’s predilection for elaborate stagings of supernatural phenomena, alongside the obvious appellation of those plays as *comedia de santos* based on their subject matter.⁴

This association of *comedias de santos* with stage machinery was deplored equally by Aristotelian critics who wanted to distance poetry from spectacle and by moralists who worried about the genre’s characteristic “monstruous” mixture of sacred and profane elements which would mislead the public.⁵ The qualification of *comedias a lo divino* as monstrous hybrids is due to the Jesuit priest, Ignacio de Camargo, whose 1689 *Discuso Theológico sobre los theatros y comedias de este siglo* declares that “estas comedias, que llaman a lo divino, tienen la monstruosidad horrorosa de mezclar lo profano con lo sagrado, de confundir...”

Vincent-Cassy and González Román; the latter’s article also includes useful illustrations of various *tramoyas*.⁴

⁴ For a view of the “generic consciousness” of hagiographic drama, including the use of *tramoyas* and *apariencias*, see Aparicio Maydeu’s “Preliminares para una definición de la comedia religiosa en el siglo XVII.” Modern critics have also recognized the genre’s reliance on ostentatious stagecraft paying particular attention to the conflict between *tramoya* and *poesía* in Lope de Vega’s theory and practice (cf. Asensio, Gallego Roca). Mario Cesáreo’s study also takes a play by Lope as his point of departure to speak more generally about the *espectacularidad* of the comedias de santos. He concludes that the recourse to a literal *deus ex machina*, in the form of miracles or apparitions (“los recursos escénicos del milagro y de la aparición” 79), represents a defining aesthetic and ideological feature of the genre (79). More generally, for a useful description of the period’s staging practices for the *comedia de santos* (from costumes to décor and architecture,) see Lucette Roux.

⁵ Most eloquently, López Pinciano, who declines the opportunity to speak of “aparato y música” because they are arts that belong to actors (“representantes”) rather than poets (Epístola VIII, 339). Less kindly, Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa’s disdain for the representation of saints’ lives, what he calls “comedias de cuerpo,” which make use of “varias tramoyas y apariencias, singulares añaganzas” [several stage machineries and apariencias, exceptional ruses] all deployed to please an unsophisticated public and bring undeserved fame to the playwright (in Aparicio “Preliminares” 174).
la luz con las tinieblas y de juntar la tierra con el cielo” (in Aparicio “Juntar” 323) [these plays to the divine, as they say, are characterized by the horrible monstrosity of mixing profane and sacred elements, of confusing light and darkness and bringing together heaven and earth]. More famously, in Part I of *Don Quijote*, in the course of the dialogue between the village priest Pero Pérez and the Canon of Toledo, Don Quijote’s neighbor launches on a diatribe against the absurdities he sees in modern plays which, in seeking popular approval, disregard any sense of decorum and Aristotelian probability. Speaking specifically about religious drama, he deplores the playwrights’ tendency to play up the miraculous and engage fancy stage machinery in order to appeal to the masses, specifically by staging false or misattributed miracles:

¡Qué de milagros falsos fingen en ellas, qué de cosas apócrifas y mal entendidas, atribuyendo a un santo los milagros de otro! Y aun en las humanas se atreven a hacer Milagros, sin más respeto ni consideración que parecerles que allí estará bien el tal milagro y apariencia, como ellos llaman, para que gente ignorante se admire y venga a la comedia…” (*Don Quijote* I.48. 554.)

One could argue over the extent to which the words of this sympathetic though rather simple-minded fictional character may correspond to the author’s own views, but the quotation above certainly speaks to Cervantes’ overarching interest in exploring the boundaries between fiction and fact. In other words, more than concern over the spectacular

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6 [And then if we turn to sacred dramas — what miracles they invent in them! What apocryphal, ill-devised incidents, attributing to one saint the miracles of another! And even in human plays they venture to introduce miracles without any reason or object except that they think some such miracle, or transformation as they call it, will come in well to astonish stupid people and draw them to the play. (Tr. Ormsby, no page number)]

7 Over fifty years ago, Bruce Wardropper warned against reading the exchange between two fictional characters as somehow speaking unequivocally for Cervantes’ views of theatre. In
excesses of contemporary plays, what is at stake regarding religious drama for Cervantes is, as Joaquín Casalduero highlights, the responsible representation of “hechos verdaderos,” a preoccupation in keeping with the Counter-Reformation (105). As we shall see, however, true facts are often also a matter of belief.

**The Drama of Belief**

In the previous chapter we saw how Jusepe de Ribera’s painting of Mary’s levitation as witnessed by Zozimas deployed paradoxical means, including an appeal to the grotesque, in order to represent holiness in a world of rags and rocks. In doing so, the painting also enacted what could be called the drama of belief: the delicate dance of doubt and affirmation as the mind asks and seeks answers to how it should react to a manifestation of the ineffable, of the supernatural, of that which tests the limits of credence. How do we know — can we ever know in all certainty — that a vision or apparition is the work of God and not a diabolical deception? In most accounts of the legend, Zozimas doubts his eyes and fears Mary is a ghost. And not without reason. After all, traditionally their encounter takes place at the sixth hour, precisely the time when the “Noonday demon” assailed solitary monks meditating in their

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8 See also the discussion in Kallendorf of “hechos verdaderos” and Cervantes’ turn to historical sources to ground the supernatural elements in his hagiographic play *El rufián dichoso* (99-117).
cells or in the desert, making them restless and susceptible to hearing voices and seeing things.  

Outside the frame, seventeenth-century viewers would also have been quite familiar with accounts of gravity-defying saints, from Biblical Peter walking on water to meet Jesus (Matt. 14: 28-31) to Francis of Assisi’s rising “sometimes to the height of a beech tree” (*Little Flowers* 156), a feat also depicted by Ribera in the early 1640s. In fact, there seems to have been a proliferation of claims of levitation, raptures, or stigmata in the sixteenth century, especially by women who, as Gillian T. W. Ahlgren has argued, would have been eager to demonstrate that their bodies, typically considered the site of sinfulness, had been claimed by God.  

And for that same reason, Ahlgren notes, the allegations of holy acts by women were also received with greater skepticism by authorities, and were often subject to Inquisitorial examination (Ahlgren “Negotiating” 386-88, *Teresa* 21-31).  

The case of Magdalena de la

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9 Giorgio Agamben quotes from Evagrius Ponticus’ *De octo spiritibus malitiae* (previously attributed to St. Nilus of Ancyra) and John Cassian’s *Of the Spirit of Acedia* in his study of melancholy, noting the Desert Fathers’ “pitiless psychological penetration and punctilious and chilling phenomenology” when describing the temptation of this vice: “The gaze of the afflicted man rests obsessively on the window, and with his fantasy, he imagines the image of someone who comes to visit him. At the squeak of the door, he leaps to his feet. He hears a voice, runs to face the window and look out, and yet he does not descend to the street, but turns back to sit down where he was, torpid and as if dismayed…” (Ponticus, quoted in *Stanzas* 3). In a footnote, Agamben also points to the potential correspondence between the Christian demon and the Greek demigoddess Empusa, attendant to Hecate, known to feast on the blood of unsuspecting young male travelers whom she has seduced. The association of desert apparitions with the perils of seduction is not without interest when thinking about Mary’s encounter with Zozimas and his qualms about her.

10 See Alison Weber’s first chapter in *Rhetoric of Femininity* for a useful overview of Counter-Reformation views of women and their influence on the understanding of women’s roles in religion in general, and more specifically, on the reception of Teresa of Ávila’s writings and reforms (“Little Women” 17-41).

11 This may help to explain the gender gap in canonizations in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries. Among the ranks of men and women who were eventually canonized, and for whom levitation was recognized as sign of holiness, we find Martin de Porres, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, Joseph of Cupertino, and Teresa of Ávila as the only woman.
Cruz (1487–1560) was exemplary. The Franciscan abbess had enjoyed the respect and admiration of her spiritual community as well as the favor of secular authorities on account of her levitating ecstasies, prophecies, and miracles until, when investigated by the Inquisition, she confessed that her powers were demonic rather than saintly. The shadow of her deception loomed large on subsequent claims of female sanctity, and it suggests that the viewers of Ribera’s painting (and of hagiographic plays) would have been keenly sensitive to the dangers of false visions and the difficulty of drawing a line that separates signs of sanctity from those of witchcraft, or true saints from impostors.

12 The humanist Francisco de Encinas, a notorious Protestant, gave the following assessment of Magdalena’s public standing: “para decirlo todo, tal era su reputación y tan grande su celebridad en todo el reino que al nacer nuestro principe heredero Felipe, se llevó como objeto sagrado de la ciudad los habitos de esta monja para que el infante fuera envuelto en ellos y así aparentemente defendido y amparado de los ataque del diablo” (in Imirizaldu 37-38) [It says everything that her reputation was such and her celebrity in the kingdom so great that when the Prince Heir Philip II was born, the habit of that nun was taken as a holy object into the city as to swaddle the infant in it and thereby apparently defend and protect the infant from the attacks of the devil]. The court page, Luis de Zapata, for his part, detailed her spiritual gifts, several of which — levitation, strict penitence, being privy to secret knowledge about people and events — echo those of Mary of Egypt, and also described her downfall as the result of her love of notoriety, “por no perder la reputación que tenía en todo el mundo,” which made her keep her pact with the devil, and to the perspicacity of her fellow nuns who grew wary of her visions because their astonishing qualities troubled their spirit rather than offer comfort because “[spiritual visions] suelen antes quietar que escandalizar los ánimos” (in Imirizaldu 33-34).

13 Alison Weber’s “Between Ecstasy and Exorcism” offers a subtle study of sixteenth-century female affective spirituality, focusing on the claims of raptures by female ecstacies as “sites of negotiation” (223) between divine and demonic forces, masculine and feminine forms of authority, orthodox and heterodox practices. Writing about late medieval and early modern cases, including Magdalena de la Cruz, Richard Kieckhefer’s “Holy and Unholy” confirms Peter Dinzelbacher’s suggestion that witchcraft and sainthood seemed to mirror each other “by virtue of their common focus on areas of life that are deeply charged with emotion and symbolic meaning” such as food, corporeal integrity, erotic experiences, etc. Kieckhefer admits that confusing mystical sainthood for diabolical deception was certainly possible, but gives more weight to social factors than to categorical misperceptions to explain why revered holy women could be suddenly declared impostors, “the confusion of these phenomena [sainthood and witchcraft] was dangerous to the prospective saint only when she encountered a coalition of enemies who could add theological justification to communal
But the skeptical stance is proper not only to the witness but also to the mystic. When John of the Cross examined a Carmelite nun’s claims of religious raptures and visions, he declared that the certainty she had of her visions guaranteed their falseness because it indulged the nun’s pride. Most famously, Teresa of Ávila was also instructed by her confessor to question her visions. Thus, humility — understood in this context as being open to doubt, to the possibility of being mistaken — indicated the visionary’s virtue and signaled divine favor. In the same way, when it came to representing visionary experience, as Victor Stoichita’s study of painting in Spain has so elegantly shown, the necessary questioning of all religious or mystical visions informed the design of the representation itself.

