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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

READING SAINTS' LIVES AND STRIVING TO LIVE AS SAINTS: READING AND REWRITING MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY

a dissertation

by

WILLIAM CASPER SCHENCK

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“Reading Saints’ Lives and Striving to Live as Saints:

Reading and Rewriting Medieval Hagiography”

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This study demonstrates the essential connection between literature and history by examining the way selected saints’ lives were read and rewritten in Latin and Old French from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Building on the concept of the horizon of expectations developed by Hans Robert Jauss, it argues against both the model of literature as a series of timeless classics whose meaning is apparent to the intelligent reader of any age and the tendency to reduce literature to the more or less successful imitation of historical realities. Not only does the interpretation of a saint’s life change over time as the text is read in different religious and cultural contexts, but the narrative is in turn capable of influencing the way its readers understand themselves and the world in which they live. By comparing different versions of each saint’s life, I am able to isolate variations in form, tone, characterization, and action, and relate them to the experiences of specific historical figures whose lives illustrate the important religious and cultural issues of their time.

In order to do this, I examine three saints’ lives in light of the sometimes troubled relationship between the clerical order of the church and the laity. Two Latin and two Old French versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* are read along with the life of Christina of Markyate, an English woman who fled from her husband to become a recluse. Alexis’s

and Christina's refusal of marriage illustrates the tension between the monastic model of fleeing from the world to save one's self and the pastoral ideal of working for the salvation of others. I compare the figure of the mother in two very similar Old French versions of the *Life of Pope Saint Gregory*, a story of incest, penance, and redemption, to Ermengarde of Anjou, a countess who could never commit herself to life in a convent. Like Ermengarde and countless other lay men and women, Gregory's mother faces the question of whether she can live a sufficiently holy life as a lay person or needs to enter a convent to expiate her sins. Finally, I read Latin and Old French verse and prose versions of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* in light of the similar yet opposing experiences of Valdes of Lyon and Francis of Assisi in relation to the question of heresy and orthodoxy.

My understanding of the medieval religious historical context, particularly the history of the laity in the Church, builds on the foundational work of Raoul Manselli, Etienne Delaruelle, and André Vauchez, as well as more recent work by Michel Grandjean, who compares the different visions of the laity held by Peter Damien, Anselm of Canterbury, and Yves of Chartres. My dissertation shows that the different versions of saints' lives not only reflect the evolution of attitudes about human relationships, salvation, and orthodoxy that characterize the time and place in which they were written, but also question the practices of later readers and offer solutions to new problems in new contexts. As my study demonstrates, ideals like the monastic identification of holiness with asceticism shape the way people understand and direct their lives, and the source for these ideals can often be found in literary texts like saints' lives. These texts do not communicate these ideals transparently. The juxtapositions, tensions, and conflicts they

depict can lead the reader to come to a more nuanced understanding or even a total reconsideration of his or her beliefs. The study of rewriting and medieval saints' lives can help us better understand this interplay between narrative, ideal, and lived experience.

Table of Contents

Introduction....1
Alexis, Gregory, and Mary....4
The Horizon of Expectations....7
Saints' lives, rewriting, and history....12
Three kinds of rewriting....14
Saints' lives and the religious horizon of expectations....16
Saints' lives and the vernacular....21
Chapter I....30
La Vie de saint Alexis and Christina of Markyate
Part 1....30
Contemptus mundi
Saint Alexis: Personal salvation at all costs....32
From the Man of God to Saint Alexis....35
Saint Alexis in Latin and French....37
The religious horizon of expectations....41
Novum martyrii genus: Alexis's path to sainthood....48
Vita Alexii: The Spanish and Roman Lives of Saint Alexis....49
Herba: Marriage, rejection, and the first growth of holiness....51
Spica: The grain emerges....58
Plenum frumentum: living in the world in solitude....62
Christina of Markyate: flight from marriage....74
Part 2....83
"An ices secle nen at parfait amor"
Wedding and flight....84
Spica....93
Plenum frumentum....99
Harvest....107

Christina and Spiritual relationships 117
Conclusion 124
Chapter II 134
La Vie du pape saint Grégoire and Ermengarde of Anjou
Can all sins be forgiven? 136
An apocryphal hagiographic legend and an extended exemplum 140
Ermengarde of Anjou, Countess of Brittany 144
Incest and consanguinity..148
Ermengarde and consanguinity 152
How do they sin? 154
Sin begets sin... 157
Shame and Sin 161
"If you had not suffered marriage": Ermengarde's sin 182
The Moral Life 197
The Impossible Penance: Seventeen Years Chained to a Rock 202
The Monastery 207
Conclusion 225
Chapter III 233
La Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne, Valdesius of Lyon, and Francis of Assisi
Conversion: Successes and Challenges of Saints' Lives 238
How far I am from the measure of true perfection 246
To Please and to Edify – The T *version* 255
Valdesius: the risks and rewards of imitating the saints 265
The O Version: Prosa Oratio 272
The O Version: Zosimas sees a ghost 276
The O Version: Spiritual grace and priestly office 289
Conclusion 313
Conclusion 320
Works Cited 341

Introduction

Vernacular hagiography is no longer the ugly stepchild of medievalism, too pious and didactic to be considered literature and too fantastic and melodramatic to be considered historical or spiritual writing. Too much has been written about vernacular hagiography in its own right and as a part of broader studies of Old French literature for a scholar to feel the need to defend the choice to study saints' lives.[1] Indeed, one of the characteristic features of hagiography that most troubled earlier generations of literary critics and historians is now seen as one of its most interesting. The phenomenon of rewriting – all of the minor and major changes that constitute different versions of the same story – was seen as an obstacle by philologists looking for the original, linguistically-significant Urtext, cheap derivation by literary critics looking for the creative spirit of the original author, and hopelessly opaque layers of embellishment, fantasy, and literary common-places by serious hagiographers looking for an authentic account of a saint's life and miracles. Now *variante* and *mouvance* have been enshrined as a defining feature of medieval literature, and the numerous versions of a given saint's life are understood as the embodiment of a legendary paradigm in different times and places.[2] Indeed, as I will argue in this dissertation, because of rewriting, saints' lives are doubly useful for the study of medieval literary history. Written and rewritten at the

[1] In addition to countless articles, monographs on hagiography include Cazelles and Johnson, *Le Vain Siècle Guerpir*; Elliot, *Roads to Paradise*; Robertson, *The Medieval Saints Lives*; Laurent, *Plaire et Édifier*. Recent general studies of Old French literature that consider vernacular hagiography a vital component of the corpus include Gaunt, *Gender and Genre* and Kay, *Courtly Contradictions.*
[2] See Cerquiligni, *Éloge de la variante* and Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* for *variante* and *mouvance* as well as Uitti, "The Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis*: Legend Paradigm and Meaning" 269-274.

intersection between an enduring legendary story and the literary and religious tastes and expectations of new writers and audiences, saints' lives demonstrate that the relationship between literature and history is not just a question of art imitating life, but the complex interaction between new and old ways of understanding and giving meaning to the human experience.

The important place of saints' lives in Old French literary history can be traced to one of the very first texts written in French. Tucked away in the back of manuscript 150 of the Bibliothèque Municipale of Valenciennes is a short poem of twenty-nine lines that holds the honor of being the oldest extant work of literature in Romance.[3] Dating from the end of the ninth century, the *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie* gives a succinct account of the martyrdom of a young girl named Eulalia. Though short, the poem contains all the features of a *Passio*: a description of the young girl's beauty and holiness, a pagan ruler who wants to break her will and force her to worship his idols, the stalwart resistance of the maiden, a first, failed attempt at execution, a beheading, and finally the ascension of the martyr's soul into heaven and a prayer for Eulalie to intercede for "us", the community in which the writer, the narrator, and the audience of the poem are drawn together as Christians in search of salvation. All of these elements can be found in the different Latin accounts of Eulalia's life and death and many other stories of virgin martyrs that came out of Christian antiquity (Berger 66-76). But here, for the first time, a

[3] Berger, *Les Séquences de Sainte Eulalie* 45. The famous "Strasbourg Oaths" sworn by Charlemagne's grandsons Charles the Bald and Louis the German in 842 are older than the *Séquence,* and Nithard's account of them may very well be the first text longer than a few words in which the spoken language of France is transcribed as something other than Latin, but they can hardly be considered a literary work. Cf. Wright, *The Romance Languages* 122-126.

story is written down in a language that, when read out loud word for word and letter for letter, could be understood by people who could not read Latin. In the past, Romance and Latin had always been considered two aspects of the same language. Romance was the way people spoke and Latin was the way people learned to write.[4] Here, tentatively and almost ephemerally, Romance has become a literary language. It is no accident that this first work of literature is a story about a saint.

Almost four hundred years after an unknown cleric of considerable literary genius wrote the *Séquence*, a poet who names himself Rutebeuf wrote another story about a saint. Rutebeuf's *Vie de Sainte Elysabel* recounts the life of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, the wife of Louis IV of Thuringia, a laywoman who dedicated her life to prayer, asceticism, poverty, and acts of charity (Faral, ed. *Oeuvres Complètes de Rutebeuf* 60-166). The literary and religious context of the latter half of the thirteenth century in which Rutebeuf wrote was dramatically different from the literary and religious context at the end of the ninth century. There was no Old French literary context for the *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie*; it was the first of its kind. The *Vie de Sainte Elysabel* was part of a thriving literary tradition with a broad range of genres and registers; it was a verse saint's life written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets at a time when more and more saints' lives were being written in prose. The *Sainte Eulalie* was written during the Carolingian Renaissance when the clerics of the new Roman Empire who had renewed and standardized their Latin, their liturgy, and their way of life began wondering how

[4] Wright, *The Romance Languages* 104-122. Wright argues that the pronunciation of written Latin evolved with the spoken languages of Western Europe until Alcuin established a standard sound-letter correspondence as part of the Carolingian liturgical reforms. This reformed pronunciation (a) rendered spoken Latin unintelligible to untrained laypersons and (b) provided a phonetic alphabet which could be used to transcribe the vernacular.

they were going to bridge the cultural gap that their learning had opened between them and the laity. When Rutebeuf wrote the *Vie de Sainte Elysabel* towards the end of the thirteenth century, vernacular culture was beginning to assert its independence from Latin culture; lay people were contesting clerical authority even as they clamored for access to clerical forms of religious experience. For people like Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, being Christian meant living a life of heroic self denial and exceptional acts of charity, not merely assenting to doctrinal propositions and following a moral code.

Alexis, Gregory, and Mary

In this dissertation, I study the literary history of the emerging French language by examining the connection between saints' lives and the evolving religious and cultural context in which they were written, read, and rewritten between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey of all of the vernacular lives written during this period, I will study three specific lives and compare them to the concrete experiences of real historical persons. Each life is selected to represent one of the three major phases in the process of rewriting that characterized vernacular hagiography and medieval literature in general.

I first analyze the well-known *Vie de saint Alexis* in light of the experience of Christina of Markyate, an Anglo-Saxon hermit and holy woman who lived from about 1096 to 1160 (Leyser, *Christina of Markyate* 1). Christina's connection to Alexis is close and remarkable; the St. Alban's Psalter, which contains the oldest Old French version of *Alexis*, is thought to have been made for Christina by her friend Abbot Geoffrey de

Gorran (Geddes, *The St Alban's Psalter* 197). As one of the oldest surviving Old French saints' lives, *Alexis* is especially appropriate for studying the initial rewriting of a Latin *Vita* into a vernacular *Vie*, and as a "first generation" *chanson de saint*, it can also be compared to later versions whose tone and content reflect later literary and cultural sensibilities. The *Vie de saint Alexis* is animated by a pessimistic, almost dualistic vision of the world very similar to that found in the writings of the monastic apologist Peter Damian. According to this perspective, only a small part of the human race could hope for salvation, and the dividing line between the lucky few and the great masses doomed to perdition was drawn between those who embraced the asceticism and obedience of monastic life and those who did not (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 55-57). The secular world was understood as a place of violence, lust, and impiety from which only the silence and peace of the cloister could offer escape. Alexis' refusal of marriage and rejection of his family serves as both model and justification for Christina's similar flight from wedded life. Like Alexis, Christina flees from the world to fully embrace the ascetic ideal of holiness promoted by the Church. Despite their single-minded pursuit of personal sanctification, however, the later experiences of the Anglo-Saxon holy woman and later versions of the saint's life reveal how compassion, sympathy, and the human need for relationship can call both into question and deepen the model of holiness that demands an exclusive commitment to God.

The second saint's life I examine is the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*. The Gregory whose story is told in this hagiographic legend is an apocryphal figure; some manuscripts identify him with the Gregory "qui chant trova," while others flatly deny this

connection.[5] In either case, the fantastic details of his life do not correspond to any historical person. The Gregory of this saint's life was born of an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister; moreover, before being elected pope, he unknowingly married his own mother. I will read two very similar Old French versions of this *Vie* to show how the small but important variations introduced by rewriting can both be a sign of substantial variations between the intentions of different rewriters and offer a point of departure for very different interpretations of the meaning of the text as a whole. In a society which believed sin to lurk around every corner, the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* presents itself as an *exemplum*, a memorable story that teaches a specific lesson, in this case, God's willingness to forgive all those who turn to him, confess their sin, and do penance. The story's fantastic, overwrought plot renders its lesson engaging and memorable, but it also introduces questions about what kind of confession and penance are required. The effectiveness and the limits of the *Vie* as a lesson emerge more clearly when it is compared to the experience of Ermengarde of Brittany, a French noblewoman whose life spanned the first half of the twelfth century. Ermengarde's fascinating and unique path offer an example of how a lay woman with great means could negotiate a personal religious path between a secular world, which trusted religious advisors told her was full of sin and deceit, and the cloister, which presented limitations and restrictions of its own.

[5] The version A_1 states, "Gregoire est de grant bonté : C'est uns de ceauz qui chant trova" (2720-272), whereas the version B_1 reads, "Il est bien dreit que jol vus die : Ceo ne fud cil Gregories mie qui fist les livres e les chanz" (2033-2035). All references are to Sol, *La Vie du pape saint Grégoire*.

The third and final saint's life I analyze is the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*, the story of a penitent prostitute from Egypt who encounters a monk in the desert of Palestine and, through the example of her asceticism and miraculous relationship with God, teaches him that an uneducated woman doing penance for her sins can become more holy than the greatest monk. As the last study of the dissertation, this life will be read across multiple rewritings, from the Carolingian Latin version by Paul the Deacon, to the twelfth-century verse life called *T*, and the thirteenth-century prose version *O*. Even though at first glance the story of a repentant prostitute may seem far removed from the experience of the founders of major religious movements, I will compare *Marie l'Egyptienne* to the lives of Valdesius of Lyons and Francis of Assisi, the founders of the Waldenses and the Friars Minor, respectively.[6] The encounter between Mary and the monk Zosimas is animated by the same tensions between an individual's personal religious experience and his or her relationship to the institutional Church that were so vital to the differing fates of Valdesius, Francis, and the many people who sought purpose in this life and hope for the next both inside and outside of the Catholic Church in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

The Horizon of Expectations

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[6] Euan Cameron gives a balanced and comprehensive presentation of Valdesius' life in his history of the Waldenses movement entitled *Waldenses*. There are countless biographies and studies of Francis of Assisi; the expanded *Editio Maior* of Raoul Manselli's *San Francesco d'Assisi* gives both an ample bibliography and a study of Francis' life.