The central place of doubt within belief plays as the ironic counterpart of the Council of Trent’s declared intention to establish the Church’s monopoly on the interpretation of visionary experience and its representations. As the last paragraph of the Twenty-fifth Session “On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics, of Saints, and on Sacred Images” declares, no expression of holiness may be recognized unless it has been questioned:

And that these things may be the more faithfully observed, the holy Synod ordains, that no one be allowed to place, or cause to be placed, any unusual image, in any place, or church, howsoever exempted, except that image have been approved of by the bishop: also, that no new miracles are to be acknowledged, or new relics

hostility” (372). More generally on the science of discerning true from false saints, see Andrew W. Keitt’s Inventing the Sacred.

14 “She has too much confidence and too little caution about erring internally…. She seems to want to persuade people to believe that what she has [experienced] is good and abundant; but that is not the sign of a good spirit, since, on the contrary, it wants people to make little of it and to belittle it” (translation in Ahlgren “Negotiating” 383).

15 Victor Stoichita, focusing on the split nature of religious images where the horizontal, earthly plane is simultaneously separated from and connected to a vertical, heavenly realm, writes that “all these images add up to an unprecedented attack on the thematicization of the sight, the creation of the painting, the representation of the representation” (28).
recognised, unless the said bishop has taken cognizance and approved thereof; who, as soon as he has obtained some certain information in regard to these matters, shall, after having taken the advice of theologians, and of other pious men, act therein as he shall judge to be consonant with truth and piety. (236)

The implicit coupling of miracles and their representation becomes the basis for a theory of Christian art thanks to influential interpreters of Tridentine reform such as Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, whose *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582) expressed directly the new charge of Christian painting as nothing less than to serve as an instrument “uniting men with God” (in Stoichita 22). This redefinition of the function of Christian visual art informs in turn, as we saw in the previous chapter, the important distinction Francisco Pacheco makes in *Arte de la pintura* (1649) between Christian artists whose primary goal should be to *persuade* people to subject themselves to God through images and the more general aim of art which is to imitate.

The greater responsibility placed on the shoulders of Christian artists is also a result of an increased awareness of the public nature of painting. In Paleotti’s account, for example, painting is public thrice over because it is “exposed to the eyes”; it is permanent, unlike ephemeral words, which makes it the subject of “public scrutiny”; more crucially, Paleotti recognizes that images committed to canvas imbue their motifs with facticity: what is seen is publically recognized to exist, even when the subjects painted are “uncertain things” like visions.¹⁶

¹⁶ Writing about the representation of “uncertain questions,” of those things that cannot be ascertained through the senses, Paleotti specifies that “[s]ince painting is exposed to the eyes of all, it offers itself up to public scrutiny, not through words which are ephemeral but through works which are permanent because it is testimony to many, of what is uncertain [...]. But it would be false to believe that anything of an uncertain nature recounted or painted as
The development of a relatively clear articulation of a distinct vocation for Christian artists with regard to painting, however, is missing when it comes to theatre. Yet, the increasingly public nature of theatre throughout the sixteenth century accentuated the debate over its purpose and whether it should be permitted at all. Defenders of theatre argued for its value on pedagogical grounds: by bringing together word and image, plays represented an important and highly effective medium for making religious doctrine accessible to the public at large. In the words of an anonymous seventeenth-century letter to King Charles II that picks up arguments made all throughout the seventeenth century, theatre was not only a site of learning, but it was perchance even more effective than schools because it harnessed teaching to spectacle: “Estas representables sagradas noticias difícil fuera que las hallara la ruda ignorancia si la resplandeciente antorcha de la armoniosa consonancia de los números no hubiera iluminado los ojos y los oídos de quantos se hallaban en el confuso caos del horror de la incapacidad” (in Cotarelo 42).

However, that same courting of the senses gave the Jesuit polemicist Mariana and other detractors of theatre reason to pause. After all, as Mariana writes in his *Tratado contra*...
los juegos públicos, theatre’s active appeal to the senses not only incites in the audience lustful thoughts but it also teaches them how to act on them:

Amonéstaseles lo que pueden hacer; y enciéndanse en lujuria, la cual principalmente por los ojos y orejas se despierta, doncellas en primer lugar y mozos, los cuales es cosa muy grave y perjudicial en gran manera á la república cristiana que se corrompan con deleites antes de tiempo; porque ¿qué otra cosa contiene el teatro y qué otra cosa allí se refiere sino caídas de doncellas, amores de rameras, artes de rufianes y alcáhuetas, engaños de criados y criadas, todo declarado con versos numerosos y elegantes y de hermosas y claras sentencias esmaltado por donde mas tenazmente á la memoria se pega, la ignorancia de las cuales es mucho mas provechosa? (413, my emphasis)\(^{19}\)

Changing the focus of the plays from earthly to divine love, from adulterous pagan stories to edifying saints’ lives, as it were, might have alleviated the moralists’ concern by channeling the power of spectacle to doctrine. The Trinitarian friar, Manuel de Guerra y Ribera, in his 1682 prologue to the printed works of Pedro Calderón defended theatre precisely on those grounds, noting that spectacle’s appeal to the senses worked in ways that a sermon’s appeal

\(^{19}\) [They are admonished about the things they can do and their lust is kindled mainly through their eyes and ears, first in young women and men, and it is a very serious and greatly harmful thing for a Christian Republic that these young people should be perverted with such pleasures before their time. For, what else does theatre hold and what else is represented there if not the loss of maidenhoods, the love affairs of prostitutes, the artistry [or deceit] of rogues and procuresses, the deceits of servants — everything professed with numerous elegant verses and clear and beautiful sententiae, everything lacquered so that it adheres all the more tenaciously to memory — the ignorance of these things is much more advantageous?]. Mariana’s diatribe against theatre was initially a chapter in a much larger treatise on kingship De rege (1598), which he then expanded into De spectaculis (1609) and translated as Tratado contra los juegos públicos, which circulated in manuscript until the nineteenth century, when it was included in Obras del P. Mariana, vol 2. See Cotarelo for more details, including excerpts from the Tratado (429-37).
to reason could not: “Si son de santos [las comedias], el ejemplo mueve, los milagros se imprimen, la devoción se extiende. ¿Cuántos me afirman que lloran más que en el más ardiente sermón? No hay que admirar, que los genios no se dan a la mayor razón y las mociones más consisten, en mi juicio, en la simpatía que en la eficacia” (133).²⁰

Mariana, for his part, acknowledges in the seventh chapter of his treatise that human nature binds us to the sensorial world to the extent that the propagation of Christian faith and piety must pass through the senses, the surface and appearance of things.²¹ And yet, he is unable to imagine plays — even those representing res sacra — as a legitimate way of honoring God because of the inevitable mixture of sacred and profane elements present in any theatrical performance. Theatre, no matter how good its intentions might be, poses for him a threat because of its reliance on appearances.²² In other words, Mariana feared that, on the one hand, in what he calls comedias de amor the pernicious strategies of make-believe

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²⁰ [If the plays are about saints, their example will move, the miracles will impress, and devotion will increase. How many affirm that they cry more [upon seeing these plays] than in hearing the most passionate sermon? That is no surprise, some wits are moved more by sympathy and other emotions than by the efficiency of reason]. On the relationship of Golden Age theatre to the ars praedicandi, see Díez Borque and Aparicio Maydeu (“‘Juntar la tierra con el cielo’”).

²¹ “Digo que conviene honrar á Dios inmortal y á todos los santos con toda muestra de alegría, con votos, sacrificios, canciones, flores, ramos hermosamente compuestos y entretejidos, y no dejar cosa alguna de las que se entiende que puedan augmentar la religion y piedad en los ánimos do los mortales; los cuales, como se gobiernan por los sentidos, se mueven principalmente por el exterior aparato de las cosas, ornato y pompa” (422). [It is right to honor the eternal God and all the saints with every sign of joy, with ex-votos, sacrifices, songs, flowers, bouquets beautifully arranged and not leave anything that might augment religion and piety in the souls of mortals, who, since they are governed by their senses are moved primarily by the external display of things, ornament and pageantry.]

²² As we saw in the previous section, apariencias were not unequivocally condemned by all moralists, in fact the various uses of the word reveal a more complex picture. For a summary of how a specifically Jesuit understanding of appearance, performance, and virtue informed not only the Order’s pedagogical mission but also the practices of many of the greatest seventeenth-century playwrights from Spain’s Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón, to France’s Pierre Corneille and Molière, all of whom trained at Jesuit schools, see Jennifer Herdt’s Putting on Virtue (128-72).
threatened to make vice seem appealing, while, on the other, *comedias de santos* commit an even greater transgression when sinful actors treat holy matters without adequate respect.\(^{23}\)

Mariana is specifically concerned with the excesses of hagiographic drama: its focus on extraordinary events such as miracles and the appearance on stage of demons and angels; the excessive sweetness of musical instruments and singing; and, not least, the alluring dances of the *entremeses*, which combined with the licentious lifestyle of the performers stir the audience to laughter at the actors’ antics rather than to sympathetic reflection on the divine matter played out on stage.\(^{24}\) Indeed, it is hard to imagine anything other than laughter as the audience’s reaction to many of the scenes Pérez de Montalbán included in his reworking of the *Aegyptiana* hagiographic material to turn it into a successful play. Let us now identify and examine some of those major changes.