The analysis of multiple versions of three different saints' lives with respect to the experiences of historical persons across three centuries is a study in literary history, and the most compelling model of literary history I have found is the one proposed by Hans Robert Jauss in *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*. Jauss's work on the aesthetic of reception provides a method and a framework for understanding the production and ongoing influence of works of literature as well as their connection and interaction to the non-literary history of societies in which they were produced and received. The impetus of Jauss's work came from his dissatisfaction with what he saw as the prevailing view of literary history: a series of great works by great authors in which each work worthy of mention is a classic whose literary and aesthetic value is timeless and hence immediately accessible and apparent to the modern reader (3-7). In Jauss's view, this perspective is marred by two flaws. First, it assumes that there is only one correct reading of a great work of literature, which is always more or less the same and always relevant to the eternal questions of the human experience. But this assumption fails to account for the historical cultural context in which the work was produced and ignores the fact that the modern critic is also influenced by his or her historical cultural context (28-29). Secondly, by insisting on the timeless nature of classic texts or at most making reference to how one genre or writer influenced or was influenced by another, this perspective detaches literature from "general" history, that is, the history of everything that is not literature. Jauss argues that this disconnect cuts the past off from the present and defeats the very purpose of history, that is, to understand the present by understanding how it developed out of the past (5).

In other terms, the person who reads a literary text as a timeless classic creates an anachronistic, ephemeral connection between the text and his or her explicit or implicit interpretative framework, or, as Jauss would say, between the past and his or her contemporary horizon of expectations, a term which Jauss defines as the accumulated experiences of other works of literature and the cultural and natural world at large that condition a person's reaction to each new experience (22-23). This ephemeral connection is made at the expense of understanding that the present horizon of expectations is neither objective nor freely subjective but rather grounded and rooted in a continuity of historical development that stretches from the time when the work was written until the present day.

This is not to say that it is wrong to read a text written in the past from within a contemporary horizon of expectations. Jauss does not pretend to have found the only correct way to interpret a text; what he proposes to do is renew and methodologically ground literary history by moving from the "prejudices of historical objectivism" towards an understanding of the ongoing reception and influence of a work. Literary works, Jauss argues, are not historical events in and of themselves. Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* is not an event in the same way the Third Crusade was; it "becomes a literary event only for its reader, who reads this last work of Chrétien with a memory of his earlier works and who recognizes its individuality in comparison with these and other works that he already knows, so that he gains a new criterion for evaluating future works" (21-22). Literary history is not only concerned with the production of works of literature or the works themselves, it must also be concerned with their historical reception; works of literature

become events when and each time they are read. Moreover, the reception of a work of literature is a dynamic process. Any given work of literature is read within the context of the reader's horizon of expectations. The meaning that a text has for a given reader depends greatly on the reader's horizon of expectations and so cannot be considered timeless and objective. As Jauss observes, *Don Quixote* only becomes a parody within a horizon of expectations that has been informed by the old tales of knighthood; otherwise it is just a sad story about a crazy old man (24).

Furthermore, the relationship between a literary work and a reader's horizon of expectations is not one-sided; not only does the horizon of expectations condition the reception of the work, the work also influences the horizon of expectations in which later works will be read. Literary history is not just the history of the production of literary works, but also the history of their ongoing reception and influence. Two of the implications of this model discussed by Jauss are of particular interest. First, Jauss proposes a criterion for discussing the aesthetic value of a work in the degree to which the work requires a "change of horizons" in the audience. According to Jauss, a work that merely conforms to expected formal and generic conventions and raises moral questions only to solve them as answers to predetermined questions falls into the category of entertainment art. Truly artistic works challenge the horizon of expectations of their first audience and become classics when the innovations that were initially challenging and unexpected have become such a fundamental part of the new horizon of expectations that their beauty and meaning seem unquestionable and eternal (25). The so-called "timelessness" of masterpieces is not the result of any unchanging, objective

meaning and beauty, but rather the product of the enormous influence those works have had on the horizons of expectations of succeeding generations of readers down to the present day. Additionally, the influence of a literary work is not limited to the change of horizons it may have produced in its first audience; it continues to have influence as it is read and re-read by new audiences with new horizons of expectations.

Second, Jauss's useful, working definition of the horizon of expectations allows the literary historian to move beyond the generic and abstract notion of the "spirit of the age" (28). Reconstructing the horizon of expectations within which a given audience read a literary work can be achieved by finding the questions to which the work gave answers and the influence of the work can be understood as the new questions that the work in turn proposed to the audience. These questions could be specifically literary: questions about genre, narrative structure, and characterization; or more generally cultural: questions about social and political relationships, religious beliefs and practices, or even the ordering and intelligibility of the natural world. Attempting to reconstruct this series of questions, answers, and new questions allows the literary historian to understand the place of a literary work in the ongoing series of literary production not as a chain of discrete literary events, but as the continually unfolding history of accumulated and superimposed influences (33-39). The influence of a literary work is not determined once and for all by its reception by its original audience but continues to evolve as new audiences with different horizons of expectations find in the work new answers and new questions. This definition of the horizon of expectations not only allows the literary historian to understand the place of a work in the ongoing interaction between the

production, reception, and influence of literature on literature, it also serves as a useful model for the relationship between literary history and general history. As Jauss argues, the questions answered and asked by a literary work are not limited to literature, but can pertain to any field of human activity, whether social, political, or religious. The horizon of expectations offers the methodological framework necessary to create a useful model of literary history.

Saints' lives, rewriting, and history

This model is certainly applicable to medieval French literary history, in which saints' lives play an important role. Jauss's model of the production, reception, and influence of literary texts must be slightly expanded, however, in light of the prevalence of rewriting in the medieval context. The ongoing influence of a saint's life, for example, is not limited to the reception of the original work by later audiences; it includes later rewritings that adapt and re-produce the story in the context of a new horizon of expectations. Karl Uitti explains the dynamics of hagiographic rewriting in an article about the *Vie de Saint Alexis*. Uitti observes that the story of Alexis' life was rewritten so many times that it achieved the status of a legend; the outlines of a core narrative coalesced around the figure of Saint Alexis: the saint's abandonment of his wife on their wedding night, the years spent as a beggar in the Near East, the return to Rome, and the iconic life and death of the saint unrecognized under the stairs in his parents' home. Each specific rewriting of the Alexis legend is an interpretation of that core narrative in a new place and time, or, as Jauss would say, in a different horizon of expectations (Uitti 269).

The different versions may vary in the presentation of the characters, the interpretation of their actions, or even the addition or suppression of minor characters and episodes, but the basic structure of the plot must remain the same or else it is no longer the same legend. Medieval saints' lives tend to be even more conservative than other legends because they were considered historically true by their readers; any major change to the plot could be perceived as a historical error by readers already acquainted with "what really happened." The tension and interplay between a core narrative and the variations introduced by each rewriting offer a fruitful field in which to investigate the reception and influence of the saint's life in different horizons of expectations.

Saints' lives also offer a valuable perspective on the relationship between literary history and general history. For its medieval audience, the saint portrayed in a hagiographic text was more than just a literary character: he or she was an exemplary person who lived and achieved holiness and salvation in the past and who remains capable of interceding for those who invoke him or her in the present. More than many other works of literature, saints' lives explicitly call on the reader to integrate what he or she has read in the text into his or her life and act on it. The narrator, who is almost always featured prominently in vernacular medieval hagiography, offers the saint and other characters as models of behavior, draws moral lessons from the events and actions that make up the life's plot, and invites the reader to join him or her in praying for the saint's intercession in the epilogue. As might be expected, these models of behavior and moral lessons vary in the different rewritings of the same hagiographic legend, as they

respond to and inform the religious horizons of expectations of the times and places in which they were written.

Three kinds of rewriting

Because of the unique perspective hagiography offers on the interplay of production, reception, and influence as well as the relationship between literature and history, I have studied a series of vernacular saints' lives and the various ways they were rewritten across the changing religious contexts of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. There are three principle kinds of rewriting that each mark a distinct phase in the evolution of a hagiographic legend. The first is the translation of a Latin *Vita* into an Old French *Vie,* specifically into the sort of narrative poems which constituted the vast majority of Old French literature until the beginning of the thirteenth century. Virtually all Old French saints' lives are derived from Latin models, which had already been rewritten numerous times in response to changing literary tastes, religious values, and the economic and political goals of monasteries and dioceses.[7] Within this series of rewritings, however, the translation of a story from the Latin to the vernacular represents a dramatic change from both formal and contextual perspectives as the story is retold in a very different linguistic, literary, and cultural context. The second kind of rewriting I study is the recasting of the same saint's life into two or more significantly different versions in Old French. These different versions may be derived one from the other or

[7] Monique Goullet offers a thorough analysis of the rewriting of medieval Latin hagiography in *Écriture et Réécriture hagiographique* based on ancient and medieval models of rewriting as well as Gerard Genette's typology of the different relationships possible between a hypotext and rewritings deriving from it, see in particular 91-101.

they may share a common vernacular or Latin model. In either case, the often subtle but meaningful differences between two Old French versions of the same *Vie* demonstrate how a story can be written and interpreted in very different ways without differing in form or language and without being composed in different times or places. Finally, the third form of rewriting I study is the composition of vernacular *Vies* in prose. These prose saints' lives might be adaptations of verse lives that have been "de-rhymed," or, as was more often the case, new, more precise translations of Latin *Vitae*. In either case, the switch from verse to prose in vernacular hagiography marks a change of literary contexts almost as significant as the change from Latin to vernacular.

This tripartite model, while an extremely useful analytical tool, should not be taken as a strict, chronological model of the evolution of Latin and vernacular hagiography in general or of the successive rewritings of any particular saint's life. Obviously, Latin saints' lives continued to be written and rewritten throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, just as verse saints' lives continued to be produced and copied even after prose established itself as a viable formal alternative. As Jauss describes, the literary event represented by each version of a saint's life is not limited in time to the moment in which that version was first produced and received, but endures as long as that version is reread and recopied, not vanishing when a new version appears, but continuing to be present as an alternative against which the significance of the particularities and innovations of new versions can been seen more clearly. A comparison of different versions of a saint's life is not a comparison between a diachronic succession of mutually exclusive evolutionary stages in which each new

version replaces the old, but the analysis of a synchronic collection in which different versions that each appeared in a concrete time and place continue to exist side-by-side, questioning and being questioned by the diverse horizons of expectations of different readers.[8]

Saints' lives and the religious horizon of expectations

The successive and simultaneous rewritings of medieval saints' lives were not produced in a vacuum nor were they solely the result of transformations within the literary system. Even formal changes like the adaptation of prose are related to changes in the cultural horizon of expectations. Telling stories about characters whose actions and traits are defined by models of holiness, saints' lives are particularly bound to the Christian religious horizon of expectations of their writers and audiences., Furthermore, within the larger religious context of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, vernacular saints' lives are particularly connected to the religious experience of lay people, who in the Middle Ages were almost by definition those people who could not read and write Latin.[9] The religious horizon of expectations in which vernacular saints' lives were written was defined by an ongoing series of tensions that can be articulated as questions to which the lives themselves offered answers and more questions. Three questions are particularly relevant. The first is, "what does it mean to be holy?" The saint, by

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[8] Jauss discusses the integration of the diachronic and synchronic perspectives in his proposed model of literary history (*Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* 36-39).

[9] In his extremely well-documented dissertation on lay preaching, William Skudlarek notes that "in fact, the word 'cleric' in the high Middle Ages was popularly used to indicate that a person was lettered." Skudlarek bases his claim on the writings of Gratian and others, including Philipof Harveng (*Assertion without Knowledge* 366-367).

definition, is holy; indeed both English words are translated by the same word in Latin and its romance descendants, "sanctus," "santo," "saint." A saint's life, therefore, describes characters whose lives reply very directly to the question of holiness. Saints' lives conform to the changing ways holiness is understood, but they also play a role in informing those notions. The result of this tautology is a slowly-evolving spiral: the saint portrayed in a *Vie* is considered holy because his or her life conforms to the reader's understanding of holiness, but that understanding is also based at least in part on the models of holiness encountered in stories about saints. The characteristics of holiness changed through the Middle Ages, but the primary place of asceticism and self-denial, especially in terms of the renunciation of sexuality and family relationships remained a constant; in the later centuries of the period, voluntary poverty and works of charity also became important.[10]

If holiness is defined by self-denial and the acceptance of suffering, it begs the question, "why be holy?" In the context of the Christian Middle Ages, this question is related to another question, one of the most vital in the Christian medieval world, "how can a person be saved?" The sense of "saved" is intentionally vague and can refer to miracles which "save" a person from sickness, danger, and even death in this life, as well as the eternal, other-worldly "salvation" of the soul which was so important to people of medieval Christendom.[11] The contemporary, more or less well-off reader, living in

[10] André Vauchez has written extensively about holiness, most importantly in *La sainteté en occident aux dernier siècles du moyen âge,* but also in "Lay People's Sanctity in Western Europe."

[11] In his discussion on the figure of Christ in the medieval popular imagination, Étienne Delaruelle describes the importance of salvation, "Il est inutile de citer ici des textes tant ils sont nombreux : sans être toujours nouvelle l'expression de *sue anime salute*, *ad animarum salutem* est alors absolument constante et rattachée à toutes les circonstances de la vie. Il s'agit essentiellement d'être racheté de l'Enfer et donc

comfort and plenty, with death as a troubling shadow on the horizon rather than a present reality and fear, may forget that for the vast majority of people in history and even for the majority of people alive today, life was and is a struggle against hunger, violence, disease, and death.[12] In medieval Europe, attempts to understand and respond to this difficult reality were articulated in the context of Catholic Christianity in an incredibly wide variety of ways, from the use of crosses to ward off evil spirits and disease to intellectual contemplation as a path toward the soul's mystical union with God.[13]

Saints' lives respond to the question of salvation in two related but sometimes opposing ways. In the context of the life itself, the saint is clearly saved by being holy, and certainly the model of holiness embodied by the saint is presented as a path to salvation. But secondly, both within the story and in the story's extradiegetic discourse other paths to salvation are offered, particularly praying for the intercession of the saint. In practice, direct imitation of the saint is not feasible, because the saint's behavior is so heroically beyond the norm that the reader could never match the saint's supernatural feats of asceticism or radically anti-social rejection of family and society. But this does not entirely stop the saint's life from advising specific behaviors; often the narrator will

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d'être relevé d'un péché d'autant plus mortel qu'il est plus inéluctable" (*Piété Populaire* 88). He also notes that medieval Christianity was a "religion anthropocentriste, plus occupée du salut, de quelque manière qu'il soit conçu, que de la louange de Dieu" (*Ibid.* 198).

[12] This is not to say that contemporary, privileged men and women do not experience sickness and death. All of the advances in the agriculture, medicine, and sanitation have not eliminated these realities, they have only reduced them to such a degree that for many people they are experienced as shocking, bewildering "crises" rather than a regular, difficult part of life. These observations on religious experience are inspired in large part by Raoul Manselli, *La Religion Populaire au Moyen Age*, especially his discussion of folklore and religion, 20-41.

[13] Delaruelle cites a Merovingian blessing invoking the apotropaic power of the cross, "in domibus ubi ista [crux] fixa maneat, fugentur demones morbisque careant" (*Piété Populaire* 32). Jean Leclercq writes extensively about the relationship between intellectual activity and the contemplation of God in *L'Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*. c.f. in particular 196-218.

explicitly recommend a certain behavior to the audience, whether that behavior is modeled by the saint or another character or simply introduced by the narrator. These models of behavior may include moral recommendations such as giving to the poor, avoiding worldly glory and attachment, and preserving chastity, that is, ways to avoid sinning, as well as penitential practices recommended for those who seek forgiveness for the sins they have already committed. At the other end of the spectrum, the entire saint's life serves as an apology for the saint's special relationship with God and the manifestation of God's power through him or her, and in the epilogue of virtually every vernacular life, the reader is explicitly invited to pray to the saint to intercede for him or herself personally and for the textual community created between the narrator and the audience (Marnette, *Narrateur et points de vue* 87-89).

There is an inherent tension between the presentation of the saint as a model to be imitated and as a figure worthy of veneration and capable of interceding with God. This tension stems from the very condition of powerlessness and suffering in which medieval men and women found themselves. As André Vauchez writes in an article entitled "Saints admirables et saints imitables," medieval men and women were happy to read about a figure who was different from them because they saw in the saint someone, "qui avait pu un jour abolir la distance immense qui séparait Dieu de l'humanité, le Ciel de la terre" (169). Unable to see any possibility of sanctification in his or her own situation, Vauchez argues, the ordinary person "préférait déléguer aux saints le soin de faire le lien entre le monde d'ici bas et un au-delà normalement inaccessible au commun des mortels." Rather than embarking on "la voie difficile de la conversion" him or herself, in

Vauchez's estimation the ordinary person preferred "une sainteté 'par délégation.'" ("Saints Admirables" 170). Confident in the saint's ability to intercede because they have heard about the saint's incredible conversion and the miracles God worked through her, the medieval audience could continue living the same more or less sinful life as always while praying to the saint to save them from disease, violence, and difficulty in this life and eternal damnation after death.

As important as it is to understand, the dichotomy between imitation and veneration is something of an oversimplification. Any given saint's life could evoke a whole spectrum of reactions even among the "ordinary people" who read or heard it, because imitation is not an all or nothing proposition. Following a saint's example does not necessarily mean equaling him or her in every superhuman detail. This is particularly true in the case of penitent sinners like the Pope Saint Gregory and Saint Mary the Egyptian. The typical people who read or heard Gregory or Mary's *Vie* in the twelfth or thirteenth century probably did not consider themselves as guilty as the saints had been before their conversion and consequently they did not feel the need for such excessive penance. The fundamental steps followed by the saint are valid and applicable to a normal life: every Christian needs to recognize his or her sin, pray to God for forgiveness, and do the penance required. The enormous sin and impossible penance found in a saint's life do not have to be read as an impossible standard to be admired, not imitated, but can be seen as the extreme case that proves God will forgive the audience's less serious faults. The specifics of how to earn that forgiveness, however, cannot always be lifted directly from hagiographic texts, and various questions remain. How radical

does a person's conversion have to be and how difficult a penance does he or she have to undertake? What is the role of sacraments like baptism, confession, holy orders, and the Eucharist, and what do these sacraments entail for the relationship between the laity and the priests and bishops who jealously proclaimed themselves to be the sole dispensers of their salvific power? The saints' lives that were written, read, and rewritten in the Middle Ages offered complex answers to these questions and asked new questions in turn.

Saints' lives and the vernacular

The question of what message a saint's life communicated to its audience is irrelevant if readers and listeners are not engaged by the text long enough to appreciate its meaning. A jongleur in the square has to attract an audience, and even a reader in a church has to keep his audience from dozing off or thinking about other things while making a point that is clear and emphatic enough to be remembered. On the one hand, the question of salvation was important enough in medieval society that it is reasonable to assume stories about holiness had an automatic appeal. But on the other hand, the lay people of the Middle Ages did not necessarily turn to the Church's teachings about salvation as a first resort, preferring instead the rituals and practices of folk religion or a simple, moralistic view of salvation.[14] The clerical order, which had maintained a literary, intellectual culture throughout the "dark ages" before and after the Carolingian Renaissance, often found itself having to communicate the Christian message to a population that was only nominally Christian.

[14] The question of "folk religion" is a delicate one. Raoul Manselli gives an overview of the issue in *La Religion Populaire au Moyen Age*, especially 24-41, 50-59.

It was not just a question of preaching to ignorant masses of peasants. By the middle of the eleventh century, the lay aristocracy, including the secular clerics who wrote for the great royal and noble courts, were creating a vernacular literary culture with different values than the Latin, Christian one. Some scholars have proposed that the clerical hagiographers who translated saints' lives from Latin into the vernacular consciously imitated the style and themes of secular vernacular literature. Françoise Laurent gives a concise analysis of the phenomenon in *Plaire et Édifier*. Contending that lay people who were not "convertis à l'hagiographie," (35) would not have been interested in reading a saint's life unless it contained the description, immediacy, and drama of the secular literature to which they were accustomed, Laurent declares that the purpose of her study is to determine, "quels furent les moyens que [les hagiographes vernaculaires] utilisèrent alors pour gagner l'adhésion de laïcs, peut-être peu soucieux d'édification pure, et qu'il fallait intéresser, voire séduire ?…Comment [ont-ils] utilisé la littérature profane à des fins pastorales?" (34-35). Laurent argues that, at least in the twelfth century, lay people would only read a saint's life if it pleased them; any edification that might take place was a side effect, intentional on the part of the hagiographers, but perhaps less so for the readers.

Scholars offer different interpretations of the commonalities between vernacular hagiography and other vernacular literature, however. In *The Lady as Saint*, Brigitte Cazelles explains the thematic and formal commonalities between hagiography and secular literature as less an explicit, intentional attempt to win over the audience's attention than a natural consequence of the cultural and literary context in which

vernacular hagiography was written. "In rewriting the hagiographic accounts transmitted by the Latin tradition," Cazelles argues, "[vernacular hagiographers] drew their themes and techniques of composition from secular literature, twelfth-century courtly romance in particular, since the genre was then the most popular mode of literary expression" (8).

Laurent's and Cazelle's perspectives represent two sides of the same coin. It is natural for a writer to attempt to engage the audience by appealing to their literary tastes, that is, by writing in such a way as to resonate positively with their literary horizon of expectations. On the other side, it is equally true to say that vernacular hagiographers used the same themes and techniques found in secular literature simply because those themes and techniques were all that was available to them. There is no need to imply that hagiographers "borrowed" these themes and techniques from secular literature; rather hagiography and courtly romance, to use Cazelles's example, form and are formed by the same literary horizon of expectations. It would be just as accurate to say that the writers of courtly romance drew their themes and techniques from vernacular hagiography; indeed, the earliest surviving poem written in rhyming octosyllabic couplets is the *Voyage de Saint Brendan*, a story about a saint.[15] For a medieval writer or reader, hagiography and secular stories like courtly romances were not as distinct as a modern reader might imagine. Both were long, narrative poems that recounted the adventures of an exceptional person, and both drew on the wide variety of rhetorical tools that had been adapted into the vernacular from Latin as well as those that evolved out of the oral

[15] Mary Domenica Legge discusses the "exciting" form of the poem in *Anglo-Norman Literature and its Background* (14-17).

storytelling tradition of that predated vernacular literature.[16] There are real differences between different groups of medieval texts, and the definition of genres can be a useful tool for understanding the shared and distinguishing characteristics of different works of literature. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that generic distinction is something imposed by an observer – whether a later reader or an author writing within that system – on a mass of texts based on the shared and distinguishing features that the observer believes are important; genres are not separate, *a priori* realities. A feature shared by one or more genres does not have to be "native" in one genre and "borrowed" in the others.

The innovation of vernacular hagiography lies not in the adoption of the themes and techniques of secular literature but in the very fact of writing in the vernacular at all. The stories that formed and reflected Christian culture were available to people who could not understand Latin without the direct presence of a cleric, a man whose role as intermediary between the human and the divine was concretized in his role as intermediary between the Latin sources of Christian culture and the vernacular world of the laity. When saints' lives were taken out of the Latin texts and cast into French verse, they could be interpreted in new ways by people whose cultural and religious horizon of expectations was quite different from that of men who had spent years studying theology, grammar, and rhetoric. Therefore, it is no surprise to find the sort of commentaries that a live translator might make inserted into the verse saints' lives themselves, spoken either

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[16] See Faral, *Les Arts Poétiques du XII et du XIII siècle* and Birge Vitz, *Orality and Performance in Early French Romance*.

by the very self-referential narrator who characterizes Old French verse narratives or by the characters themselves.[17]

Another considerable change in vernacular writing occurred between the beginning and the middle of the thirteenth century: prose began to be employed alongside verse in both religious and secular literature. Some vernacular writers had abandoned the constraints of rhyme and syllable-count and began composing texts in prose, the form long associated with truthful narratives in Latin: epistles, theological treatises, chronicles, saints' lives, and of course, Sacred Scripture itself (Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* 34-35, 120-121, Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* 234-242). Perhaps the most famous example of this "mise en prose" was the prosification of Robert de Boron's *Estoire du saint graal* into the *Joseph d'Arimathie, Merlin,* and *Didot-Perceval*, the pseudo-histories of the Grail that drew the material of Arthurian legends into the Christian history of salvation and paved the way for the great Arthurian prose romances of the thirteenth century (Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* 35). But as was the case with the original "mise en roman," romances were only a part of the story. By the middle of the thirteenth century, many of the narrative forms that had been expressed in octosyllabic couplets, including saints' lives and chronicles, were also being composed in prose.

The rise of Old French prose was anything but a simple transition from one way of writing to another; it marked an important moment in the self-understanding of vernacular writing and the expression of truth. This understanding is famously evoked in

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[17] See Uitti, "The Clerky Narrator" and Marnette, *Narrateur et points de vue.*

several of the French translations of the Latin *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*, the supposedly historical source for Charlemagne's expeditions into Spain that form the background of the *Chanson de Roland*.[18] To give one example, in 1208, a writer known as Johannes began his translation of the *Pseudo-Turpin* by declaring that, "Por ce que rime se velt afeitier de moz conqueilliz hors de l'estoire, voust li cuens [Renauz de Boloigne], que cist livres fust sanz rime selonc le latin de l'estoire que Torpins l'arcevesque de Reins traita et escrist si com il le vit e oï" (Walpole, *Johannes Translation of the* Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle 130). It is easy to follow Johannes's argument: unlike a rhyming text, embellished with words gathered from outside the "history," or source material, his prose text is a direct translation of the Latin written by Turpin, who, as he claims, was an eyewitness of the events he relates.

Of course, claiming fidelity to a Latin source as a guarantee of a work's veracity was not unknown to verse writers; Johannes's brief commentary on the truthfulness of his work recalls one of the first *romans antiques* of the mid-twelfth century, Benoît de Saint-Maure's octosyllabic *Roman de Troie.* In the prologue, the narrator declares, "Ci vueil l'estoire conmencier: / Le latin sivrai e la letre; / Niul autre rien n'i voudrai metre / S'ensi non cum jel truis escrit" (Benoît de Saint-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie* vv. 138-141). The *Troie* narrator makes the same promise Johannes would make fifty years later, he goes on to qualify his fidelity by adding, "Ne di mie qu'aucun buen dit / N'i mete, se faire le sai, / Mais la matire en ensirrai" (vv. 142-144). These three verses offer a superbly self-

[18] Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* 120-121, Dembowski, "Récits hagiographiques" 84 note 15, Mölk, *Literarästhetik* 100. It is interesting that the version quoted by Mölk traces the "mençongie" of rhymed tales to the fact that they are based on hearsay rather than their form: "Nus contes rimés n'est verais, tot est mençongie ço qu'il en dient; car il n'en sievent riens fors quant por oïr dire."

reflective explanation of what Johannes and other prose writers would try to avoid. It is not just the poetic form that gives rise to "extra words"; it is not just a question of the words added to make a rhyme or fill a line with eight syllables. Prose writers in the thirteenth century explicitly distanced themselves from the embellishment characteristic of verse texts, whether this embellishment took the form of lengthy descriptions of beautiful people and their emotional states, marvelous natural and supernatural phenomena, or the "bele conjointure" that arranged varied material into an artful narrative (Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* 18). A new aesthetic of "straight talking" - the meaning of "*prosa oratio,*" the etymological ancestor of "prose" - had appeared alongside the poetic aesthetic of embellishment, that is, the aesthetic of added beauty (Monfrin,"Journal des Savants" 161-190). As Johannes' appeal to Count Renaut's command demonstrates, the desire for the truthfulness of a faithful, prose translation of a Latin source did not come just from the writers themselves, it was demanded by the patrons who sponsored their work. The "faithfulness" of prose translations like the *Pseudo-Turpin* may be as much the product of writers acquiring a new skill of accurately translating as it is the result of the changing sensibilities of the patrons and audiences of vernacular literature. Prose did not replace verse as the only way to write literature, but it did offer another alternative. The literary system of thirteenth century France had matured to the point where multiple perspectives on how to write and how to represent the truth could operate side-by-side.

In his 1976 article, "Traits essentiels des récits hagiographiques," Peter Dembowski writes of the important role played by hagiography in the "propagation de

l'idée même de la vernacularisation efficace et fidèle des textes latins sérieux" (85). As in every other phase of the development of Old French literature, hagiography played a vital role in the creation and expansion of prose narrative, both as a genre whose evolving relationship with its audience provided an impetus for change and as a group of texts in which that change occurred. These transformations did not occur in a vacuum, of course. It is not a coincidence that the development of vernacular prose narrative occurred at a time when the deepening religious aspirations of lay men and women met the cresting tide of clerical ascendancy; the thirteenth century saw the vernacularization of religious experience in every sense of the term, both linguistic and cultural. The translation of Latin Christian culture into the vernacular changed the relationship between the lay reader and the texts, which could now be read and heard without the need for a live, physically-present clerical intermediary. Jongleurs and lay preachers, both without clerical formation or supervision, could recite memorized stories about saints in the public square (Elliot, *Vie de saint Alexis* 67-76) and pious aristocrats and bourgeois could acquire legendaries containing collections of prose or verse lives that they could read at their leisure.

The standards of holiness and the definition of what was necessary for salvation were still defined by the clerical, Latin-literate order but once translated into the vernacular they were expressed and interpreted in new ways. Each of the three analyses that follow shows a different facet of this interaction between pre-existing stories and new expectations. The different questions about the purpose and destiny of human life answered and asked by the *Vies* of Alexis, Gregory, and Mary do not supersede or even

oppose one another; they exist synchronically in overlapping relationships of mutual influence and tension. Is total rejection the only way to respond to a violent and treacherous world? Do the rituals and doctrines offered by the Church provide relief from guilt and anxiety or do they exacerbate them? What is the relationship between a strong personal sense of religious purpose and a worldview that saw the Church, society, and indeed the entire universe as a carefully-ordered hierarchy? These questions are specific to the particular cultural context of Western Europe in the Middle Ages, but they also touch on broader concerns that are relevant to other times and places. The literary history of medieval saints' lives is connected to the general history of human experience, and by studying it we can better understand the origins and idiosyncrasies of our own horizon of expectations.