**Comedia, Not Flos Sanctorum**

Montalbán’s audience would have been familiar with a general outline of the legend of St. Mary the Egyptian. The literate and prosperous theatre-goers could have encountered it in any one of the many immensely popular anthologies of saints’ lives printed at the end of the sixteenth century. The *Flos sanctorum* (1599) compiled by the Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneyra went through more than 20 editions and translations through the seventeenth century, while the anthology by the Dominican Alonso de Villegas (1569-1603) saw around

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\(^{23}\) As Jennifer A. Herdt’s work shows, there is a consistent “intriguing asymmetry in antitheatrical critiques” throughout Europe, where the performance of virtuous roles on stage is denied any persuasive efficacy, “since it is hypocrisy and deception,” yet acting out sinful roles is charged with endangering one’s soul (136).

\(^{24}\) In short, as the twentieth-century literary critic Javier Aparicio Maydeu noted, when moralists react against hagiographic drama, they are polemicizing against drama itself, “lo propiamente teatral de estas piezas” (“A propósito” 141).
sixty editions and translations. For the more impecunious in the audience, broadsheets printed with romances of the life of the Pecadora, or manuscript copies of translations of selections from Voragine’s Golden Legend were easily available, while the illiterate would have heard sermons, participated in church feasts or seen relics, statues or paintings.

Both of these works follow learned sources, as does the extensive novelized and moralized version of Mary’s life Mujer fuerte, asombro de los desiertos, penitente y admirable Santa María Egipcíaca (1685) by Andrés Sánchez de Villamayor. Of all these, Villegas’ appears to be more open to local cults and legends and to narratives that indulge in the more extravagant aspects of the saints, according to Julio Caro Baroja (“Religión, historia, literatura” 395-96). All three authors, Villegas, Ribadeneyra and Sánchez de Villamayor, declare Paul the Deacon’s prose Latin version as an important source, although Ribadeneyra also gives Sophronius, the brief retelling of the Egipcíaca’s life in the course of the Second Council of Nicaea, and John of Damascus’ third oration on images as the authorities behind his text. Of course, the actual extent to which the authors follow Paul the Deacon’s text varies from Ribadeneyra’s very close version to Sánchez de Villamayor’s looser take on his source (see Delgado “Biografía” for a detailed consideration of Sánchez Villamayor’s sources). The many reprints and editions of these much-appreciated works means that there is also room for variation in the choice of saints’ lives told and their individual narrative details. Therefore, it is not surprising, for example, that Sánchez-Ortega did not find reference to Mary of Egypt in the 1609 Alcalá de Henares edition of Villegas she consulted, while the 1588 Madrid Historia general de la vida y hechos de Jesu-Christo… y de los santos retells Paul the Deacon’s vita framed by an allegory from the Apocalypse about a battle between a dragon and a woman who is given wings to flee to safety in the quiet of the desert.

Saints’ lives were popular themes for pliegos de cordel (chapbooks) well into the nineteenth century (Caro Baroja “Religión”), and they also survive in various romances including several from the seventeenth century on the exploits of “la mujer fuerte” collected in Romancero general of Agustín Durán, as well as regional adaptations of the Mary of Egypt legend, such as the Romance curioso de la maravillosa conversión de una muger, y cómo estubo catorce años haciendo penitencia en una cueva en Sierra Morena, cerca del Convento de los Ángeles, y el dichoso fin que tubo (in Vázquez García and Moreno Mengíbar 305-306). Although these texts give witness to the legend’s popularity, it is important to remember with Caro Baroja that it would be anachronistic (and indeed, very difficult) to draw a clear distinction between elite and ‘mass’ cultures. Outside the world of letters, the image of the prostitute-saint was immensely compelling. Mary Elizabeth Perry describes, for instance, the importance of Magdalene and Mary of Egypt in the life of a bustling Seville, where the saints were often enrolled in efforts by clergy to convert prostitutes as their statutes and relics paraded through the streets and preachers went directly to the city’s brothels to make their case. See also William Christian for descriptions of miraculous interventions by Mary of Egypt, including the “apparition” of images, which led to the establishment of ermitas (and the public celebration of those shrines) in the Spanish countryside throughout the sixteenth century.
The overall architecture of Montalbán’s *Gitana de Menfis* retains, as expected, much of the traditional material reorganized to fit the play’s three-act structure. However, he did not offer a slavish repetition of known narrative elements thereby disappointing the audience that came to see a *comedia* and not a *flos sanctorum*, as Father Ignacio de Camargo lamented.27 There are new details that fill in some of Mary’s back-story and jolt the play into action. We learn in the opening of the play that the reason she is, in a sense, a free woman, is that her father, an honorable military man, died. Not being rich, he stipulated in his will that his daughter must either be married off or enter a convent, but unenthusiastic about both options, she flees.28 The role of the parents in contemporary versions of the legend derived from the Latin prose tradition, where Mary narrates in her own voice her life to Zozimas, is minimal. Ribadeneyra mentions them only once in passing, “Que ella [María] auia nacido en Egypto, y siendo de doze años, se auia huido de la casa de sus padres…” (186) [That she was born in Egypt and at the age of twelve she left the house of her parents]. In contrast, as Natalia Fernández Rodríguez notes, the exploration of paternal power is a central element to the *comedia nueva*, where the father-figure represents social order and normativity.29

27 Father Camargo, in his *Discurso teológico sobre los theatros y comedias de este siglo* (1689), lamented that the *comedia de santos* required special care in the disposition of the story, “que aunque sea menester hacer violencia a la historia, aunque la comedia sea de San Alexis o San Bruno, ha de hacer lugar al galanteo y a los amores profanos, y si no le dirán que es *Flos Sanctorum* y no comedia” [although it is necessary to do violence to the story, even if the play is about St. Alexis or St. Bruno, there must be room for courtship and profane love, otherwise people will say that it is an anthology of saints’ lives and not a play] (fol. 46, in Aparicio Maydeu “A propósito” 147).

28 This paternal detail stands in contrast to the medieval tradition where both parents are said to be alive. Moreover, as we saw in chapter I, Mary’s mother plays an important role in the thirteenth-century poem, where she pleads with her daughter to change her ways in exchange for a profitable marriage.

29 I agree with Fernández Rodríguez’ general assessment of the patriarchal role in the *comedia nueva*, however, in the specific case of Montalbán’s play, her assertion that in hagiographic drama, paternal authority extends to the divine making the earthly father a
Predictably, characters are also added to enhance the dramatic potential of the story. The nameless young men who are lead astray, and even die, in pursuit of Mary in other versions appear in the play under the guise of recognizable stage types: the pugnacious rogues, Anselmo and Ventura, on the one hand, and the generous shepherds Gerardo and Fileno, on the other. Although through the inclusion of specific characters that fall under the spell of Mary, Montalbán is able to show the various ways seduction works (sometimes directly, other times more coyly), those characters remain marginal to the story. More significant is the amplification and complication of the relationship between Zozimas and Mary.

The first act opens with Mary and her maid, Teodora. The presence of the maid is also original to Montalbán and much in keeping with *comedia* convention. Teodora’s name, moreover, in its ironic meaning (God’s gift), is the perfect counterpart to Mary of Egypt’s promiscuous grace. The two ladies are receiving several male well-wishers who attempt to offer condolences to Mary on the death of her father, although she is not keen on their obsequiousness. She rebukes them declaring “el remedio mejor / para la mayor tristeza / es

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30 In addition, the name Teodora alludes both to the infamous actress Theodora, much maligned by Procopius of Caesarea in his *Secret History of Justinian* and to Saint Theodora, another noble Alexandrian who succumbed through treachery to an adulterous relationship and eventually, through penitence, earned her place among the saints. On Procopius’ Theodora and the polemic over theatre, see Clotilde Thouret; for a summary of the literary fate of the legend of Saint Theodora in Spain, see Sánchez Ortega (303-11) and Fernández Rodríguez, who analyzes Andrés de Claramonte’s play *Púsoseme el sol, salióme la luna* throughout her book.
ostentar la belleza” [The best remedy against the greatest sadness is the flaunting of beauty] (2a). Appalled by her joyful disposition under the circumstances, they leave, and immediately after, the audience is treated to the first of the evening’s surprises. Teodora announces the arrival of Zozimas a rich and genteel galán who has just declared his intention to take Mary as spouse in order to fulfill her father’s will. The audience no doubt would have recognized in the name Zozimas the ascetic monk from the traditional legend who offers the sacraments of confession and communion to Mary in the desert and learns from her the virtue of humility. The grafting of a romantic subplot concerning secondary characters to the primary plot of the saint’s life was not uncommon. In fact, it often served to highlight the saint’s struggle to leave behind the secular world to pursue a religious vocation. Still, Montalbán would be hard pressed to defend his play against the charge of Cervantes’ curate that Gitana was full of apocryphal and poorly understood religious matters, “atribuyendo a un santo los milagros de otro.” Indeed, not only does the traditionally ever-pious Zozimas get associated in the first third of the play with secular, amorous interests — more monogamous in intent but not altogether unlike Mary’s — but also in the third act, it is he we see walking on water and not the Gypsy girl from Memphis.

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31 The *Diccionario de la comedia del Siglo de Oro* regards this amalgamation as characteristic of the subgenre. We find love intrigues, either concerning the saints themselves or characters around them, in many of the most famous comedias de santos, such as the courtship of Diocletian and Camila in Lope’s *Lo fingido verdadero*. Elma Dassbach’s study of the hagiographic drama of Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina and Pedro Calderón, for her part, goes one step further to note that of the different types of subplot present in hagiographic drama (those dealing with love, historical matters, and social manners and customs), the amorous one predominates. She also offers a useful taxonomy of three main types of romantic subplot based on the dramatic function they play: to show how the saint rejects secular life for his/her religious vocation; to humanize the saint by showing his/her struggle to make sacrifices; and lastly, the love intrigue may serve to contrast the saint’s life with other characters (131-35).
But there is a method to this madness. From the perspective of dramatic craft, introducing Zozimas as a suitor early in the play not only solves the problem of bringing in a new and important character late in the third act, but it also makes sense thematically. Traditionally, Zozimas has served as a foil to Mary. In those versions, his life stands for the masculine values of monastic life, spiritual community, and the approach to holiness through prayer and good works, while Mary’s embodies the power of grace, of feminine intercession, solitary contemplation and penance, but one never forgets that his quest is for spiritual perfection while hers is initially for perfect pleasure. By having Zozimas appear at the beginning as a suitor, Montalbán places his two main characters on the same plane: both are initially too preoccupied with eros to care for their salvation. In a striking exchange with an angel disguised as a shepherd, Mary twice expresses an insouciance regarding the afterlife worthy of el Burlador de Sevilla.\(^{32}\) The angel tries to remind her in Act I of the transience of youth and beauty compared to eternal torments, but she dismisses those concerns: “Este tiempo que durare / quiero tener alegría, / y después venga la muerte, / vengan penas, y desdichas” [As long as our time here lasts, I want to experience joy; let death come afterwards, let sadness and misfortunes come] (10a). Not long after this exchange, Zozimas echoes her words when he laments that his uncompromising stand to have her married or cloistered has made her flee: “yo triste fui la causa de perdella:/ habléla con enojo, / mas ya la muerte escojo, /primero que no verla” (10b) [I, miserable one, was the cause of losing her, I spoke to her in anger, but I would rather choose death over not seeing her again].

Their paths from eros to agape, however, will be different. After Mary has rebuffed Zozimas’ advances a second time in order to run away with some sailors at the end of Act I,\(^{32}\) See H.W. Sullivan for a study of Tirso de Molina’s *Burlador* in the context of theological debates over faith, grace, free will, and good deeds.
he decides to turn away from human society and seek refuge in the solitude of the desert, not so much rejecting the world as having been rejected by it. The expression of his conversion, therefore, remains at this point ambiguous. It is unclear whether his move to the desert represents an outdated chivalric desire to mourn Mary’s rejection of his love (along the lines of Cardenio’s madness in the Sierra Morena and of his model Amadís), or the desire to expiate his sins and lead a holy life in authentic eremitic fashion:

\[ y\ y\ o\ y\ \ e n\ \ e l\\ \ d e s i e r t o\ \ h a r è \v i d a\ \ t r i s t e \]
\[ [...] \]
\[ Y a\ \ m i\ \ v i d a \]
\[ s e r à\ \ d e s d e\ \ o y\ \ p r o d i g i o s a : \]
\[ a l\ \ d e s i e r t o\ \ v o y :\ \ S e ñ o r , \]
\[ t e n\ \ d e\ \ m i\ \ m i s e r i c o r d i a . \ (11b) \]

Mary, for her part, will have to wait for her vision in Jerusalem in the second act, but the audience can already anticipate that the two will meet again in Act III. The initially shocking innovation of having Zozimas as Mary’s suitor actually produces a more structurally balanced play since it opens and closes with the main couple: first in open conflict with each other and then united in God’s love.\(^{34}\) Equally important, by placing the monk squarely on

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\(^{33}\) [And I, in the desert, will lead a miserable life … My life from now on will be a wonder. I am going to the desert. Lord, have mercy on me]. Fernández Rodríguez interprets Montalbán’s changes to the character of Zozimas differently. She reads his decision to live in the desert already as an honest turn to divine love, much in keeping with his role as the normative guardian and executor of Mary’s deceased father’s will. While I agree that ultimately his presence in the play signals the conversion of love itself from sacred to profane, my reading favors a more conflicted path to holiness in his character.

\(^{34}\) This happy ending \textit{a lo divino} has made Sánchez Ortega read Montalbán’s play as a sort of “taming of the shrew” (297-303), where the focus of the plot is the thwarting of Mary’s pre-
the side of the profane and making the audience witness his own spiritual transformation —
more prosaic and gradual than Mary’s and thus more accessible — Montalbán has
successfully created a more complex character with whom the audience can identify without
taking away the focus from Mary.

The last two strategic changes to the basic elements of the legend will be the focus of
the rest of the chapter, namely, the intensification of the legend’s association of Mary with
dangerous beauty and the inclusion of a subplot around the figure of the *gracioso*.

We saw in the first chapter that the risk of turning Mary’s spectacular beauty into an
object of illicit love, an idol, went hand in hand with a fear of rhetoric and the ability of
words to conjure up seductive images. The question then was whether there was room in a
didactic, religious poem for poetry’s sensuality, which ultimately becomes acceptable
through the mystery of the Incarnation. In *Gitana*, Mary’s sensuous beauty takes on a
different valence as it becomes associated with spectacle, with a desire to see and to be seen,
but also with the fifth canon of rhetoric, what in Greek was called *hypocrisis* and
encompassed the delivery or performance of a speech, including the regulation of voice and
gesture. In Montalbán’s time, the terms *hipocresia* and *hipócrita* still maintained their
connection with performance, but as Covarrubias’ definition of the latter term shows, the
negative connotation of appearances as fakery, specifically of those who are evil pretending
to be good, already colored the use of the word. 35 The suspicion of falsehood implicit in all

conversion, proto-feminist declaration of independence by the play’s end. Although it is true
that in the last third of the play Mary’s role is less prominent, I would contend that she
remains through the end an example of self-possession, turned now to godly ends rather than
earthly ones, but at no time does she endure anything like the humiliation of a typical shrew.

35 We read the following in Covarrubias’ *Tesoro* for *hipócrita*: “propiamente significa el
representante, porque finge muchos afectos, ya llorando, ya riendo, por consistir en aquello la
acción y lo mismo se considera en el orador; pero comúnmente se toma por el que en lo
performance made moralists nervous. It sits at the heart of Mariana’s alarm upon seeing morally dubious actors, or more precisely, actresses, take on religious roles on stage. More generally, it also inspired the opprobrium of the gracioso, whose antics, and particularly his performance of false miracles will be the focus of the final section of the chapter.

“PODER DE HERMOSURA SUPERIOR”

Towards the end of the second act of Gitana, we find our protagonist standing at the gate of the Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, abandoned even by her roguish companions, Anselmo and Ventura, who have followed the crowds that went in to listen to the patriarch’s sermon. Mary says to herself then:

Que es esto? Estoy ciega?

entrar adentro es mejor,

donde podré, con color

exterior quiere parecer santo, y es malo y perverso, que cubierto con la piel blanda y cándida del cordero es dentro lobo carnicero” [properly speaking, it means an actor or player, because he puts on many emotions, now crying, now laughing, in keeping with the plot, and the same goes for the orator. But commonly speaking, it refers to he who on the outside wants to be taken for holy but is wicked and perverse; he who sporting the soft and white wool of the lamb is but a murderous wolf within]. Contrast with the definition a century later in Autoridades where the theatrical nuance is lost altogether: “lo que finge y representa lo que no es; y comunemente se dice del que ostenta en lo exterior virtud, devoción y bondad, siendo todo lo contrario” [what is put on and represents what is not; commonly understood of he who affects virtue, devotion and goodness on the outside, when he is, in fact, the exact opposite].

36 Mariana recounts the story he heard from a judge about a company of actors where the woman playing the role of the Magdalene was the real-life concubine of an actor playing Christ, to the great delight of the audience who took pleasure in “semejantes torpezas” (426) [such depravity]. These anecdotes circulated widely in polemical texts against theatre all the way up to the nineteenth-century. Clotilde Thouret’s “Théâtres de la concupiscence” analyzes the peculiar currency that anecdotes regarding the effects of sinful actresses on audiences had in Spanish texts on theatre arguing that they respond to specific theories of passions, religious models of spiritual possession and medical models of contagion.
de oír el Sermon, prender
voluntades con poder
de hermosura superior.\textsuperscript{37} (18a)

The expression of confidence in the power of her “hermosura superior” may be taken at first as a simple statement of her superlative beauty compared to that of all other women, but I would like to make the argument that, significantly, it also articulates the \textit{agon} between her spectacular beauty, associated with the sensual pleasures of theatre, and the unadorned beauty of the sermon she has thrice refused to listen to.

We had already seen in Chapter One that Mary’s beauty is associated with her way with words. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the dangers of her seductive, sensuous beauty are also those of theatre, whose greatest flaw in the eyes of moralists, as J.C.J. Metford noted in his comparative study of the polemics against theatre in early modern Europe, was that as spectacle, theatre engaged the senses, and this sensual pleasure stirred the flesh and restricted spiritual growth (85). We may observe the coupling of theatrical seduction with Mary’s own by comparing the Jesuit hagiographer Pedro de Ribadeneyra’s account of the debauchery aboard the ship from Alexandria to Jerusalem in his collection of saints’ lives and his condemnation of contemporary theatrical practices in his \textit{Tratado de la tribulación} (1589). Of the fateful voyage, he writes:

[María] se entró en la nave, provocando los pasageros, que ya estaban en ella [la nave], con gestos y movimientos lascivos a risa, y dissolución; y que en aquella navegación

\textsuperscript{37} [What is this? Am I blind? Going into the church is a better idea, there under the guise of listening to the sermon I will be able to turn the will of others with the power of my superior beauty.]
The highlighted words echo almost verbatim, Ribadeneyra’s own critique of contemporary theatre. In his *Tratado de la tribulación*, he admits that theatre as a whole need not be banned, and indeed it had been spared outright condemnation by the likes of St Thomas Aquinas. However, the Jesuit insists that such permissiveness must be understood historically, and many sixteenth-century representations in his own day show signs of degeneration insofar as they include “palabras lascivas, hechos torpes, *meneos y gestos* provocativos à deshonestidad” [lascivious words, indecorous acts, *swaying and shaking* which lead to indecency], which would make even Saint Thomas take issue with these plays (in Cotarelo 523). In a later passage, Ribadeneyra expounds in greater detail on the threats to decency and virtue posed by actresses on stage, in words that again echo Mary’s seduction of the pilgrims:

> pues las mujercillas que representan comunmente son hermosas, lascivas y que han vendido su honestidad, y con los *meneos y gestos de todo el cuerpo y con la voz blanda y suave, con el vestido y gala*, à manera de sirenas encantan y transforman los hombres en bestias, y les dan tanto mayor occasion de perderse, cuanto ellas son más perdidas, y por andar vagueando de pueblo en pueblo menos se echa de ver su perdición” (in Cotarelo 523).

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38 [Mary entered the ship, tempting the passengers that were already inside with *gesticulations, and lascivious movements, moving them to laughter and dissoluteness*; and on that vessel she had tempted and snared many men, being the incentive and cause of their perdition].