Chapter I

La Vie de saint Alexis and Christina of Markyate

Part 1

Contemptus mundi

Throughout the Middle Ages, but specifically in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, holiness and marriage were considered almost incompatible. First, marriage meant sexual activity, and even if the apostle Paul had recommended marriage as an appropriate outlet for sexual passion (1 Corinthians 7:1-7), Augustine's idea that sexuality was inherently sinful continued to be widely accepted (Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* 388). Second, marriage meant being bound to the world with its pressures and demands. As Paul wrote, "I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided" (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

Sexual activity and entanglement in worldly affairs were viewed as major obstacles to salvation by a religious culture in which asceticism and the exclusive contemplation of God were seen as the surest path to holiness. Many of the leading thinkers of the clerical order of the tenth and eleventh century and beyond saw the refusal of marriage as a symbolic and concrete refusal of the secular world and its values. These secular values included the use of violence to protect and extend individual and political power, the accumulation of wealth and territory, and the relentless need to procreate,

even outside of the marital framework begrudgingly authorized by the Church, in order to ensure the continuation of the family line. Those who sought true holiness differentiated themselves from the rest of the Christian population by refusing many of the things lay people valued, including the pleasures of food and sex and the natural affection and support of a family, in order to cultivate an interior life based on mediation and expiate their sins through self-deprivation (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 53-57).

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, this dichotomy between secular and religious values did not run between the those who had received holy orders and those who had not, it divided those who had taken monastic vows and lived in a cloister and the priests and lay men and women who were not subject to a rule and who did not live in closely-supervised religious communities. Amidst the barbarian invasions and the depredations of local warlords that marked the anarchy following the end of the Carolingian Empire, it was easy for the men and women who took refuge in monasteries to see their communities as little ships floating on a vast sea of sin and violence. And this attitude persisted even after some semblance of political order was reestablished. The world was a profane and dangerous place. One outspoken eleventh-century proponent of monastic values, Peter Damian, used the model of Noah's ark to divide humanity into the few who were saved and the masses tossed about by the impetuous sea of life who were doomed to perdition.[19] For Peter Damian, those who are saved are monks, and Noah's ark is not the Church, as it was for many Patristic writers, but the institution of monasticism. Only the total renunciation of marriage as well as possessions, worldly honor, and family

[19] Ep. 6,32 to the hermits of Gamugno, as cited in Grandjean 70. Vauchez summarizes this conviction, which was not unique to Peter Damian, in *Spiritualité* 55-57.

allegiance could guarantee salvation. Free from the ties of human relationships and the anxieties and compromises they demand, the monk who has left the world is able to dedicate all of his time and energy to struggling to dominate his passions through prayer, fasting, and other ascetic practices and to enjoying the angelic experience of contemplating God without any distractions.

This pessimistic view of the world and dim appraisal of an ordinary person's chance for salvation often led to a feeling of contempt for the world, the *contemptus mundi* that has often been ascribed to medieval culture in general. In practice this meant that those who had found refuge within the cloister were not anxious to go back out into the world to preach or minister to those who still lived under the domain of sin. It was acceptable and even necessary to turn one's back on the world and seek one's personal salvation safe within the monastery, or if one was particularly daring, alone in the wilderness as a hermit (Grandjean 112-113). As Peter Damian and other writers said, the man who has escaped from a shipwreck should not swim back out into the storm to save those who are still drowning or he will be pulled back under himself.[20] The monastic contempt for the world was based on the conviction that the word was an obstacle to salvation. It was better to flee the world and be counted among the few who would be saved than stay in it and be damned with the many.

Saint Alexis: Personal salvation at all costs

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[20] Op. 12, as cited in Grandjean 162.

The legendary Saint Alexis is an example of someone who abandoned the world in order to save himself. The story of his life responds to many of the most important questions asked by men and women whose religious horizon of expectations was marked by a stark opposition between the secular world and monastic life and an obsession with the pursuit of salvation. As the most famous Old French version of the *Vie*[21] tells it, Alexis is a Roman nobleman who has agreed to marry a young woman of imperial extraction in order to satisfy his father, who is concerned for the future of his lineage. After the wedding, Alexis enters his bedchamber and sees his beautiful wife. But the sight of her attractive body and the bed has an unexpected effect on the young man: rather than burning with passion, Alexis "remembers his celestial lord," and begins to tell his bride about the superiority of the celestial life over the mortal one. He encourages her to take Christ as her spouse and then slips out of his family's home and flees from Rome (*L* 51-75). Alexis is concerned enough about his wife's salvation that he stops to tell her that she too should devote herself entirely to God, but he is unwilling to stay and help her do so. Just as the world was for Peter Damian, Alexis's wife is an obstacle to salvation, an obstacle that once overcome can be left behind and forgotten.

The saint flees from Rome, gives away all of his possessions, and dedicates himself totally to God through the physical and psychological self-abnegation of poverty and anonymity. He refuses to use the goods of the world to give pleasure to his body or the people of the world to comfort his spirit. Just as Peter Damian promises to those

[21] *La Vie de Saint Alexis*, Ed. Mario Perugi *(L),* referred to here as the *Chanson de saint Alexis*, because it is referred to as an "amiable cançun" in the prologue that accompanies the text in the St. Albans Psalter (A reproduction and transcription of this text can be found at http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans057.shtml).

hermits who "sit in their cell and hold their tongue and stomach in check,"[22] this complete dedication to God earns Alexis his salvation. The salvation of the saint's parents and wife, however, is not as certain. They have remained in the world and continued to embrace its values. It is not impossible for them to be saved, and indeed many versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* specifically mention their ascension to paradise,[23] but their salvation is not the primary focus of Alexis's decisions. If the saint's example encourages them to change their lives or if the saint's intercession can earn them forgiveness for their sins, that is good, but he is unwilling to risk being dragged into the tempest of the world to save them. He is unwilling to relate to them as a son or husband. Like the monk who leaves secular society and the even more perfect hermit who leaves his monastery, Alexis values the exclusive relationship with God, which he and many in the Church believe will guarantee his own personal salvation, more than relationships with other people, which might help them gain theirs.

Alexis's self-absorbed pursuit of salvation has been harshly criticized by modern critics. Emil Winkler in particular describes Alexis's asceticism as "superficial" and "egotistical" (588-589, as cited in Cartlidge 81-82). But even the writers of later medieval versions of the *Life* were anxious to soften the harsh edges of Alexis's holiness (Elliott, *The* Vie de Saint Alexis 29-31). In the wedding night scene in *S*, a twelfth-century Old French rewriting of the *Life*, Alexis's bride engages him in a long conversation that extends across almost two hundred lines, or about one seventh of the

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[22] "Sede in cella tua, et retine linguam tuam et ventrem, et saluus eris." Op. 15 as cited in Grandjean 125.
[23] In particular a Latin *Vita* contained in several Spanish manuscripts ("Die älteste lateinische Alexiusvita", Ed. Ulrich Mölk) and the Old French *Vies* known as *L* and *S* mentioned above.

total poem. The saint speaks to her tenderly, and goes to great lengths to teach his wife the importance of choosing the spiritual life over the earthly one. He is also careful to obtain her consent before leaving.[24] But he still flees. The story of Saint Alexis is the story of a man who leaves his wife on their wedding-night.

Many important questions would have been asked by those reading or listening to this story in medieval France, and the story would have given rise to many other questions in turn. What is the connection between working for one's own salvation and working for the salvation of others? Are the two pursuits mutually exclusive? Can a profound and devoted relationship with God coexist with other relationships, or must it be exclusive and all encompassing? Is human affection always an obstacle to salvation, or can it be part of the path? Is the purest form of the Christian religion a self-serving asceticism that refuses to be contaminated by the complications and the compromises of ordinary human life? These questions are also extremely relevant to the experience of Christina of Markyate, a historical woman who like Alexis fled from an arranged marriage for the intense religious experience of the cloister. The successive rewritings of the Alexis-legend and the historical evidence about Christina's later life seem to indicate that the opposition between divine and human relationships was not as absolute and uncomplicated as Peter Damian's more impassioned writings and earlier versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* might lead one to believe.

From the Man of God to Saint Alexis

[24] *Li Roumains de Saint Alessins*, Ed. Alison Goddard Elliot (*S*) verses 123-318.

In the precursor to the *Life of Saint Alexis*, the protagonist's rejection of his family is simple and total.[25] The Syriac legend of the anonymous Man of God tells the story of a young man who flees from his native Rome, here referring to Constantinople, before his wedding. He goes to Edessa in Syria, where he lives out his life as a beggar and dies shortly after revealing his identity and story to the doorkeeper of the church outside of which he prays.[26] Once the Man of God leaves his parents and the young woman he never married, he never sees them again. Both the narrator and the saint are totally unconcerned about their fate and their salvation. The Syriac legend ends with an epilogue in which the bishop of Edessa, Mar Raboula, deepens his love of foreigners because of his dedication to the Man of God, who died as a foreigner in his city.

In the *Life of Saint Alexis*, however, the saint is not afforded such a simple and complete separation from his family. When adapted into Greek and eventually Latin, the original legend of the Man of God is expanded to include a second flight, this time away from Edessa and back to Rome, where the protagonist lives out the rest of his life in his family home.[27] Despite this return, it cannot be said that the saint comes back to Rome to save his parents and his wife. He is forced back by a storm, and he only reveals his identity in a letter to be read after his death. Alexis does not come back to enter into a relationship with his family; his return to Rome is proof of his ability to refuse the world – the abundance of food and human affection available at home – while living in its

[25] Tony Hunt gives an excellent overview of the development of the Alexis Legend in "The *Life* of Saint Alexis" 217-224.

[26] *La Légende syriaque de saint Alexis,* ed. Arthur Amiaud 1-9.

[27] Many scholars have pointed out the similarity to the *Life of John Calybite*, a Greek saint's life in which the protagonist flees from his wife and parents to live in a monastery. A heavenly voice tells him to go back to his family, however, and the saint lives unrecognized in a little hut (καλύβα in Greek). His identity is revealed to his parents and he is reconciled with them before his death (Hunt 217-218).

midst. As Neil Cartlidge observes in his analysis of the development of the Alexis legend, this return heightens the emotional tension of the story (87-91). The saint's separation from his family is more poignant because he – and the reader – are directly aware of its consequences. On one level, Cartlidge argues, a devout reader might have seen "the saint's voyeur-like detachment as a model of resistance to the degrading influence of earthly affections," while on another level, "many others would have identified with Alexis in the splendid heroism of being able to catalyse so magnificent a tragedy" (89). Alexis's return to his family creates a narrative space in which the implications of a complete refusal of the world and human relationships emerge in all their emotional complexity. The adaptations of the *Life of Saint Alexis* rewritten in different contexts throughout the Middle Ages respond to this complexity in different ways, trying to minimize its impact or taking full advantage of its dramatic weight. Each version offers a different perspective on the tension between fleeing the world to save oneself and the charitable desire to save others. An analysis of the relationship between Alexis and his family in several different rewritings of his *Life* demonstrates how the opposition between the secular world and the monastic, ascetic ideal of holiness and the choice between personal salvation and compassion for others became more nuanced and complicated through the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a pivotal moment in the history of Western Christianity.

Saint Alexis in Latin and French

I will concentrate on four versions, two Latin and two French, in which the tension between saving oneself and saving others can be clearly seen in the changing

relationship between Alexis, his family, and his wife. At the center of the study is the famous *Chanson de Saint Alexis*, found in the St. Albans Psalter and referred to by the siglum *L* because the Psalter was once in the possession of the Benedictine Monastery of Lambspring. The choice of this version is justified first by the direct connection between the St Albans Psalter and Christina of Markyate. The obstacles Christina had to overcome in order to be freed of her marriage and the complications she encountered once she entered the religious life serve as an important illustration and counterpoint to the experiences of Alexis. Second, ever since Gaston Paris published an edition of *L* as a "poème du XIe siècle," the *Chanson* has occupied a privileged place in French literature, where "il ouvre dignement l'histoire de la poésie nationale."[28] The *Chanson de Saint Alexis* is one of the earliest works of French vernacular hagiography, and it is an excellent example of how the clerics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries rewrote the lives of saints in a new language, adapted them to a new cultural situation, and in the process created a new literature.[29]

While the connection to Christina alone makes *L* noteworthy and the linguistic and literary interest of *L* cannot be disputed, the preeminence it has been given as the earliest Old French *Vie de saint Alexis* has been called into question. The St Albans Psalter is the oldest manuscript containing a version of the *Vie*, but the Psalter dates from the twelfth century and the text it contains is a copy.[30] Otto Pächt argues against Gaston Paris's dating of the *L* original to the eleventh century, and T.D. Hemming claims that a

[28] Paris, *La vie de saint Alexis: poème du XIe siècle* vi, as cited in Cartlidge 79.
[29] Cf. Laurent, *Plaire et édifier* 577-580.
[30] Jane Geddes, who has done extensive work on the St Albans Psalter, proposes some time between 1135-1139 as a date for the completion of the manuscript ("The St Albans Psalter" 212).

shorter version of the *Vie* found in the Ashburnham manuscript, *A*, is based on an original older than the original of *L* (Cartlidge 79). In his edition of the *Vie*, Mario Perugi gives a very thorough and technical analysis of these issues and the relationships between *A*, *L*, and the other Old French versions of the same family (116-134). He argues that although *L* is not the oldest Old French version, it does occupy a unique position in the tradition. Perugi describes *L* as a sort of "manuscrit réceptacle" (90) which combines all of the features of the other first-generation *Vies* into one composite story.[31] The status of *L* as the accumulation rather than the synthesis of the previous versions is analogous with rewriting in general. The successive versions of a story like the *Life of Saint Alexis* do not replace one another the way one generation is replaced by the next, but older versions continue to exist side-by-side with newer ones, continuing to offer their particular interpretations of the tradition to a new audience.

In order to understand the relationship between the *Chanson* and the earlier and later tradition of the Alexis legend, I also analyze two Latin and one later Old French versions. I have chosen two Latin versions first because, as Mario Perugi has observed, not all the features of the earliest Old French *Vies* can be traced to one Latin source (51-63), and second because the comparison of two Latin *Vitae* allows for an appreciation of the diversity present in the Alexis tradition even before its translation into the vernacular. Of the many Latin *Vitae* written about Alexis, the first I will read is the *Vita: Alexius*

[31] The most compelling argument of *L*'s composite nature is the presence of two endings: the first, which is found in stanzas 109 and 110 and corresponds to the ending of A, and the second which is found at the end of the poem in stanzas 124-125.

Confessor Romae, B.H.L. 286,[32] one of the nine versions of the *Life* published by the Bollandists in the *Acta Sanctorum*. Found in a manuscript dating from the eleventh century, this version is a copy of a Latin text translated from the Greek in Rome in the last quarter of the tenth century, when Sergios, the exiled archbishop of Damascus, came to Rome and established the cult of Saint Alexis in the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Boniface on the Aventine hill. This *Vita* is considered the standard Roman version of the *Life of Saint Alexis*, and it is one of the primary sources for the family of Old French *Vies* to which the *Chanson* found in the Saint Albans psalter belongs.[33]

The second Latin text I examine is the *Vita Sanctissimi Viri Filius Fimiani*, B.H.L. 289.[34] Found in four Spanish manuscripts, this *Vita* is described by Ulrich Mölk as the oldest Latin version of the *Life of Saint Alexis* and dated to the ninth or tenth century (Mölk, "Die älteste lateinische Alexiusvita" 293-301). It is a translation and adaptation of a Greek or Arabic original and as such is more of a cousin than an ancestor of the official Roman *Vita* published by the Bollandists. Nonetheless, Maurizio Perugi argues convincingly that many of the features of the Old French *Vies* like the *Chanson* can be traced to this Spanish *Vita* and therefore that the direct Latin model for the original Old French translation must have reflected an intermediary stage between the Spanish *Vita* and the Roman versions which he calls "les 'Vitae' plus récentes."[35] As will be

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[32] *Acta Sanctorum,* XVII dies Julii cols 251E-254A. It is referred to here as the Roman *Vita*, and referenced by the sections into which the Bollandists divide the text.
[33] Archbishop Sergio arrived in Rome in 977. The relics of Saint Alexis were transferred to St Boniface in 986. For a recent discussion of the different Latin versions of the Alexis legend, see Tony Hunt, "The *Life* of St Alexis"
218-219 and Maurizio Perugi 51-71.
[34] Published in Mölk, "Die älteste lateinische Alexiusvita" 303-315 and referenced by Mölk's sections.
[35] Perugi 97. For the detailed textual analysis that leads him to this conclusion, see 51-100.

shown later in the chapter, this Spanish version differs substantially from the Roman *Vita* in its presentation of the relationship between Alexis and his family.

The fourth and final text I will analyze is the *Roumans de Saint Alessin*, a twelfth-century *Vie* in assonanced *laisses* edited first by Gaston Paris and more recently by Alison Goddard-Elliott. This version, known by the siglum *S*, is an amplification belonging to the same tradition as *L*. It is about twice as long as the *Chanson* and, as Elliott demonstrates in the introduction to her edition, much of this additional material pertains to the relationship between Alexis and his bride (28-50). Because of the high frequency of *laisses similaires* and epic formulas found in the *Roumans*, Elliott contends that *S* is actually the record of a "jongleuresque" oral composition and not a direct copy of the *Chanson* or any other related manuscript (50-76). In any case, the character of Saint Alexis emerges as a much more sympathetic figure in the *Roumans* with respect to the *Chanson*. He is anxious to convince his wife to choose the spiritual life herself, and he is tormented by the fear that the pain he causes his family might actually count against him as a sin. The implications and limitations of this sympathy give rise to new answers and questions that respond to and influence a changed religious horizon of expectations.

The religious horizon of expectations

As outlined in the previous introduction, Jauss's model of the horizon of expectations is a useful tool to analyze the relationships between the different versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* and the cultural and religious context in which they were written and received. Rather than attempting to define the abstract "spirit of the age," I will try

to determine what sort of questions an eleventh- and twelfth-century audience might have asked when reading or listening to the *Life* and what sort of questions the *Life* might have asked them in turn.

We have already seen several of these questions. Alexis's refusal of marriage and his flight from his wife and parents respond to the question whether it is better to marry and take on the responsibilities of being a husband, father, and lord, or to flee the world and all of its demands to dedicate oneself wholly to God and one's personal salvation. At its most basic level, the *Life of Saint Alexis* is about opposition, the opposition between the earthly and the spiritual, between the temptation to seek happiness in this present life and the willingness to endure suffering in order to merit joy in the future, and between the demands of human relationships based on natural affection and the need to give oneself totally to God to earn forgiveness for one's sins.

By the time the earliest Latin versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* were written down, the question of whether it was better to seek pleasure in the material world or work for eternal salvation had already been resolved, at least on a theoretical level. Western Europe had been Christianized for centuries, and the ideal of the opposition between the flesh and the spirit was an integral part of both the intellectual climate and the popular mentality (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 33-62). The specifics of what this opposition meant in practical terms, however, were very much an open question. When the Latin versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* entered into wide circulation and the first Old French versions were being composed in the eleventh century, Western Europe was beginning the process of ecclesial transformation known as the Gregorian Reform. Along with his supporters

and successors, Pope Gregory VII worked to free the Church from the control of lay rulers and impose the monastic model of holiness on all of the clergy.[36] These two goals had a common ideological foundation. The reformers, many of whom had been monks (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 124), maintained that the Church should be led by pastors who personally embodied the ideals of holiness that they believed had allowed the monasteries to survive and indeed flourish during times of anarchy and cultural decay. This meant that all bishops and priests should abstain from sex, live in communities, and renounce personal wealth and that lay aristocrats should not be able to appoint men to ecclesiastic positions, whether for profit or to reward friends and family. The reform was not an instant or total success, however, and many people, even priests and bishops, resisted the idea that celibacy and the renunciation of material possessions were obligatory for clerics, to say nothing of the rest of the Church. Nonetheless, the Gregorian reform was successful in convincing a large portion of the population, including many lay people, that the monastic model of spirituality was obligatory for priests and bishops and strongly recommended for all others who wanted to ensure their salvation.

Understanding the encounter between monastic spirituality and the secular world that took place during the Gregorian reform is essential for understanding the *Life of Saint Alexis*. Monasticism had always been defined in opposition to the rest of society. As Dom Leclercq explains in *Aux sources de la spiritualité occidentale,* the first monks were those Christians who distinguished themselves from the rest of the community of

[36] The term "Gregorian Reform" can be traced to Augustin Fliche's three volume history of the movement, entitled *La réforme grégorienne.* Grandjean points out, however, that the papacy never used the word "reform" in its documents, nor was this "renewal" the work of one man (*Laics dans l'Église* 41-42). See also Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 65-68, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 123-124, Delaruelle *Piété Populaire* 95-112.

the faithful by taking on obligations that did not apply to everyone, especially "en matière de célibat, de pauvreté, d'austérité et de prière" (17). At first these men and women simply acted differently from their brethren, but eventually, "afin de rester plus sûrement fidèdles à ce programme d'ascèse volontaire" they physically and materially separated themselves from the rest of the community (ibid.). Monasticism formed around the opposition between the world and the desert, the material and the spiritual, and the monk and the non-monk – the same sort of opposition that underlies the *Life of Saint Alexis*.

As Duncan Robertson explains in *The Medieval Saints' Lives*, the rise of monasticism and its ascetic ideals led to a transformation in hagiography as well (76-87). Whereas the model of holiness in the early Church had been the martyr, a new model was needed after the alignment of the Church with the authorities under the emperor Constantine and the cessation of widespread persecutions. No longer was simply being Christian enough to distinguish someone from the rest of society – everyone was at least nominally a Christian. Since society itself was Christian, holy men and women had to distinguish themselves by their practices rather than their beliefs. This meant asceticism, and the *Lives* of these confessors were filled with extraordinary fasting, long nights of prayer, and spiritual and emotional battles against temptation.

After the fall of the Roman Empire and the end of the Carolingian renewal, the self-sufficiency monasteries had gained by separating themselves from the rest of the world took on a survival value (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 34-38). In a time of anarchy and ignorance, monasteries shone as beacons of learning and sound economic and agricultural practices. This success naturally contributed to the conviction expressed by proponents

of monasticism like Peter Damian that the monastic life was not just an option available to the most scrupulous souls or those who felt the need to expiate a particularly serious sin, but the only sure path to salvation. As Michel Grandjean describes, in a world "où regnent le désordre et l'injustice, un monde où le moine ne peut guère discerner de valeur positive et où, partout, il voit l'oeuvre du péché" it is not unreasonable to arrive at "une disqualification radicale des réalités terrestres" (67-72). In a world where human violence, ignorance, famine, and disease were the norm, the relative peace, intellectual achievement, and economic prosperity of monasteries truly made them seem like pockets of angelic life and the foretaste of paradise (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 138, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 43-44).

But just as Alexis returns to Rome after achieving spiritual perfection in Syria, the monastic order could not remain isolated from society for ever. The reputation of monks as the holiest of men attracted donations from lay people anxious for intercessory prayers, and abbeys like Cluny and its daughter houses found themselves in possession of vast domains and considerable wealth (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 161-165). On one hand this contradiction between the renunciation of the world and wealth and prosperity would eventually lead to the creation of new orders like the Cistercians and hermits of the Chartreuse dedicated to poverty and separation; on the other, it would also lead to further engagement with the world. With their way of life validated by the success of monastic orders like Cluny, Gregory VII and his collaborators were no long interested in separating themselves from the rest of the Church but reforming the world, starting with the clergy, according to the monastic model.

There were two major results of the Gregorian reform. First, the two major clerical vices – the traffic of ecclesiastic offices, and clerical marriage – were banned in theory and largely eliminated in practice. Not all clerics, however, lived in communities and submitted to a religious rule. Rather than turning all clerics into monks, the reform contributed to the development of canons, priests who lived in supervised communities and followed the rule of Saint Augustine. Instead of withdrawing from the world into cloisters, however, canons practiced an active pastoral ministry of preaching and *cura animarum* that they felt was the true model of apostolic life (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 173-179, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 96-100). Like monks, canons believed that it was important to live according to a stricter moral standard than ordinary people, but instead of clinging to solitude and separation as the only sure path to personal salvation, they also went out into the world to work for the salvation of others.[37]

The other paradoxical result of the Gregorian reform was the reformers willingness to engage the laity in the struggle against recalcitrant priests and bishops. Rather than acting on Peter Damian's conviction that the world was drawing near to its end and the time for preaching was over (Grandjean 163-167), many of the reformers preached to the laity and instilled in them the monastic values of celibacy, poverty, and asceticism. And the laity not only began to hold their priests and bishops to this standard, but at least some of them also began to apply it to themselves. If a cleric could be holy by abstaining from sex, food, and wealth, could a lay man or woman not do the same?

[37] Michel Grandjean summarizes the rivalry between canons and monks in his discussion of Yves of Chartres, who himself was a fierce proponent of the importance of pastoral ministry in addition to contemplation (373-385).

Furthermore, at the same time chastity was being held up as almost synonymous with holiness and an obligation for all clerics, marriage was being changed from a necessary evil to one of the seven sacraments.[38] What had been tolerated by the Church as a channel for sexuality and procreation and a means of stabilizing the family became an order, like the clerical order, in which individual consent, vows of life-long commitment, and affection played such an important role that it became "a metaphor for the love of God" (Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage* 3). As the Church extended its control over society and made marriage a religious affair, the most binding of human relationships was transformed into a space for moral improvement and mutual spiritual support (Cartlidge 18).

The specific questions raised by these religious developments are as pertinent to the different versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* as are the more general questions outlined above. An eleventh or twelfth century reader of the *Life* would have been very concerned with the question of whether it was possible to live a holy life in the world as a married man responsible to a spouse and family and as an aristocrat responsible for the administration of property and required to fight as a solider in his lord's army. A monk or nun who had fled from the world might have been tempted to wonder whether it was better to turn back, metaphorically speaking, into the raging storm and try to save others from drowning, to stand safely on the shore and let the example of his or her life shine as a beacon. The monk considering leaving his monastery to become a hermit might have weighed the question of whether human relationships are a burden and a distraction from

[38] Neil Cartlidge gives a summary of the evolution of medieval marriage in *Medieval Marriage* 12-21.

the exclusive contemplation of God, or a place to exercise the supreme virtue of charity. A young woman whose family has found her a husband but who was attracted by religious life might have wondered whether marriage was simply an affair of economics and lineage that stood as an obstacle to salvation, or possibly the context for a mutually beneficial spiritual relationship? The different ways the four versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* pose and respond to these questions provide a clear index of how a centuries-old Syriac legend was adapted to the evolving religious and cultural context of Western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Novum martyrii genus: Alexis's path to sainthood

My analysis of the relationship between the different versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* and their religious and historical context is organized around the four major stages of Alexis's life as described by Peter Damian in a sermon composed for the saint's feast day, July 17th.[39] As was common practice for medieval preachers, Damian divides Alexis's life into four stages and connects them to the Gospel passage on which his sermon is based, Mark 4:26-49, as a mnemonic and didactic aid (Carruthers 101-106).

> He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.' (NRSV)

[39] Peter Damian, "Sermo XXVIII. De S. Alexio Confessore (XVII Jul.)" in *Patrologia Latina.* vol. 144 col. 652-660.

The four major episodes in Alexis's life correspond to the four stages of a seed's growth into ripened grain: the "stalk," the "head," the "full grain in the head," and the "harvest," or in the Vulgate used by Peter Damian, the "herba," the "spica," the "plenum frumentum," and the "messis." The saint's flight from his wife on their wedding night and his abandonment of the secular world and its values are symbolized by the plant's first growth, the "herba." The second stage of Alexis's life, the time he spent in exile as an anonymous beggar in Syria, corresponds to the emergence of the "head" or "spica" of the plant, while the third, Alexis's return to his family and the ascetic rigor with which he endured the sight of his family, the opulence of his home, and the abuse of his own servants, corresponds to the ripened "plenum frumentum." Finally, Alexis's death and ascent into paradise is represented by the harvest, when the farmer "goes in with his sickle," and, as Peter Damian adds, gathers the grain into his storehouses (col. 654C-656A).

Vita Alexii: The Spanish and Roman Lives of Saint Alexis

The two Latin *Vitae* that I analyze offer different answers to the questions outlined above. The cultural and religious context of Latin hagiography was not a monolithic block of unchanging ideology, but a dynamic and often contested intellectual environment in which the principles of a common tradition were interpreted in different ways. The question of why Alexis agreed to marry and why he then felt the need to flee can be answered by looking at the four scenes that make up the first part of the *Life*. First is the presentation of Alexis's parents, second the description of Alexis's acquiescence to

marriage, third the brief account of the wedding ceremony itself, and fourth the saint's conversation with his bride before he flees. Each of these scenes contributes to the conflict between Alexis and his family, a conflict that is not based on the diametrical opposition of good versus evil, but a more subtle opposition between something good and something better.

Alexis's mother is often anonymous, although in the Roman *Vita* she is called Aglaes. His father, however, is always named, and his name is more or less consistent from version to version as some variant of Euphemian. Despite their son's eventual rejection of them, Euphemian and his wife are described as good and pious people in the both the Spanish and the Roman *Vita*. Unlike in some Greek versions of the *Life*, they are not malicious, and it is not out of irreligion that they encourage their son to marry (Cartlidge 85). Peter Damian himself describes them in very favorable terms. His sermon on Alexis begins with a description of the virtues of Euphemian and his wife, and their generosity and piety are held up as an example for lay people in his audience who "have not reached the summit of spiritual life and are given over to secular activities and tied by the bonds of the conjugal couple."[40] Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, Alexis's mother and father are righteous people who have not been able to produce a child (col. 653A). It is only after fervent prayer that Alexis is born and, like many saints, he is presented from the beginning as a special child, a gift from God rather than the product of natural generation (Gennette, *Réécriture hagiographique* 213). The

[40] "…qui necdum spiritualis vitae culmen aggressi, saecularibus adhuc estis actibus dediti, et conjugalis copulae vinculis obligati" (col. 653B).

mother's prayer that God give her a child "ki seit a tun talent" (L 25) ironically turns against her: Alexis will be the child that God wants, not the heir that his parents' want.

This characterization of Alexis's parents as good and holy lay people is important to the *Life'*s presentation of the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. It is not the diametrical opposition of absolute good and absolute evil but the superiority of one good over another. As Cartlidge observes, Alexis's holiness is increased by the value of the family relationships he is willing to sacrifice (80-81). Unlike a martyr, who is opposed and eventually killed by radically evil pagan adversaries, a confessor like Alexis progresses on the path to holiness by constantly choosing the better life, which, while physically and emotionally challenging in the near term, promises greater rewards after death, over the good life, which is more pleasant and comfortable in the present but offers no guarantee of salvation after death.[41] Alexis's attitude towards his family and the family's reaction to the discovery of their long-lost son dead in their house are two of the most important differentiating factors between the Spanish and Roman *Vitae*.