39 [since the wenches who typically play on stage are beautiful, lascivious, and have sold their honesty, and through their *swaying and shaking and bodily gestures* and through their *sweet and soft voices*, and through their elegant costumes, they charm and transform men into beasts, like sirens, and give them the opportunity to damn themselves in keeping with how much more damned they are, and by roaming from town to town, it is difficult to take notice]
And yet, if the association of Mary to the seductiveness of theatre was commonplace, the emphasis on the sermon as such is Montalbán’s innovation. In all the contemporary versions I have been able to consult (Ribadeneyra, Villegas, Sánchez Villamayor and the anonymous 1652 poem “Maravillosa vida de Santa María Egipciaca” at the Hispanic Society of America), as well as in the medieval sources studied in Chapter One, the crowds in Jerusalem are in a rush to enter the church in order to venerate the Holy Cross, not to listen to a sermon. Furthermore, the scene quoted above is not the first time Mary dismisses the persuasive powers of discourse, although it is the first time that the word is used to refer to “los razonamientos santos de la Iglesia” as Covarrubias’ Tesoro puts it. Previously, in the first act, Zozimas had delivered a long speech, chastising Mary for frolicking with men “dando placer con los ojos, / dando risa con los labios, rodeada de galanes” (2a) [giving pleasure with her gaze and bringing laughter to the lips, surrounded by suitors] when she is supposed to be in mourning. He attempts to remind her of her filial duties to her dead father, of the honesty of his own love for her, and of the favors she had once bestowed on him as her suitor. He concludes with a declaration of his intention to become, if necessary, “enemigo à

of their fallen state.] Interestingly, Ribadeneyra’s confusion of the sirens’ deadly seductive song and Circe’s magic capable of turning men into beasts is also present in Montalbán’s play, where Mary’s effect on the sailors is described in comparative terms to these dangerously alluring feminine figures.

40 The anonymous poem, “Maravillosa vida de Santa María Egipciaca” at the Hispanic Society, follows tradition when it dates Mary’s conversion to “el día tambien venido / en que el madero sagrado / do el mundo fue redimido / auia de ser enseñado” (1v) [the day had come / when the Sacred Tree / on which the world was redeemed / was going to be displayed] and Mary prays to her Virginal namesake to grant her entrance to the church to adore the Holy Cross, “Dadme favor con que acierte / à ver con dichosa muerte / aquella Cruz tan preciada.”

41 “Sermón: Lat. sermo, is, locution, verba, colloquium, etc. Comúnmente tomamos esta palabra sermón por los razonamientos santos que la Iglesia Católica acostumbra en los oficios divinos, para que los predicadores del Evagenlio nos le declaren y nos reprehendan nuestros vicios y pecados.” [Commonly, we take the word sermon to mean the holy discourses that the Catholic Church uses in the holy liturgy so that the preachers of the Gospel point out to us and condemn our vices and sins].

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tu hermosura” (3b) [the enemy of your beauty], in order to fulfill Claudio’s death wishes to see his daughter enter into a monogamous covenant with a man or with God. To this harangue, Mary responds mockingly: “Siempre, señor Cavallero, que alguna muerte sucede […] hay un Sermon en su muerte. / Mi padre murió, y assí / oy en sus exequias quiere, / por evitar tantos gastos, / predicarnos libremente.” (3b) [Everytime there is a death, sir Knight, there is a sermon. My father died and therefore today at his funeral you want to avoid the expense and instead preach to us liberally and without charge].

Her immunity to Zozimas’ words, however, does not stop her from pronouncing her own speech in defense of her actions. Thus, in this speech, Mary outlines her libertine philosophy. She begins by countering Zozimas’ accusation of filial frailty by pointing out that death by natural causes, is just that, the natural course of things, and not something to be mourned; his death, merely the consequence of his having been alive. She proceeds to paint a vivid counterfactual epic situation, namely, that had Claudio died in battle at the hands of the enemy, she would have turned into a doncella guerrera to avenge him:

\begin{quote}
y como fuerte Amazona,
mas enojada, que fuerte,
subir en veloz cavallo,
y llegar a sus rebeldes murallas, y echar un reto ayrosa, y gallardamente,
con que obligarles pudiera
\end{quote}

\footnote{“Mi padre Claudio murió, / Soldado noble, y valiente, / señal fue de haver nacido, pues siempre el que nace muere” (3b). [Mi father, Claudio, died / a noble and brave soldier. / It was a sign that he had been born, for he who is born always dies]}
à batalla, y desta suerte,
o castigàra ofensores,
ò muriera noblemente.\textsuperscript{43} (4a)

She concludes that since Claudio’s was not an epic death, it does not deserve epic mourning; indeed, to claim otherwise would be, she says, comparable to Lucifer’s rebellion against God’s design. Finally, she is willing to concede that she owes some feeling to her father, but not its ostentation, “Decir, que su muerte sienta, / está bien dicho; mas piense / vueussamerced, que no es mi gusto / mostrar disgusto en su muerte. / Si le tengo, yo lo sè; / que no es de pechos valientes / no ocultar la pesadumbre / al tiempo que la padecen” (2a)\textsuperscript{44}. Once liberated from the tyranny of apariencias, of the qué dirán of popular gossip, which Zozimas mobilizes to get her to behave properly, Mary declares her freedom to be “una muger, que no tiene / mas imperio y sujecion / de aquello mismo que quiere” (5a) [a woman who has no other rule or allegiance than her very will].

Likewise, Mary’s disdain for human razones or sermones will extend to her disregard for religious ones in the second act. Her declaration of the superiority of her beauty to that of the patriarch’s speech at the beginning of that act, is framed by the arrival of the motley crew (Mary, Anselmo and Ventura) to the Holy City after they had all conspired to set fire to the house of the shepherds who had previously saved the ladies when the sailors who were

\textsuperscript{43} [and as a strong Amazon, / angrier than strong / I would mount a swift horse / and reach their rebellious / walls and throw a challenge / so proudly and bravely done / that it would force them / to enter into battle with me / and this way / I would either punish those who offended me / or die nobly.] Mary’s eloquence is evident in this passage not only in the striking images she paints of herself, slightly unhinged by sorrow and anger, on horseback and challenging her opponents at the city gate, but also in the effective staccato rhythm of the parataxis proper to epic action.

\textsuperscript{44} [To say that his death must be felt / is well said, but think / good sir, that it is not my pleasure / to display displeasure on account of his death. / If I am displeased, I know it, / that it is not becoming to brave hearts / to not conceal their grief]
taking them to Alexandria tossed them overboard to stop the mayhem caused by their beauty.

The audience knows that they have reached Jerusalem because Anselmo delivers a description of the place. His hypotyposis presents the city as the stage for the greatest historical event, the Crucifixion of Christ, “Aquesta es Jerusalèn / y aquestas calles, Maria, / vieron pisarse algun dia / del mismo Dios nuestro Bien. / Aquí, cerca un Monte està, / donde muerte padeciò / aquel, que vida nos diò (17b).45 It is unclear what effect he expects his words to have on Mary, but she responds coldly, mocking his preaching: “Predicas? bueno está ya” (17b). Her sarcastic remark reminds the audience that the man who now piously offers a guided tour of Jerusalem was in the previous act a violent pimp and arsonist. More importantly, it also highlights her resistance, verging on allergy, to any sort of sermonizing.

Mary’s rejection of the holy word embodied in the sermon becomes more pointed a few lines later. Teodora is first to see the crowds around them and wonder about them. Ventura then explains that everyone in town is making haste to hear the patriarch’s sermon about to begin. Mary, too, marvels at all the people gathered and declares her intention to use her powers of seduction to disrupt peace in the city:

Oy has de vèr, que por mì,
en Ciudad tan excelente,
ay immensas disensiones:
oy mi hermosura ha de ser
suficiente à revolver
mil pendencias y questiones

45 [This is Jerusalem, and those streets, Mary, were stepped on some day by our very God, the source of all goodness. Near here there is a Mount, where he who gave us life suffered death.]
que es de lo que yo mas gusto.\textsuperscript{46} (17b)

After this declaration of war by sexual means, her companions all attempt to get Mary to attend the sermon. As with Zozimas’ turn to the desert in Act I, motivated by equal parts religious fervor and amorous distress, the rogues’ determination to get Mary into the temple is ambiguous. Their insistence on attending the sermon may be taken as a sign of the thaumaturgic powers of the Holy Land and a prefiguration of Mary’s own dramatic future conversion. Yet, it must also be said that their intention is colored as much by an eagerness to hear the holy words they have all been talking about as by their fear of getting caught up once again in the trouble that they know Mary’s beauty can stir. Ventura is the most vocal about their equivocation when he says to Mary “yo me pienso hallar / treinta leguas de tu gusto” (17b) [I plan to be more than thirty leagues away from your pleasures and desires] before beckoning her again to join them inside.\textsuperscript{47} Anselmo, too, invites her one last time to join them, but she rejects him again with these words: “Sermón yo? / locura igual no se viò, / mi gusto à entrar no se aplica, / oygale quien le estudiò” (17b) [Me, a sermon? / no such madness has been seen before. / My pleasure does not extend to entering the church. / Let the learned listen to it].

Moments later, supernatural forces prevent Mary from crossing the church’s threshold. More specifically, she is unable to move, and feeling for the first time the weight

\textsuperscript{46} [Today, you shall see that / on my account, in this most excellent City / there will be huge disagreements / my beauty shall be / enough to stir up a thousand fights and brawls, / all of which gives me most pleasure.]

\textsuperscript{47} Regardless of which interpretation one favors, what is clear is that the rogues’ sudden eagerness to hear a sermon, should not be attributed to fickle dramaturgy that turns out inconsistent characters, convenient mouthpieces for whatever plot needs. Instead, I contend that their various reactions dramatize for the audience the very agon between two types of beauty that Mary articulated earlier in the scene. More generally, on the dramatic problem of anti-Aristotelian characterization in the comedia de santos, see Anne Teulade (“Santidad y Teatralidad”).
of her own sinfulness, she laments, “Qué es aquesto, Cielo ayrado? / el peso de mi pecado / me llega a oprimir assí” (18a) [What’s this, angered Heavens? / The weight of my sin / has come to oppress me so]. Frightened, she turns to an image of her namesake, the Virgin Mary for the grace necessary to “entrar, / siquiera en esta occasion, / al celebrado Sermón / que antes no quise escuchar” (18b) [enter / even if only this one time, / to the celebrated Sermon / which I did not want to listen to before], and as she speaks, she is able to join the crowd inside.

This scene suggests the impotence of discourse, of logos, in effecting a conversion on its own. Words alone fail in the play on two accounts. First, and most importantly, without grace, even the most eloquent speech will leave its audience unmoved. Secondly, the play gives multiple examples of how logos uncoupled from the trappings of delivery — voice, vision, movement, spectacle, etc. — words without body, as it were, will also fall on deaf ears.