Herba: Marriage, rejection, and the first growth of holiness

The Roman and Spanish versions differ in their presentation of Euphemian's decision to find a wife for his son and in the particulars of the wedding ceremony itself. The question of what constituted a legitimate, binding marriage was an important part of the religious horizon of expectations in which the different versions *Life of Saint Alexis*

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[41] Charles Altman defined these two types of opposition as diametrical and gradual in "Two Types of Opposition and the Structure of Latin Saints Lives." Interestingly enough, after giving several Latin examples, Altman point to the *Life of Saint Alexis* as a vernacular example of gradual opposition (8-9).

were written, and so it is useful to explore these differences in some detail. As several scholars have noted, the presentation of Alexis's relationship with his wife is closely related to the church's evolving view of marriage in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, during which what was originally a secular affair became one of the seven sacraments of the Church.[42] One of the key elements of this transformation was the conviction that it was the consent of the partners that constituted a valid marriage and not the consummation of their sexual relationship.[43] This attitude not only placed individual subjectivity at the center of the fundamental building-block of social life, it also allowed for possibility of "spiritual marriages," in which a couple pledged themselves to one another for life but never consummated their relationship sexually.[44]

The two Latin *Vitae* differ in their description of Alexis's agreement to marry. In the Roman version the saint is not involved in the decision at all. His marriage is a matter of course, the natural consequence of the boy's growth into adolescence: "when he reached the age of adolescence and they judged him ready for marriage, they chose for him a maiden from the imperial family." The young man's lack of initiative is reinforced by the use of the passive voice in the account of the wedding ceremony itself, "…and

[42] Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage* 5-32, Pinder, "Transformations of a Theme: Marriage and Sanctity in the Old French Saint Alexis Poems" 71-88, Leclercq, "L'amour et le mariage vus par des clercs" 102-115 and "Monks on Marriage," Mölk, "Saint Alexis et son épouse dans la légende latine et la première chanson française" 162-170.

[43] Cartlidge summarizes the role of consent in marriage beginning with Roman law, where it was required in theory but in practice made irrelevant by the absolute power a father had over his children, especially his daughters, to thinkers like Ivo of Chartres, Gratian, and Hugh of St. Victor, who in the first half of the twelfth century saw consent and consummation as complementary, and finally to Peter Lombard and the "Parisian School," for whom consent alone made a marriage valid. By the reign of Pope Alexander III at the end of the twelfth century, consent became "the prevailing canonical doctrine throughout Europe" and an essential part of the matrimonial liturgy (15-18).

[44] Vauchez discusses the concept of continence within marriage and virginal marriage as well as examples in hagiography and history in *Les Laïcs* 205-220.

they adorned the wedding chamber and a crown was placed on each of their heads."[45] He never gives his consent to marry. In the Roman *Vita*, Alexis's marriage is a question of economics and lineage, not an affair of the heart or spirit. It is not, however, a completely secular affair. This tenth-century *Vita* relates that Alexis was married in a church – the church of Saint Boniface in which Alexis's cult was centered in Rome – by the "hands of very honorable priests."[46] In a time when the presence of a priest at a wedding ceremony was a "privilege" and not a "pre-requisite" (Cartlidge 13), the author of the Roman *Saint Alexis* insists on the religious dimension of the marriage the saint rejects. But even this religious dimension does not elicit the saint's consent. It is almost as if there are two levels of religion operating in the *Vita*: there is the religion that validates and sacralizes a marriage contracted according to secular values, and the religion that rejects those values on the path to personal salvation. The tension between the world and the spirit did not just oppose lay people and clerics, it ran through the very heart of the Christian religion, which could be a support for the values of society at large or the inspiration for an anti-social pursuit of self-fulfillment.

The polyvalence of religious values is even more apparent in the Spanish *Vita*'s account of the marriage. Not only is the wedding performed in a church,[47] but here Alexis himself recognizes that marriage has religious merit. In a scene unique to this version of the *Life*, Alexis's parents refer to the teachings of Saint Paul in an attempt to

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[45] "Cum autem ad tempus adolescentiæ accessisset, & eum nuptialibus infulis aptum judicassent, elegerunt ei puellam ex genere imperiali & ornaverunt thalamum, & impositæ sunt eis singulæ coronæ..." (§2).
[46] "…& impositæ sunt eis singulæ coronæ in templo S. Bonifacii martyris per manus honoratissimorum sacerdotum" (§2).
[47] The narrator of the Spanish *Vita* states that "they performed the wedding for them in the church, which is called holy." "…fecerunt nuptias illis in ecclesia, que vocatur sancta" (§5).

convince their son that it is better for men and women to marry and have a lawful outlet for their sexual passion than remained unmarried and succumb to temptation (1 Corinthians 7). Obedient to his parents' wishes and Paul's instructions, Alexis responds, "Since I know from the divine law that marriage is not a sin for me, but a grace, I will do what you urge me."[48] As Mölk observes, this scene is actually borrowed from another saint's life found in the Cardeña Passionary, one of the four manuscripts that contain the Spanish *Vita* ("Die älteste Alexiusvita" 298-299). This text, the legendary *Life of Julianus and Basilissa*, tells the story of a young man and woman who, although married, agree to live together chastely.[49] The parallels with Alexis's situation are striking. Even though Alexis leaves his bride, his relationship with her hints at a virginal marriage, a union that takes advantage of the love and mutual support available in marriage without being tainted by sexuality. Julianus and Basilissa are only one example of an early Christian couple that married without sexually consummating their union; the famous Saint Cecilia and her husband Valerianus are another. These couples, however, were martyred by the Roman authorities soon after their weddings, and they did not have to endure temptation for long.

Living in a thoroughly Christianized Rome, Alexis and his wife cannot quickly ensure salvation by testifying to the Gospel in the face of murderous pagans, and, despite the hagiographic and supposedly historical precedents, they do not decide to live together

[48] "Quia ex diuino precepto cognoui coniugium mihi non esse peccatum sed gratiam, faciam, que hortamini" (§4).
[49] DeGaiffer analyzes the parallels to Alexis "virginal marriage" found in other saints' lives in "Intactam sponsam." For his discussion of Julianus and Basilissa, see 173-174.

"like brother and sister."[50] In a Christianized society that is corrupted by worldly concerns, the only sure path to salvation, as Peter Damian would argue, is flight. For Alexis this means leaving his wife and slipping out into the night. Before he leaves, however, the saint must explain to his bride what he is doing. This is one of the most emblematic and decisive scenes in the entire *Life*, but it is far from being clear and straightforward. The two Latin *Vitae* begin to show how complex Alexis's relationship with his wife truly is.

The Roman *Vita* gives the briefest version of the encounter. No mention is made of Alexis's state of mind when he sees his bride: he simply begins to instruct her and explain the "sacramenta", that is, the holy things, to her. The focal point of the scene is not the conversation, but the physical exchange of tokens. Alexis gives his bride his golden ring, symbol of their marriage, his sword belt, symbol of his military role, and his purple mantle, the symbol of his nobility, and tells her to "take these things and keep them as long as the Lord pleases, and may the Lord be between us."[51] These objects will be mentioned again at the end of several versions of the *Life*.[52] In the Roman *Vita*, however, the ring, the sword belt, and the mantle vanish from the story after Alexis gives them to his wife. Their disappearance symbolizes the saint's utter rejection of all that they represent. What Elliott observes in many saints' lives is dramatized in the Roman

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[50] In his article, "Marriage in Medieval Hagiography," Marc Glasser observes that there were even some male saints who lived chastely with their wives to an old age (17). In terms of historical figures, the eleventh-century Holy Roman Emperor Henry II and his wife Cunegonde were reported to have lived together without ever having sexual relations, but, as Glasser writes, "the reported celibacy of this marriage is much disputed." The hagiographers who wrote Henry's life point out his childlessness as evidence of his chastity, but this claim was already controversial by the twelfth century (17-18).

[51] §2 Suscipe hæc, & conserva usque dum Domino placuerit: & Dominus sit inter nos.

[52] E.g. the Old French *S* and the Latin *Vita* found in the Monte-Cassino manuscript (B.H.L. 288), which I do not study here (Mölk, "Saint Alexis et son épouse" 165).

Vita: Alexis's flight from marriage is "symbolic of the saint's entire rejection, summing up and encapsulating the full oppositional range between saint and society" (*Roads* 92-102).

The Spanish *Vita* offers a more complex portrayal of both Alexis's motives and his wife's reaction. Unlike in the other three versions, here Alexis has explicitly assented to his parents' suggestion that he marry. Nonetheless, when he enters the bedchamber with his young bride, he is filled with a "God-fearing spirit."[53] His first words to his wife, however, are words of blessing and gratitude that acknowledge God as the author of their union, "Blessed be the Lord forever, who gave you to me in marriage."[54] Only afterwards does he explain to his wife the urgent need to convert, and even then he speaks in affectionate tones, calling her, "sponsa mea, dilecta mea." Finally, unlike in the Roman *Vita*, Alexis's wife does not accept his words silently, but gives her consent explicitly, declaring, "Fac, sicut tu uis," that is, "do as you will." This explicit consent to the saint's departure, and its absence in other versions of the legend, is an important aspect of the *Life*'s relationship to the religious horizon of expectations in which it was rewritten. As Leclercq demonstrates in *Monks on Marriage*, after contracting a legitimate marriage, a husband or wife could only enter a monastery with the consent of his or her spouse (19-20). In the Spanish *Vita*, Alexis consented to the marriage before it took place, and he needs his wife's consent before he can leave.

The question remains, however: by leaving is he dissolving the marriage or transforming it? There is no doubt that the protagonist of the Spanish *Vita* believes that

[53] §5 …repletus est spiritu timoris Domini.
[54] §5 Benedictus Dominus in eternum, qui dedit te mihi in coniunctionem.

the secular world is a dangerous place that offers little hope for salvation. Quoting Scripture, he urges his bride "not to delay" in converting because no one knows when the end will come; indeed "this world is set in ruin."[55] He urges his bride to convert, but she must make this conversion on her own, just like Alexis. Even if their marriage is a valid, religiously ordained institution, it is better to pursue salvation alone, in the solitude that allows for the complete denial of the self and the exclusive contemplation of God.

Despite the explicitly religious context of Alexis's wedding in the Roman *Vita*, the silence of his bride and his renunciation of the objects that symbolize the secular world accentuate the opposition between marriage and the ascetic path to holiness. Alexis not only rejects the nobility and violence represented by his purple cloak and sword, he also rejects marriage and the person of his bride. There is only room for one relationship in Alexis's vision of holiness, an exclusive and all encompassing relationship with God. The Spanish *Vita* is less categorical about Alexis's rejection, but Alexis still leaves. The time to convert to the Lord is short, and conversion means fleeing from a ruined secular world and seeking out God in poverty and solitude. But he is affectionate towards his bride, thanks God that she has been given to him, and waits for her permission before departing. There is already the trace of another possibility – not a total innovation, but something drawn from the culture of the Early Church, just as the scene in which Alexis agrees with his parents that marriage is a religious good is borrowed from the legend of Julianus and Basilissa. It may be possible to live in an affectionate, loving relationship with someone without being trapped in the ruin of the world and the

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[55] §5 Est igitur, sponsa mea, dilecta mea, seculum istum positum in ruina.

carnality of sexuality. The comfort, edification, and support that one partner can give another may contribute as much to the salvation of both as solitude and self-abnegation contribute to the salvation of the individual.

Spica: The grain emerges

After fleeing from his bride and home, Alexis goes to the seashore and boards a ship bound for the Near East. The precise itinerary followed by the saint varies from version to version.[56] Regardless of the precise identification of the city, however, once Alexis arrives there, he enters the second stage of his life, in which, as Peter Damian describes, the saint's holiness first emerges as a "spica," the head of a plant. This holiness corresponds perfectly to the monastic model of asceticism, the renunciation of possessions, and the exclusive contemplation of God. First, the saint sells all of his possessions, gives the money to the poor, and takes his place among the beggars sitting outside of a church. Like the earliest monks, Alexis understands Jesus' words to the young rich man in the Gospel as a command addressed to him personally, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21, cf. Mark 10:21).

Alexis has left everything to follow God, and for now this means living anonymously as a beggar in Syria. An encounter between the saint and his father's servants dramatizes the young man's transformation from aristocrat to pauper. The

[56] In the Roman *Vita*, he arrives first in Laodicea and then travels to Edessa in Syria. In the Spanish *Vita*, Laodicea is described as an "island," and "Herea" is a city on the island in which Alexis settles. Mölk explains the strange geography of the Spanish scribe by noting that the region of northern Mesopotamia in which "Herea", or ar-Ruha, is found is actually called the "Island" by Arab geographers and historians ("Die älteste Alexiusvita" 297).

servants find Alexis among the beggars outside the church, but his appearance is so changed that they do not recognize him, and the saint praises God because he has been humiliated to the point of accepting alms from his own servants. The details of this encounter differ from version to version, and these differences confirm the characterization of Alexis and his family that have begun to emerge from each story.

In the Roman *Vita*, the whole encounter is described quite simply. When Alexis turns up missing in Rome, his father sends his servants all over the known world in search of him. Some of them come to Edessa, and their encounter with the saint is recounted in one brief sentence.[57] When the servants return, they simply say that they did not find him. At this news, Alexis's mother puts on sackcloth and says she will mourn until she finds out what happened to her son, and the bride says that, like a turtle dove, she will never take a new husband but instead will stay with her in-laws until she knows what became of her "dulcissimo conjuge" (§3-4).

The Spanish *Vita* offers an alternative motivation for the servants' mission. Rather than being sent out to find Alexis, here the servants are sent to make donations to monasteries, churches, and poor people all over the world to encourage them to pray to God that Alexis may return to his family (§8). Whereas in the other versions, the servants' generosity towards Alexis is an incidental side effect of their mission, here it is the very reason they were sent. Once again, the Spanish *Vita* shows itself more sympathetic to Alexis's parents than the Roman version. In their desire for their son, they unknowingly imitate his generosity to the poor. The saint could not stay with them

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[57] §3 Quorum aliqui, dum venissent Edessam, viderunt eum inter ceteros pauperes sedentem: & dantes [ei] eleemosynam, discesserunt, quia non cognoverunt eum.

and work for their salvation, but in leaving he encourages them along the path to holiness.