The necessity of grace is illustrated by the different ways Mary’s companions respond to the sermon that they had been, for multiple reasons, so eager to hear. Anselmo is the first to exit the temple, and awed by the patriarch’s eloquence, he comments on its beauty (“gallardamente predica’’). Ventura, agrees and adds that it would suffice to move and convert a marble statue (“Basta à un marmol convertir”), while Teodora, for her part, could not hear it, or as Ventura points out to her, perhaps it was less a question of ability than of will (18b). Did any of them experience a true change of heart? The answer becomes clear once Mary returns on stage, declaring her heart full of “palabras misteriosas,” which have replaced her previously insatiable desire for beautiful things and praise (19a). Anselmo quickly forgets the beauty of the sermon, and fearing that his beloved has found a new
paramour, he draws his sword against her in a jealous fit, but he is foiled by the intervention of an angel who whisks Mary away to safety. Ventura is unable to take Mary’s words seriously, and now it is he who mocks her sermonizing, “Quando el diablo nos predica, / algun gran daño barrunta” (19a) [When the devil preaches, / he augurs great harm], while Teodora is simply unable to recognize her mistress. Their skeptical and even hostile reactions to Mary’s new-found Christian love, thus give the lie to Ventura’s hyperbolic claim earlier that the patriarch’s words were enough to convert a marble statue.

The poverty of words has been, in fact, a peculiar characteristic of the play, where in contrast to what Ignacio Arellano has studied as “la visualidad de la palabra” in Tirso de Molina’s oeuvre, Montalbán seems to highlight Mary of Egypt’s dismissal of figural language. In the opening scene of the play, she derided the clichéd words of another suitor, Julio, who has come to comfort her upon her father’s death. In an admittedly clumsy deployment of Petrarchist motifs, the well-wisher declares that, “imaginamos, / señora, en esta ocasión / que porque Amor a cogerlas / llegase, lloviesen perlas / ojos, que diamantes son” (1b) [we imagine, / lady, that in this occasion, / Love would deign to collect the pearls / that your diamond eyes would shed]. Mary is unmoved by this inflated rhetoric and responds by literalizing it, and thus rendering it inoperable: “si son diamantes los ojos, nunca lluven los diamantes” (2a) [if eyes were diamonds, diamonds never shed]. Similarly, at the end of Act I, she misinterprets (literalizes) the warning from the angel, who disguised as a shepherd, prophesies that her intention to pursue “esse camino” (10a), the path of godlessness, will take her to a wilderness where she will find herself naked. Pre-conversion Mary thus imagines that she will be victimized by Anselmo and Ventura, and she runs away by catching a ride on a ship sailing to Alexandria: “si me he de ver algun día / desnuda por estos dos, / que están
ahora en la Villa, / mas quiero ser pecadora / publica en Alexandría” (10b) [If I should ever find myself / denuded by those two rogues / who are now in town, / I would much rather become a public / sinner in Alexandria”]. Finally, moments before her conversion, she dismisses Ventura’s praise for the sermon, which he describes as “cosa rica,” by declaring that a diamond would be more precious (17b).

As we have seen, up until her epiphany at the temple, Mary had turned a deaf ear to all admonitions she calls a sermon; indeed, we have seen her neutralize the persuasive power of words by refusing their figural meaning and remaining as devoted to the literal meaning as she is to the here and now and the pleasures of the flesh. Significantly, then, her conversion does not imply a corresponding semantic sublimation that would take her from the literal to the allegorical, so to speak. Instead, she is saved through the literal (now made spectacle) rather than in spite of it. In other words, she converts when the heavens “speak” in a language she understands, a language of gestures. She interprets her inability to move towards the temple literally as the very weight of her sin prevents her from going forward (“el peso de mi pecado / me llega a oprimir así” 18a).

Embodied logos, or words and spectacle together are able to bring about meaningful change. Mary will credit the words of the sermon with her conversion in Act III, but the audience knows that it was her physical experience of heavenly anger, together with the active intervention of two visual representations outside of the temple that made her conversion possible. The first of these instances, as we saw earlier, was the image of the Virgin Mary to whom the Egyptian prays in order to be allowed to enter the church. The second mediating instance occurs when Mary turns to the Virgin again after the sermon to ask whether she should atone for her sins by joining a convent or by becoming an anchorite.
The painting of the Virgin ("un quadro" 19b) flips over to reveal her answer in the figure of a third Mary — one that charts the halfway point between our sinner and the holy virgin — Mary Magdalen.

This dramatic turn is, as far as I can tell, wholly of Pérez Montalbán’s invention; in most other renditions, the answer comes through a disembodied voice that directs Mary to the desert. The intervention of an image in this context would therefore seem to tilt the scale in favor of a purely visual mode of communicating the divine. However, as Mary immediately points out, the _apariencia_ is but a “tabla muda” (19b) that requires, emblem-like, an inscription to be fully intelligible, and indeed, Mary then articulates for herself and the audience the message towards which the mute canvas could only gesture. Similarly, for all of Anselmo’s admiration of the sermon’s beauty, his true conversion did not happen upon listening to words alone. Instead, it will take place late in Act III when he mistakes Zozimas’ reference to the host he is carrying to give Mary communion as a treasure. Anselmo then attempts to rob the monk of the wafer box, but the “tesoro, que los hombres / no le conocen mayor” (30a) [greatest treasure known to men], miraculously gives way to an image of Christ (either on the cross or as a child), and addresses the highwayman directly. Here again, the words of the _apariencia_ speak in the sinner’s literal-minded language, and the pun on _robar_ marks the turning point of the rogue’s conversion: “si quieres robarme, llega: / mas mejor te fuera al doble / el robarme con el alma, / no con manos de rigores” (30b) [if you want to steal me, come / although it would do you twice as good / to take me with your soul / than with ruthless hands].

48 The 1756 edition of _Gitana_ from which I quote describes the performance of this miracle in the stage directions thus: “Ha puesto Zocimas el Hostiario al pie de un arbol, donde se descubre una Imagen de un Santo Christo, ù de un Niño” (30b) [Zozimas places the wafer
To summarize then, if the purpose of religious visual art according to interpreters of Tridentine doctrine, is not only the repetition of a fixed content, but more importantly, to persuade viewers to submit themselves to God and to lead pious lives, it is not difficult to see in the scenes we have studied that Montalbán’s response to the moralists’ critique of the sensuality of performance resides in an exaltation of theatre as successful crucible of word and image. As we also saw, a vital result of that interaction is spectacle, most visible in Gitana in the multiple apariencias that awe and move characters within the play and, presumably, also the audience. According to the detractors of theatre, as we saw earlier, apariencias were not to be trusted on philosophical grounds because of their inherent deceptiveness; and as stage machinery, they could prove even more treacherous. This suspicion notwithstanding, this same machinery is shown in Gitana again and again to be the vehicle of conversion, including, as we shall see in the next section, the spiritual transformation of the play’s most irreverent character, the gracioso.

box at the foot of a tree, where an image of Christ on the Cross or as a Child appears]. An earlier imprint of the play is a little more explicit, suggesting that the tree trunk opens up to reveal the sacred image (30a). In both cases, the vision of an image (most likely, a statue) hiding and revealing itself in a landscape would have resonated with legends of statues appearing in particular places as a sign of the saint’s desire to be worshipped at that site (see Christian 75-92).

49 Javier Aparicio Maydeu points out that for the critics of comedia de santos, the plays’ elaborate staging of effects was not understood as the mechanical means to spiritual ends, but rather as crass pandering to the audience’s lowest sensibilities. He writes, “un error en el funcionamiento del bofetón o del palenque podía romper la eficiacia catequética de la pieza […] que fallando poleas o resortes, sí podía acaba en festín de risas y desengaños” (“Juntar” 328) [a mistake in the functioning of the rotating frame or the boardwalk on stage could rupture the didactic effect of the play… that in the failure of pulleys and springs, the play could indeed end in a feast of laughter and disillusionments].
**Grace and the Gracioso**

At the end of Act II, after Mary’s conversion, her spurned lover Anselmo attacks her, but she is literally removed from harm’s way by a flying angel while Anselmo is lifted off stage by another pulley. The stage is suddenly empty except for Ventura and Teodora who attempt to make sense of what they have just witnessed:

> Vent. Que te parece Teodora?
> 
> Teo. Que hemos tenido ventura / en no volarnos à todos.
> 
> Vent. Cordura es grande: yo pienso irme / al desierto, que me ofusca esta vida.
> 
> Teo. Y qué has de hacer?
> 
> Vent. Ser Santo à Dios y à ventura.
> 
> Teo. Santo?
> 
> Vent. Juro à Jesu-Christo / que lo he de ser
> 
> Teo. Cómo juras?
> 
> Vent. Porque aun no soy Santo aora. (20ab)

This scene marks a turning point in the play with regard to the function of the graciosos who had up to this moment served as servant and sidekick to the Anselmo. Ventura’s assertion that “this life dazzles and bewilders me” (20b), coming from a character like Zozimas or Mary, could be read straight as a moment of unmasking the frailty of human pursuits, of Mary, could be read straight as a moment of unmasking the frailty of human pursuits, of

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50 V: What do you think Teodora?
T: That we’ve had good luck in not flying off ourselves.
V: That is very wise: I plan to go to the desert, this life dazzles and bewilders me.
T: And what shall you do there?
V. I shall be Saint to God and to my good Venture
T: Saint?
V. I swear by Jesus Christ that I shall become a saint.
T. How’s that? You swear?
V. Because I am not quite yet a saint now.
desenganó, but from his mouth, it comes across as much as a comment on the bewildering events and the staging of the comedia itself. This metatheatrical aspect will become more elaborate as the play moves to its final act where Mary’s apotheosis, which will include her marvelous levitation and the miracle of raising the dead, is juxtaposed to Ventura’s clumsy imitations. Modern critics, in contrast to the period’s moralists who decried the presence of the gracioso as an aberration, have identified mimicry as part of the character’s function in the comedia. Elma Dassbach writes, for example, that a central function of the gracioso is to turn the imitation of the saint into a parody, thereby highlighting the distinction between the sacred and the profane. In this last section, I will examine more closely how parodic imitation works in Montalbán’s Gitana suggesting that rather than denote the subversion of the representation of holiness, it is essential to the performance of the drama of belief.