After his father's servants abandon their search, Alexis settles into a life of poverty and self-abnegation. The saint has achieved his goal of total dedication to God, and if allowed to follow his own heart, he would have lived out the rest of his life on that spot. This is an important juncture in the *Life* from both a narrative and a more specifically hagiographic perspective. In order for the narrative of his *Life* to continue, something external must come and force Alexis out of his inactivity. It is significant that what moves Alexis is a divine voice. Alexis is the one who decides to flee from his family in order to be closer to God, but once that relationship has been established, it is God who directs the further course of the saint's life. The contrast between Alexis's passivity and God's initiative are the narrative embodiment of the total subservience of the saint's will to God's. But why does God will for the saint to leave Syria? From a hagiographic perspective, the *Life of Saint Alexis* could not exist as a work of hagiography if the saint died alone and unrecognized in Syria. Like all solitary saints, Alexis must be found and identified by another person so that the edifying and inspiring story of his life can be made known to the community of believers.[58] Even in the oldest versions of the Man of God legend in which the protagonist never returns to his family home, the saint is still obliged to reveal his identity and his story to the sacristan of the church in front of which he begs (*La Légende syriaque de saint Alexis* 6-9). Here, however, the revelation of Alexis's holiness to the sacristan in Edessa does not

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[58] The other two saints I will study in this dissertation, the pope Saint Gregory and Mary the Egyptian, offer two other examples of this phenomenon.

immediately precede his death; instead, it leads to his return to Rome. Unlike the anonymous Man of God, Saint Alexis is defined by his return to the very family that he left. This return has very significant implications for the tension between the single-minded pursuit of personal salvation and the charitable desire to save others.

In all of the four versions examined here, the Virgin Mary tells a cleric who serves in the church to go and get the "man of God" and bring him into the church.[59] At first the cleric does not know who Mary is talking about, but after being given more precise indications he realizes that it is Alexis. Having fled the worldly honor and entanglement of an aristocratic life, Alexis is now threatened with the honor of being venerated as a saint while still alive. He flees again, hoping to reach Tarsus in the Roman *Vita* and "distant, unknown, and unheard of regions" in the Spanish version.[60] Instead a storm blows his ship to Rome. Using Peter Damian's scriptural metaphor, Alexis's holiness began to appear in the Near East like grain emerging from a stalk, but in order to reach full maturity, the saint must face one last test. He has fled from family and wealth and lived in poverty in a foreign land, but now he must persevere in his ascetic path in plain sight of the opulence, the devoted parents, and the loving wife he abandoned.

Both Latin texts, however, also refer to the fact that by returning, Alexis recreates his relationship with his family as a bond of Christian charity. Unlike the Old French *Vies*, which describe the storm as a "fact" of nature that the reader is free to interpret as a

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[59] *L* 166-190, *S* 515-581, Roman §4-5, Spanish §9-11. In the Roman *Vita* and the two Old French *Vies*, Mary speaks through an "image," whereas in the Spanish *Vita* she appears to the cleric in a dream, "per visionem noctis."

[60] "…ad incognitas et inauditas longeque divisas regiones" (§11) The Spanish *Vita* actually gives a different reason for Alexis's departure from Syria. Rather than fleeing the honor and veneration of the people of the city, Alexis fears that now that he has been recognized his father will be able to find him, "Quum igitur uideret sanctissimus puer declaratum se esse, [timebat] ne pater illius angosceret…"

work of divine providence or not, the Latin *Vitae* make God's responsibility for this turn of events explicit, and in the Spanish *Vita*, the saint himself realizes that "the Lord had led him there because of his parents' prayers."[61] In both *Vitae*, Alexis makes an active decision to return to his family. "As the Lord lives," he says in the Roman *Vita*, "I will not be a burden to anyone else, nor will I go anywhere else, other than in my father's house, because I will not be recognized there."[62] Since he has been transformed both inwardly and outwardly, Alexis can return to his father's house without fear of being recognized and dragged back into the secular world against his will or of succumbing to the temptation of seeing the food, honor, and human affection that could be his if he asked. Confirmed in his ascetic spirit and submission to God and with a changed appearance, Alexis can receive the food and support naturally due from a father to his son as a free act of Christian charity.

Plenum frumentum: living in the world in solitude

The heart of the Alexis-legend can be found here in the saint's return to his father's house as an unknown beggar and his humble acceptance of the insults and abuse of his servants and the daily spectacle of his weeping parents and bride. This superhuman ability to reject his family while fully and personally aware of the pain and suffering this rejection causes has led many contemporary readers to see Alexis as "necessarily and essentially inhumane" (Cartlidge 94). For Peter Damian, however, this

[61] "…quod Dominus adduxerat eum pro deprecatione parentum suorum" (§11)

[62] "Vivit Dominus, quia alicui onerosus non ero, neque alibi ibo, nisi in domum patris mei, quia cognitus illic non ero" (§5). cf. Spanish *Vita*, "Uiuit Dominus in eternum, quia nullum alium hominem pro uictu uel uestimento deprecabor nisi tantum patrem meum. Melius ergo erit, ut a patre proprio elemosinam accipiam quam ab extraneis atque incognitis" (§11).

display of single-minded asceticism is a glorious new kind of martyrdom and this so-called inhumanity is a laudable achievement. Whereas it is “the armed hand of an executioner” that tortures a martyr, Alexis is more seriously punished by the “daily sight of his parents’ *pietas*.” The martyr must confront the “terrible rage of the judge,” but Alexis is assaulted by the “meek and lovely face of his wife.”[63] The fact that Alexis can even resist the sight of his pious, affectionate, and suffering family is an index of his incredible devotion to a certain notion of God. His return to Rome is now an opportunity for his example to transform and redeem the parents and wife he had left behind.

Peter Damian’s praise for Alexis’s ability to withstand human affection is certainly a valid way to interpret the Alexis-legend, and it is the interpretation suggested by the Roman *Vita*’s brief summary of the seventeen years the saint spends on the “grabatum,” or cot that his father’s servant prepares for him at the entrance to his house. The primary focus of this account is that Alexis “persevered in the austerity of his way of life, tireless in his continual prayer, fasting, and wakefulness,” and that he put up with the insults and abuse that he received from his father’s servants, “because of his love of the Lord.”[64] No mention is made of Alexis’s family or the saint’s feelings about them. In the Roman *Vita*, Alexis’s presence in his father’s house does not establish a two-way relationship, it merely serves as a more dramatic backdrop against which his ascetic triumph appears even more astonishing. The emphasis is not on the suffering of Alexis’s

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[63] “Illos torquebat manus armata carnificum; istum gravius puniebat conspecta quotidie pietas genitorum. In martyrem quemlibet fremebat horrenda rabies judicis, hunc blanda, mitis atque venusta facies impugnabat uxoris” (col. 658D-659A).

[64] “Susceptus autem perseverabat in austeritate vitæ suæ, orationibus continuis, jejuniisque & vigiliis indefessus. Pueri quoque cœperunt deridere eum, & aquam, qua discos lavabant, super caput ejus fundebant, & multas injurias inferebant; quæ omnia homo Dei propter amorem Domini libenter sustinebat...” (§6).

parents and wife or their generosity and compassion towards the pilgrim they have welcomed into their home; it is on the saint's ability to refuse food and human companionship in the very place where people would be happiest to give them to him. In Peter Damian's eyes, this makes Alexis even more holy than the poor man Lazarus in Luke's Gospel (16:19-31). Lazarus would have loved to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table, but no one gave him anything; Alexis could not only have had scraps, but would have been given all the food he wanted, as well as wealth and all the honor of the world. The saint's refusal of the pleasure and satisfaction that would be so easy for him to obtain earns him the enthusiastic praise of the monk Damian: "O vigorous soldier of Christ! O never-defeated and most eminent warrior of the celestial army!"[65] For Damian, who describes Alexis's ascetic victory in terms of the violence of martyrdom and war, the opposition between the world and holiness could not be more total. But this is only one interpretation. It is a legitimate reading of the Roman *Vita*, but it does not represent the entire tradition of the Alexis legend, even in Latin.

The Spanish *Vita* presents Alexis's return to his family in a much different light. Rather than simply being the dramatic background against which the saint's dedication to asceticism shines out more clearly, it also provides an opportunity for a new, transformed relationship between Alexis and his family. In every version of the Alexis legend, the saint arrives in Rome and meets his father in the street. Whether because the ravages of seventeen years of fasting have really changed Alexis's features or because God clouds his eyes, the father does not recognize his son, and the saint can introduce himself to his

[65] "O strenuum Christi militem! o prorsus invictum, et nimis insignem coelestis militiae bellatorem!" (Col. 659A).

father as a pilgrim from a distant land and beg him for hospitality without risking being discovered.

This paradox of Alexis's presence in Rome as a beggar and his father's references to him as his missing son is inherent to the structure of the *Life*, but it is also made explicit by the characters themselves. In the Roman *Vita* the reference is rather obscure: when Alexis asks his father for hospitality, he concludes with a promise that if Euphemian welcomes him into his home, "God will bless [his] years and will have mercy on the one [he] has in foreign lands."[66] The Spanish *Vita* is much more explicit about the connection between the compassion Euphemian has on Alexis the anonymous beggar and the love he has for Alexis his son. Alexis says clearly, "I beg you, my lord, to bring me into your home, if the Lord is to show you in this present life your son, for whom you suffer such tribulation."[67] The irony could not be stronger. Euphemian, who had sent his servants to give alms to the poor and makes donations to churches all over the world, understands these words to mean that if he has compassion on this unknown man, God may let him someday see his son, who is now in some foreign land. The truth is that this man *is* his son. Euphemian is seeing him right now, and if he has mercy on him and welcomes him into his home, he will even be able to recognize him later.

In the Spanish *Vita*, Alexis's return to his family does not just provide a greater, more dramatic ascetic challenge for the future saint; it also offers an opportunity for Christian charity for his family. By reentering the world with a new identity, Alexis finds

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[66] "…ut Deus benedicat annos tuos, & ei, quem habes in peregre, misereatur" (§5).

[67] "Sed obsecro, domine mi, ut introducas me ad domum tuam, si in hac presenti vita demonstret tibi Dominus filium tuum, per quem tantas tribulationes sustines" (§12).

a compromise between the pursuit of personal salvation and the compassionate desire to help other people be saved. The anonymity he has gained through seventeen years of fasting and exile allows him to be present to his family as an example of asceticism and humility and the object of charity without being implicated in the ruin of the secular world. Alexis does not veer from the path that God has set out for him. He does not seek comfort in material wealth, food, or human companionship. But the very fact that this epic struggle for holiness is occurring in the household Alexis abandoned means that it can have the side effect of moving the saint's family along the path to salvation as well. This dynamic is implicit in every version of the Alexis-legend in which the saint returns to his family; the Spanish *Vita*, however, makes it an important part of the narrative. In her longing for Alexis, his mother "served the poor daily," and his wife "remained a virgin" (§15). Alexis's mother, father, and wife are not portrayed as the equivalent of pagan tormenters, torturing the saint with their human affection, they are described as fellow Christians who are also struggling to be saved.

The Spanish *Vita* also softens the superhuman or inhuman indifference that has made Alexis so repugnant to contemporary readers like Winkler. In the Roman version no mention is made of the parents' suffering after Alexis's return, and the saint's feelings towards his mother, father, and wife are also passed over in silence. But in the Spanish *Vita* we read, "when the blessed young man heard this and saw the pain felt by his father because of his longing for his son, he could not hold back his tears."[68] Everyone around him thinks he is weeping because of his poverty and misery, but the ascetic champion

[68] "Beatissimus autem puer audiens haec et considerans dolorem patris pro desidero filii non poterat a lacrimis se continere" (§14).

does not shed tears at his own suffering; he has compassion for the suffering of others. Certainly, this does not mean that Alexis is going to comfort his parents by revealing his identity and reentering the secular world; it means that the saint's asceticism is not the product of cold indifference and a superhuman immunity to pain and hunger, but a willingness to endure the suffering caused by human frailty. Alexis's return to his family as an anonymous beggar is the center of his *Life*, both thematically and narratively, and the different interpretations of this scene given by the Roman and Spanish *Vitae* demonstrate how the Alexis-legend could be reworked to respond to and question different religious perspectives.

Statim mittit falcem, quia venit tempus messis: death and salvation

The climax of Alexis's *Life* actually comes right after his death, when his identity is finally revealed through a combination of the saint's initiative and divine intervention. As Peter Damian writes, this is the time of the harvest. Like fully ripened grain, Alexis is cut down, but according to the saint's life, his death is not a tragedy. His soul is taken to paradise the way grain is taken to the barn, and there it can serve the purpose for which it was planted. It is only after the saint's death that his identity is revealed to his family and the people of Rome, and it is only then that he can become the example, inspiration, and object of veneration that God intends him to be. By keeping his identity hidden during his life, Alexis never has to deal with the demands of his family or even the honor and fame of being known as a holy man which caused him to flee from Syria. He can persevere in his humility until he has achieved his ultimate goal, eternal salvation. Once that has been assured, then his body and story can be revered and honored.

There are two major components to Alexis's death and its aftermath. First there is the revelation of the saint's identity, and second there is the contrast between the crowd's reaction to his death and the family's. Alexis's identity is revealed through the cooperation of the saint's actions and a celestial voice. The Spanish and Roman *Vitae* do not differ substantially in the way they recount this episode, but they do give significantly different interpretations of it. Feeling that the end of his life is near, Alexis asks for a pen and parchment from the servant whom his father assigned to watch over him, and he writes out who he is and how he has lived. No explanation for this is given in the Roman *Vita*, but in the Spanish version it is directly attributed to the saint's concern for his

family: “And he wrote everything and made it known to his parents, so they would recognize him and feel no more sadness about him from that time on.”[69] There could be no clearer indication that in this version, at least, Alexis is not cold and unfeeling. He recognizes the pain his flight has caused and hopes to put an end to it by revealing himself to his family, even if the risk of being drawn back into the secular world was too great for him to have done so while he was still alive. Alexis has chosen one good – the freedom to dedicate himself to prayer and fasting offered by anonymity – over another – the consolation of his family’s grief. It is only after death that the two can be reconciled.

Alexis will not only be recognized by this family. As a saint, his example and his intercession are offered to the whole city and beyond. Just after Alexis’s death, a celestial voice speaks in a church after Mass and tells the faithful gathered there to go and find the Man of God, indicating precisely that he is to be found in Euphemian’s house. The people of Rome, including the Pope and the two emperors, all run there, but Euphemian denies knowing anyone who fits the description of “man of God.” It is the servant who took care of Alexis and observed his humility and piety who realizes that the anonymous pilgrim is the one they are searching for. They all gather around the saint’s body, which, still unrecognized, holds the letter tightly in its hand; only after prayer and supplication can the pope take this letter and have it read.

Despite Alexis’s hope that the letter would put an end to his family’s sadness, the revelation of his identity and story actually causes his family to lament his death and bewail the fact that he had lived among them but never made himself known. The

[69] “Et scripsit omnia notumque fecit parentibus, ut agnoscerent eum et de ipsa hora non haberent tristitiam pro illo” (§17).

content of their *planctus* is remarkably similar in both Latin versions. Euphemian complains that he has lost the one he had hoped would care for him in his old age. The saint's mother, like many modern critics, is astonished that her son could have seen his parents' weeping and suffering and not revealed himself to them. Alexis's wife declares that she is now a widow, as she had feared she would be. In the Spanish *Vita*, she asks the people of Rome to weep with her and gives a simple but significant reason for this request, "weep with me and help me with your prayers, that I may be united with him in the eternal life."[70] The Roman *Vita* is more emphatic in its presentation of the family's suffering, and this increases the tension and the drama of Alexis's choice to remain faithful to the path of humility, poverty, and exclusive devotion to God. The Spanish *Vita,* on the other hand, hints at the possibility that Alexis's bride's devotion to her husband may actually lead to her salvation as well.