In serving as companion to the rogue rather than the saint, Ventura stands outside of the typologies of “graciosos con breviario” that Robert Morrison and Elma Dassenbach have sketched out in their respective works. Most often, graciosos (and graciosas) play the role of confidant and companion of a member of the same sex, although of a higher social, economic, or spiritual status than themselves. Dasselbach observes that there are very few plays where the gracioso is not a companion or servant to the saint, furthermore, in all the exceptions she mentions, there is some sort of partnership established between the holy protagonist and the gracioso (145-47 and 155, n. 3). Morrison, for his part, notes that not every comedia de santos by Lope has a gracioso; some plays have none, like El divino africano, which traces the conversion of Saint Augustine, while in El rústico del cielo, the saint himself also plays the gracioso (Morrison 35-37). One could attribute the structural anomaly of Ventura’s case

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51 “el gracioso convierte la imitación del santo en una parodia y lo sublime de sus acciones en algo trivial, realizando así el contraste entre el ser extraordinario y el común” (147).
to gender, since a male *gracioso* cannot be the attendant of a female protagonist. However, that explanation would still leave unanswered the question of why Ventura could not have been Zozimas’ valet, for example, thus following the more typical dramatic formula. Instead, it might be more fruitful to read that Montalbán’s choice to partner Ventura with the more reprehensible Anselmo contributes to the drama of belief by accentuating the affinity of *santos* and *bandoleros* already present in the popular imagination.\(^{52}\) In other words, the *gracioso* contributes to staging the *process* of assimilating the miraculous, of an active making sense of *apariencias*, which as we saw earlier in this chapter, includes doubting its veracity. Moreover, precisely by pairing Ventura’s decision to become a mock-saint in the last act with Anselmo’s to become chief highway robber, Montalbán highlights the proximity of penitent and sinful behaviors as a phenomenon present in society at large rather than only epitomized in Mary’s exceptional example.

The slight structural anomaly of Ventura serving Anselmo rather than a saintly figure, does not preclude him from fulfilling many of the other functions of his role. Chief among these is its association with humor, typically witty and subtle rather than crass and buffoonish, or as witnessed by Lope de Vega’s famous claim to have created the “*figura del donaire*,” which he may have borrowed from the earlier *bobo* but remains distinct from it.\(^{53}\) Ventura satisfies the expectation of providing comic relief by playing up the creaturely aspects of existence that often preoccupy the *gracioso* (food, sex, saving his own skin) but also by puncturing his partner’s hyperbolic anger. He quips, for example, in response to Anselmo’s claim to experience the greatest misfortune ever experienced by mankind because Julia, his

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52. See A.A. Parker “Bandits and Saints” and more generally, Saint-Saëns’ work for evidence of the not negligible suspicion that eremitical models sometimes brushed too closely the picaresque (“Apology and Denigration” and “Saint ou coquin”).

53. See the definition of *gracioso*, in *Diccionario de la comedia*. 
whore, left him, that the pain could not be so great since she left Anselmo for a midget (6b),
and a few lines later, he points out his master’s fickleness in forgetting Julia upon seeing
María (8a). Separated from Anselmo, however, Ventura’s wiles and witticisms are directed
instead inward to the mechanisms of the play itself, from eremitical practices to the
machinations that mimic divine intervention.

When the play’s third act opens, we learn that ten years have passed since the crew
from Memphis parted ways after Mary’s conversion. Anselmo has spent that time sinking
deeper into his own sinfulness, while Ventura has spent nine of those years in Samaria before
remembering his vow to become a hermit and turning to the desert.54 That tenth year, he
spent imitating some of the most recognizable eremitical practices. However, rather than see
these exercises as salvific, he jokes that if his sufferings consisted in grazing on wild grasses
and not keeping company with men, “también es verdad, / para aliviar mis tormentos, / que
con brutos, y jumentos / hablaba allà en la Ciudad” (22a) [it is also true / that to relieve my
suffering / with beasts and asses / I used to speak out there in the City]. Similarly, he
complains that his new alimentary habits bring him closer to beasts. This irreverent take on
penitence is immediately contrasted with Mary’s description of her repentance:

La comida regalada
que el rico tanto conserva
es ya para mi la yerva
del rocío salpicada:
porque he llegado a advertir,

54 The association of Ventura with Samaria raises the analogy between the gracioso and the
Biblical figure of the Good Samaritan: both are undesirable outsiders who, in spite of their
shortcomings, are nonetheless open to God’s grace (Luke 10: 25-37 and 17:11-20; John 4:1-26).
que es bien en mi corta vida,
que coma bruta comida,
quién fue tan bruta en vivir.

Es ya mi comunicar
con fieras, que no es decente,
que comuniqué con gente,
quién fue tan fiera en pecar.55

How are we to understand juxtapositions such as this one? Dasselbach distinguishes between an innocuous form of imitation and a reprehensible one. In the first case, the gracioso’s spiritual shortcomings are a source of laughter for the audience, but they do not expose him as a swindler or a hypocrite, while in the latter, his actions betray cowardliness, capriciousness, and a lack of conviction that bring laughter to an end and point to an unbridgeable gap between the heroic saint and himself. Here again, Ventura proves to be an exception to her classification. While it is true that Ventura’s interventions do translate the lofty concerns of Mary (and Zozimas) into all too human terms, he is also a declared swindler. After declining Anselmo’s offer to join his gang of robbers, less out of concern for his soul than fearful for his life, Ventura plots to feign sainthood in order to trick local shepherds into making offerings to him (23b). And yet, the parallelism of his speech and Mary’s, in their respective play on the different meanings of “brute,” shows that they are, in fact, not all that far apart. Both of them articulate their experience in the desert as a literal act of embrutecimiento, of turning beastly, and in spite of himself, Ventura has not shirked from

55 [The delicate food / that the rich prize so much / is for me now the grass / sprinkled by dew / because I have come to realize / that it is proper that in my short life / I should eat such brutish food / having lived like a brute before. / Also in communicating with beasts / because it is not decent / that I should speak to people / having sinned so grievously.]
the harsh routine of the anchorite; the difference is that Mary embraces her new condition while Ventura resists it.

More spectacularly, Ventura will attempt to reproduce the miracle of Mary’s levitation through recourse to a crude form of stage machinery. At the end of the tearful encounter between Zozimas and Mary, celestial music plays, and Mary hovers above the ground in prayer. Zozimas, in awe, throws himself at her feet with the intention of kissing them, but she stops him, extracting instead from him the promise that he will return to see her with the holy host. Immediately afterwards Ventura appears on stage carrying a large stone attached to a rope with the intention of fabricating his own miraculous levitation:

Famosa está la invención:
gallardamente me elevo;
oy tengo de ver si llego alguna manducación.
No hiciera tal artificio
el mismo Diablo. (27a) 56

The parody now touches not only on the “miracle” we had just observed, but also implicitly on her “performance” of a supernatural act in order to earn her own “manducación,” that is to say, the host.

Ernesto Delgado, who has worked at greatest length on this play, reads Ventura’s antics in light of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival that posits a popular, festive, life-affirming counter-discourse to an elite, repressive, authoritative one. He writes, “[a]un cuando el dogma [the Counter Reformation’s insistence on grace and free will] no se cuestiona, se

56 [The invention will be noteworthy: / I will rise elegantly and bravely / today I shall see if I can procure / some edible thing. / The devil himself would not be capable of such artifice.]
plantea una grieta en sus elementos constitutivos. Ventura como falso hacedor de Milagros … denigra la imagen [del santo eremita] hasta entonces consagrada y abiertamente promovida por Trento” (Gitana y la comedia 541).\footnote{Even when the dogma is not put into question, a gap within its constitutive elements is posited. Ventura as the false miracle-maker denigrates the image of the holy hermit consecrated and openly promoted by the Council of Trent.} Accordingly, he identifies three targets of this carnivalesque “ataque frontal” (540): the figure of the saint, eremitic practice, and the mechanisms of the play. He proceeds to interpret Ventura’s interaction with the shepherds that mistake him for Zozimas, whom they have seen walking on water, as undermining their naive belief in the efficacy of saints. While it is true that Ventura depends on equivocations and prevarications to get as much as possible out of the shepherds before they find him out, the fact that in the end their faith pays off (albeit through the covert intercession of Mary who prays that the corpse should come back to life rather than the ostentatious intervention of the \textit{gracioso}), complicates, if not contradicts, the claim that his antics undo the authority of the figure of the saint.\footnote{This extreme proof of Mary’s holiness is not recorded in any of the medieval versions of the legend or the learned early modern ones. However, William Christian notes that the legend of the Spanish Virgin of Guadalupe (including the resurrection of the daughter of the person who found the image in the countryside) was “widely imitated in Castile and may have influenced the legends of Saint Bridget (Brugel), Saint Mary the Egyptian (Luciana)” (89).} This is especially true because after the miracle and once Zozimas’ reveals the fragrant body of Mary, Anselmo takes his cue from his former lover and declares his intention to live in the desert doing serious penance, and an overwhelmed Ventura asserts that he will follow suit, “para ser Santo de veras / que todo hasta qui fue chanza” (32b) [to become a real saint / for up to now everything was fake].

I am not trying to argue against the destabilizing force of the \textit{gracioso}, but rather to nuance our understanding of how parody works in Montalbán’s play. The first definition of
parody in the *OED* equates this imitative practice with satire, and similarly, the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* distinguishes between parody whose aim is critical (parody proper) and a more neutral form of imitation (pastiche). This bias towards a polemic valence of parody dates to the nineteenth century, which, considering that the earliest known use of the word dates back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, makes it a relatively recent development. In the last twenty years, critics have attempted to offer accounts of parody that do not rely exclusively on a caustic model. Margaret Rose’s work takes as its point of departure the deeply citational practice of parody to propose that one of its primary functions is metafictional, that is to say, to raise awareness of a text’s fictional conventions, not necessarily to condemn them but to show how they can be productive loci for other fictions. Linda Hutcheon’s account does not have the historical depth of Rose’s, but it does encompass wider forms of artistic expression. She defines the practice of parody as “imitation with a critical difference” (36), where critical is not a synonym for disparaging but rather for analytical significance. Turning to the etymology of “parody,” from the Greek prefix *para*- and the word for song *ode*, she points out that while most theorists of parody have focused on the meaning of *para* as “counter” or “against,” an alternative history of parody lurks in its alternative sense of standing beside something. She concludes that “there is nothing in *parodia* that necessitates the inclusion of a concept of ridicule” (32).

Less well-known, but more suggestive for our reading of *Gitana*, is Giorgio Agamben’s recuperation of parody as a liminal practice. He, too, begins with a consideration of the etymology of the word and privileges contiguity over contradiction, but his real
interest is in sketching out the implications of a “serious parody” (40). This seriousness, which he acknowledges to be initially counterintuitive, is not the seriousness of tragedy in its tracing of the movement from innocence to guilt and its demand for sacrifice in order to reestablish the order of things. Tragic seriousness demands clear demarcations separating right from wrong, the saved from the damned, the sacred from the profane. Parodic seriousness, in contrast, implies embracing the ineffability of mystery, renouncing what Agamben calls the “tastelessness” and ultimate failure of direct representation, in favor of parody or a representation that keeps its distance.60

The coupling of parody and mystery leads to the Italian philosopher’s most original contribution to parody, namely, that being “beside” the point, it is not metafictional, but rather “constitutes its [fiction’s] polar opposite” (48). In a crucial distinction, he writes that “unlike fiction, parody does not call into question the reality of its object; indeed, this object is so intolerably real … that it becomes necessary to keep it at a distance. To fiction’s ‘as if,’ parody opposes its drastic ‘this is too much’” (48). Yet, if parody, according to Agamben, gestures towards the limits of language, that is to say to its incapacity to reconcile words and things, the gesticulation is jocular rather than mournful because of the “comic possibility opened to man by Christ’s passion” (Agamben “Comedy” 10).

59 Contiguity, however, does not imply a lack of disruption. Agamben extends his archeological investigation to include an ancient understanding of parody as “the rupture of the ‘natural’ bond between music and language, the separation of song [melos] from speech [logos]” (40) from which prose will arise next to rather than against verse. 60 Colby Dickinson’s reading of Agamben emphasizes that while “the traditional attempts to declare the existence of God, or posit some sustainable metaphysics ‘beyond our world’ […] is here brought under critical scrutiny by Agamben through the utilization of parody” (32). However, this “critical scrutiny” does not imply a refutation of God’s existence but rather a comprehensive reconfiguration of the terms of the debate.
In conclusion, we can say that this parodic excess characterizes the elaborate descriptions of Mary’s shrunken body in the medieval poem, as much as the interludes of Ventura’s imitation of Mary’s levitation and Zosimas’ walking on water in Pérez de Montalbán’s stage version of the legend. Moreover, the comic scenes in the play, as we have seen, serve as much to mark a gap between the ideal devotion of the saint and human weakness as to highlight their points in common, such as Mary’s and Ventura’s attachment to literal meanings. A deeper commonality unites them. In a sense, one could say that only through Ventura’s parodic, recognizably failed, imitation of the well-made, tramoya-based miracle of Mary’s levitation and Zozimas’ walking on water can the audience become aware of the gap separating representation and its referent. The distance separating Ventura’s ‘miracle’ from those performed by the holy characters also points out the distance separating the successfully staged from the unrepresentable “real thing,” that is to say the mysterious core that sustains the play. It becomes clear then, that the excess of parody does not call into question the play’s serious content (on the contrary, it preserves its core, its mystery); instead it calls attention to the value of representation, which albeit flawed, does suggest that “the just person does not reside in another world. The one who is saved and the one who is lost have the same arms and legs. The glorious body cannot but be the mortal body itself” (Agamben *Coming Community* 91) — the graceful body of a nymphomaniac who became a saint through an equally promiscuous divine grace.
Last Thoughts, On Attending to Saints

Saints are good to think with. Or at least, I hope the preceding pages have managed to show that Mary of Egypt is a good saint to think with about matters of aesthetics, or the relationship of beauty, decay and the divine, as the title of this study would have it.¹

Historians of Christianity have, of course, long appreciated the utility of studying saints and the cultural production associated with them encompassing both artistic creations (from the sublime paintings of Caravaggio to the circulation of humble, mass-produced devotional prints) and bureaucratic processes (and the accompanying legal and theological documents related to the saint’s process of canonization). In the last fifteen years scholars less interested in religious history than in its secular counterpart have been thinking with saints about local and global politics (cf. Ahlgren, Rowe on St. Teresa), modes of pre-modern scientific inquiry (Keitt on the intersection of medical and natural philosophy discourses with the Inquisition’s goal of identifying and prosecuting false saints), matters of geography (Christian on the enchantment of Spanish landscape through saints’ apparitions) and ecology (Siewers on medieval Ireland and Wales). Conversely, insights from anthropology, sociology, and iconographical studies have given us a greater appreciation of how the medieval and early modern lives of saints, which may seem

¹ The reader will recognize the borrowed expression “to think with” from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ observation in *Totémisme aujourd’hui* that the importance of totemic animals resides less in how useful or feared they are than in the way they allow for the articulation of speculative thought: “les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que ‘bonnes à manger’ mais parce que ‘bonnes à penser’” (*Totémisme* 128) [the natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat,’ but because they are ‘good to think’” (*Totemism* 89).
esoteric when viewed from a modern perspective, in fact, manifest central cultural concerns often far afield from the obviously “saintly.”

At the same time, the cultural work done by saints is much more than a mere reflection of a particular set of intellectual, historical, and sociological circumstances. Attending to saints, thinking with them, implies recognizing their cognitive value, that is to say, how they enable the articulation of speculative thought. As the historian Simon Ditchfield noted in a recent special issue of *Critical Inquiry* dedicated to saints, the cult of saints exceeds the translation of other concerns (dogmatic, symbolic, pragmatic) into particular practices, and therefore requires a synthetic (if not synaesthetic) approach which instead of asking why certain beliefs came about would focus on how they endure.² This implies understanding that “when debating or talking about what we would today categorise as scientific, historical, religious, and political topics, early modern Roman Catholics not infrequently used saints as tropes or discursive tools” (554).

Strikingly, an important category missing from Ditchfield’s catalogue of productive disciplinary dialogue with saints is the aesthetic. This may be, of course, because as an historian, his main concern is to establish points of contact with the social sciences, but that does not mean that literary and visual culture scholars have not also

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² Ditchfield distinguishes between what he calls a synaesthetic approach “involving all the senses and thus requiring analysis of a language that was visual as well as textual, symbolic and spiritual as well as concrete and literal” (544) from a symptomatic interpretation where the goal is as much to understand the constellation of phenomena associated with the cult of saints as to explain it away, in a sense (555). Although he does not explicitly say this in the article, what appears to be at stake are two different conceptions of history. One is concerned with universals (how do people throughout time think through contingency, for example), the other with particulars (the practices of the past are always safely past, as it were, available to us as objects of study that are to be analyzed and labeled as a conscious or unconscious response to now-understood circumstances).
been thinking with saints. I offer two significant representative examples. First, from a literary perspective, Ángel Gómez Moreno’s *Claves hagiográficas de la literatura española* (winner of the 2010 Corónica International Book Award) offers a corrective to Ernst Curtius’ surprising silence on the *topoi* secular literature borrowed from hagiography. Second, Victor Stoichita’s *Visionary Experience* provides an elegant account of how Spanish Golden Age painters responded to the challenge of making visible to the physical senses the experience of the ineffable narrated by the mystics. Gómez Moreno acknowledges early on his intellectual debt to a book that has also been influential in my thinking, Julia R. Lupton’s *Afterlives of the Saints*. Lupton’s goal is to trace the residual structure of hagiography (as represented by Voragine’s *Golden Legend*) in certain *topoi* and *mythoi* (i.e., idolatry, martyrdom, scenes of trial and conversion) of the secular literature of the Renaissance, but as she admits in the introduction, her book “is not about saints’ lives in themselves, as either literary or historical phenomena” (xxi).

In contrast, *Promiscuous Grace* is less focused on the future anterior value of hagiography, that is, how narratives about saints’ lives influenced the development of later so-called secular literature. Instead, I dwell on the present moment of each of the instantiations of the legend studied in the chapters, submitting them to close exegetical analysis in order to understand how textual and visual artists used the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt to think about aesthetics and religion. That is to say, to think about the

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3 Amy Ogden’s 2005 “The Centrality of Margins” was a call for French medievalists to take hagiography seriously as a literary mode, not least for what it can contribute to our understanding of gender. Emma Campbell’s *Medieval Saints’ Lives* (2008) on how hagiography rather than represent fixed sexual and social systems made room for thinking about alternative modes of kinship and community and Cary Howie’s beautifully evocative *Claustrophilia* (2007) on the erotics of reading, prove Ogden’s point that the odd tradition of saints’ lives may actually prove to be “delightfully readable and shockingly modern” (15).
role of beauty and the sensual in the representation of the divine, about presence and appearance, about the tensions between form and content, and not least about the creative value of paradox and parody. Attending to the different manifestations of the legend of Saint Mary of Egypt, I hope to also offer a way out of the stalemate that would pit formalism against cultural-historical approaches to artistic artifacts from the past.

I respond to the iconoclasm that would reduce hagiography to mere contextually conditioned constructions, or reclaim the genre under the banner of subversion by highlighting the excess that characterizes each version of the legend of Saint Mary and precludes any simple explanation of puzzling excess, whether it be the double portrait of Mary in the medieval poem, the all-too realistic representations of Mary by Jusepe de Ribera, or the immoderate imitation and miracles in Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s *Gitana de Menfis*. Conversely, to the idolatry of the aesthetic object’s self-containment, I offer the promiscuity of grace, which requires putting the narrative of the saint’s life back into circulation for it to be efficacious in religious and artistic terms.
ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. St. Mary of Egypt. Jusepe de Ribera. 1651. Museo Filangieri, Naples.

Fig. 2. Frau Welt. Cathedral of Worms. c.1310.
Fig. 3 Illustration of “The Three Living and the Three Dead.” *Psalter of Robert de Lisle* (Arundel 83 II, British Library).
Fig. 4a *Penitent Magdalene*. Jusepe de Ribera. c. 1641. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Fig. 4b *St. Mary of Egypt*. Jusepe de Ribera. c. 1641. Prado, Madrid.
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Fig. 6 Mary Magdalene Repenting. Orazio Gentileschi, c. 1626. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Fig. 7 Grotesque Old Woman. Quintin Massys, c.1525. National Gallery, London.
Fig. 8 Mary of Egypt in Ecstasy. Jusepe de Ribera. c. 1651, private collection.

Fig. 9 Mary of Egypt in Ecstasy. Detail.
Fig. 10 *St. Bartholomew*. Jusepe de Ribera.
1641. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Fig. 11 *Penitent Magdalen*. 1637.
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