Moved by this pathetic scene, the people of Rome join Alexis's family in mourning. In the Roman *Vita* this mourning quickly passes, however, and the story concludes with a description of the miraculous healing power of the saint's body and how it was placed in an ornate casket and buried in the Church of Saint Boniface on the fourteenth of July. Alexis's family disappears from the story; they have been left weeping and lamenting their loss, frozen in an icon of the incompatibility of secular values and holiness. After the saint's death and the confirmation of his holiness, he is reduced to an object; the only relationship that matters is the people's relationship with his relics. In contrast with the family's weeping "the people rejoiced and gave thanks to

[70] "…flete mecum et adiuuate me in orationibus uestris, ut illi coniugar in uita eterna" (§21).

the Lord because he deigned to give them such help, through whom anyone who prayed with sincere intention would doubtlessly obtain their petition."[71] Alexis's relationship with his family is the backdrop for his incredible holiness, which in turn is a source of miraculous, concrete salvation for the people of Rome, both those who appear in the narrative and those who read or listen to it. Alexis is a talisman, a source of healing and comfort to those who invoke him.

No miraculous healings or guarantees that the saint will answer prayers appear in the Spanish *Vita*. It is the fact that Euphemian's son has been found in his own home that is called "tam magnum miraculum," and the story concludes with the fate of Alexis's parents rather than the joy of the crowds. The saint's parents "sold all that they had and gave it to the poor and to monasteries, and they converted to the Lord, believing without a doubt that if they persevered and endured passing tribulations they would come to eternal joy." And, according to the narrator, their faith was rewarded: "after a short while they left this light and came to Christ."[72] The Spanish *Life of Saint Alexis* ends with the conversion and salvation of the saint's family. His return to them offers more than just a dramatic setting for his ascetic victory; it offers an example and an inspiration for his parents to change their lives and travel on the path to holiness themselves. To use Peter Damian's imagery, he does not go out into the raging storm to pull his family from the shipwreck. In the safety of his anonymity, he shines out as an example of holiness,

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[71] "Tunc populi jocundantes, maximas Domino gratias agebant, qui tale populo suo conferre dignatus est subsidium, per quod omnis quicumque sincera mentis intentione deprecatus fuerit, petitionis effectum sine dubio consequatur..." (§11).

[72] "Parentes uero eius uendiderunt omnia, que habebant, et distribuerunt pauperibus, uel monasteriis et conuersi sunt ad Dominum credentes sine dubio, quod perseuerantes atque temporales tribulations sustinentes ad gaudia eterna perueniant…post non multum tempus migrauerunt ex hac luce et perrexerunt ad Christum" (§23).

inspiring his family to imitate his life and join him on the shore. There is no rehabilitation of secular values in the Spanish *Vita*, nor is there any suggestion that a lay person can achieve holiness in the secular world. Like monks and like Alexis, the family has to "sell all that they have and give it to the poor" in order to be saved. Only a radical conversion and a complete break with the secular world allow them to believe "sine dubio" that they will arrive at eternal glory.

The Spanish and Roman *Vitae* both respond to the central question of the religious horizon of expectations of the tenth and eleventh centuries: how can a person assure his or her salvation? They both offer the same answer: the rejection of material possessions, earthly glory, and the values and relationships of the secular world. These are the same things that a monk has to leave behind to enter the monastery. These two Latin versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* both confirm the monastic, ascetic model of holiness that was promoted by the reformers of the eleventh century. Nonetheless, the Spanish and Roman *Vitae* do differ from one another in an important way. Whereas the saint's family serves mainly to heighten the drama in the Roman *Vita*, in the Spanish *Vita* they are held up as examples of what it means to take the saint's lesson to heart and imitate him on his path to holiness. The answer to the question of how can a person be saved is the same, but in the Spanish version it is extended to the family in addition to the saint. This corresponds to an important development in the context of the religious reforms of the eleventh century. The success and spread of the monastic model of holiness among the clergy was accompanied by an increasing awareness of lay people that they, too, could aspire to perfection. Otherwise the only way for lay people to

believe "sine dubio" that they would be saved was to abandon their families and the secular world and embrace a life of solitude, prayer, and fasting. The conclusions to the Roman and Spanish *Vitae* demonstrate two different visions of the purpose of a saint. In the Roman *Vita*, the saint is above all a talisman and a relic. His ability to persevere in asceticism even in sight of his family is a sign of how holy he is and therefore how effective his intercession will be after his death. The reader is invited to pray to Alexis, not imitate him. In the Spanish *Vita*, however, Alexis's holy life is a concrete example for his family, who follow him in abandoning their wealth and station. The reader can imitate them in imitating the saint. He or she does not have to match Alexis's self-imposed exile, his years of begging, or the distress he felt at living among his own family without being able to reveal himself to them.

Christina of Markyate: flight from marriage

As we have seen, a person who, like Alexis, left their families and entered the religious life was Christina of Markyate. Almost all of what is known about Christina's life comes from a Latin biography entitled *De S. Theodora, Virgine, quae et Christina dicitur* written by an anonymous author who was apparently a personal acquaintance of Christina's (Tablot 5-10). As the title of the *Vita* indicates, this text is intended to be a saint's life, and the story it tells may owe as much to the conventions of hagiographic writing and models of sainthood as it does to the actual events of Christina's life.[73]

Nevertheless, unless its author fabricated major episodes in the life of a woman whom some people in his audience probably knew personally, it is reasonable to assume that the *Vita* offers a generally accurate account of the experiences of a real twelfth-century Englishwoman, a woman who was connected to the *Life of Saint Alexis* in some surprising ways. First of all, like Alexis, Christina fled from marriage, preferring to follow the surer path to salvation offered by virginity than be bound to the earthly life of the world. Second, it is extremely likely that the *L* version of the *Life of Saint Alexis* was included in the St Albans Psalter specifically as a message to Christina.[74]

Despite the many circumstantial differences between her experience and the saint's, Christina and Alexis are alike in one very important way. They both chose to flee from their families and spouses in order to dedicate themselves completely to God and

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[73] Samuel Fanous points out the hagiographic patterning of Christina's biography and cautions against taking the author's claims to authenticity and the text's highly autobiographic flavor at face value ("Christina of Markyate and the Double Crown" 53).

[74] In 1959, Talbot claimed that *Life of Saint Alexis* "mirrors exactly the experiences of Christine" and that it is "a kind of *pièce justificative* of her action in leaving her husband and retiring to the hermitage." Indeed Talbot argued that these parallels were the only way to explain the presence of the Old French *Vie* in the Latin psalter (26). Even more recent scholars like Mario Perugi have accepted this claim (32).

thereby assure their salvation. Both Christina and Alexis left the storm-tossed sea of the secular world and took refuge on the shore of virginity, asceticism, and solitude, and as such, they are both powerful examples of the monastic model of Christianity espoused by Peter Damian.

Christina's conflict with her family and the clergymen who tried to force her to accept marriage offers an interesting counterpoint to Alexis's experience of flight. First of all, at a very young age, Christina is convinced by a canon name Sueno that virginity is far superior to marriage, and she acts on this conviction by secretly vowing to God that she will preserve her virginity forever (*De S. Christina* §3-4). Ironically enough, the first man to put this vow to the test was not a young layman, but the bishop of Durham, Ralph Flambard, a high-ranking English clergyman who had already had several children with Christina's aunt Alverna (§5-6). The tension between the monastic ideal of holiness and secular values did not just separate the clergy from the laity, it also divided the clergy against itself. Some clerics, like the proponents of the Gregorian reform, believed that celibacy was an essential aspect of the radical conversion required of those who entered the priesthood. Others, like Ralph Flamstead, saw ecclesiastic office as just one of the career paths available to an ambitious man looking for honor, rents, and influence. Bishop Flamstead literally tried to seduce Christina in her own home and with the tacit approval of her parents, who benefited from the bishop's favor because of his relationship with their sister. Thanks to her quick wit and strong will, Christina was able to escape from the bishop and preserve her virginity, but Flamstead, enraged at the insult her refusal represented, determined to avenge himself "by depriving Christina of her

virginity, either by himself or by someone else."[75] To this end he arranged for Christina to be betrothed to a young Anglo-Saxon nobleman named Burthred.

Succumbing to the pressure of her family and friends, Christina initially agreed to the betrothal, but soon repented and renewed her determination to preserve her virginity at all costs.[76] Unfortunately, in Christina's case this was not as simple as saying she had made a mistake and now wanted to enter a convent instead of marrying. Even though she was not yet technically married, the betrothal ceremony took place in a church and was blessed by a priest, and Christina did makes vows that could be considered binding. As Thomas Head explains in "The Marriages of Christina", the common tradition and ecclesiastic law of twelfth-century England both agreed that once a marriage was consummated by sexual intercourse it was complete and indissoluble; whether marriage was already complete at the moment of betrothal, however, was a source of "considerable debate in twelfth-century ecclesiastical circles" (121, 125-130). The parallels and differences with Alexis's situation are instructive. In the Roman *Vita*, Alexis never consents to his own marriage, and his wife is silent when he leaves her. Spanish *Vita* deals with the question of consent more openly: Alexis agrees to marry, and his bride consents to his departure. But in either case, there is nothing that physically restrains Alexis from leaving. Christina, on the other hand, had to resist marriage on two fronts.

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[75] "Set nullo alio modo se ultum iri credidit quam ut vel per se vel per alium aufferet Christine florem pudicicie" (§6).

[76] The author of the *Vita* makes it seem like Christina's family lured her into a church and surprised her with the betrothal ceremony, "Postea vero quadam die congregati ad ecclesiam aggressi sunt simul omnes ex improviso puellam…tot impinguentibus lingua concessit. et eadem hora Burthredus illam in coniugem sibi desponavit" (§7).

Whereas Alexis's parents are described as upright and pious, the author of Christina's life writes that her parents actively conspired to make their daughter accept marriage, going as far as keeping her confined at home, barring her from seeing any religious men, and forcing her to associate with "people given to jesting, boasting, worldly amusement" (§8). They even allowed Burthred into Christina's bedchamber at night in the hope that he could consummate the marriage by seduction or force. The first time this happened Christina tried to convince the young man to live with her chastely, recounting "in detail the story of Saint Cecilia and her husband Valerian," two early Christian martyrs who "were accounted worthy to receive crowns of unsullied chastity from the hands of an angel."[77] Burthred was dissuaded for one evening, but after being mocked and insulted by his friends and Christina's parents, he was sent to take Christina's virginity two more times. Due to her wit and determination, Christina was able to evade him each time, and eventually she succeeded in escaping her parents' custody all together, but even then she had to remain in hiding until her betrothal was officially dissolved.

Christina not only had to resist her parents, she also had to resist a series of all-too-worldly clerics who tried to convince her that her marriage was binding. In a scene reminiscent of Alexis's parents' arguments in favor of marriage in the Spanish *Vita*, Christina's mother and father bring her to the prior of the local chapter of canons, Fredebertus, in order to convince her that it was her religious obligation to honor the betrothal she had contracted. Fredebertus finds ample scriptural support for the parents'

[77] "Historiam ordine retexuit illi beate Cecilie et sponsi sui Valerani. qualiter illibate pudicicie coronas eciam morituri meruerunt accipere de manu angeli"(§10).

case. He cites Jesus' command that "what God has joined together, no man should put asunder," as well as Paul's teaching that "a woman has no power over her own body, but the husband," and the fourth of the ten commandments, "obey your parents and show them respect."[78] Christina professes to be ignorant of these scriptures and counters that she is not in fact married, because the vow of betrothal forced on her against her will is invalidated by her previous vow of virginity, "Know that from my infancy I have chosen chastity and have vowed to Christ that I would remain a virgin."[79]

The question of whether Christina is bound to Burthred depends on whether the vow of chastity she made as a child supersedes the vow of betrothal her parents coerced her to make. Just as in the Spanish *Vita Alexii*, there is a conflict here between two visions of religion, one which supports and validates the prevailing social order and the other which demands a personal and anti-social conversion. In the Spanish *Vita*, this conflict is presented as the gradual opposition between something good and something better. The saint's acquiescence to his parents' arguments for marriage, as well as his parents' piety and eventual conversion and salvation all indicate that the "lay" religion and morality they espouse is good, even if it is not in and of itself a guarantee of salvation. Peter Damian says as much at the beginning of his sermon on Alexis's feast day. The saint's mother and father live the "chaste, sober, and honest life" that their "order requires," but according to Damian, this does not mean they will be saved, it

[78] "Quos Deus coniunxit homo non separet…Mulier sui corporis potestatem non habet. sed vir…Et scimus preceptum filiis obedire parentibus: et honorem deferre" (§15).
[79] "Quantocius scitote quod elegerim ab infancia castitatem et voverim Christo me permansuram virginem" (§16).

means they will be able to produce "offspring worthy of God."[80] That offspring, whether understood literarily or allegorically, will be able to work for the parents' salvation.

The opposition in Christina's *Vita* is much more diametrical. As Samuel Fanous remarks, Christina's relationship with her family and the clerics who try to seduce her and convince her to marry is modeled after the diametrical opposition between a martyr and her pagan foes. Like a pagan ruler who tries to force a young Christian to sacrifice to his gods, Christina's parents first try to make their daughter submit in a match of wills and then they torture and humiliate her, even resorting to intoxication and magic potions to break their daughter's resolve. The bishop of Durham Ralph Flambard who tries to seduce Christina, the prior of Huntington Fredebertus who quotes Scripture to convince her to marry, and the bishop of Lincoln Robert Bloet who accepts her parents' bribes to rule against her in an ecclesiastic court are described in terms similar to the pagan judges and philosophers who are called in to confound a virgin martyr like Katherine of Alexandria ("Christina and the Double Crown" 53-63).

More than the *Life of Saint Alexis*, Christina's *Vita* portrays a vision of Christianity in which the dividing line between the saved and the damned does not run between the baptized and the un-baptized, or even between monastic and secular values, but between those who are willing to devote themselves unconditionally and totally to God and those who contaminate religion with secular values. This is precisely the vision promoted by the most fervent advocates of the Gregorian Reform, who found enemies

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[80] Damian summarizes Alexis's parents' qualities as a recommendation for the lay people in his audience, "pietatis ac misericordiae studiis vigilanter insistite, necessaria fratribus penuria laborantibus subsidia ministrare, castam, sobriam et honestam vitam, in quantum vester ordo dictat, exhibere contendite, ut ad conservandum posteritatis vestrae genus, dignam Deo valeatis sobolem procreare" (col. 0653B).

both among the laity who interfered with the appointment of bishops and abbots and the clergy who kept concubines like Ralph Flamstead and accepted bribes like Robert Bloet. Christina's flight from her family is not portrayed in terms of the tension between renouncing the world to save oneself and staying to work for the salvation of others; it is depicted as the implacable struggle between a young woman's desire for union with God and her family's attempts literally to drag her into the corruption of the secular world. As Cartlidge observes, Alexis's parents' righteousness and his bride's beauty and goodness are an index of how great a sacrifice he makes in leaving them (94). Christina struggles with her parents, her fiancé, and the clerics who oppose her. She has to confound them with her wisdom, resist them with prayer and resolve, sustain their physical abuse, and finally break out of their confinement and flee. Their wickedness and veniality is an index of Christina's comparative holiness and the dramatic setting for her resistance and "swashbuckling and romantic" escape.[81]

The Roman and Spanish *Vitae* and the *Vita Christinae* demonstrate that the opposition between asceticism and the world so important to the monastic model of holiness was understood and portrayed in very different ways between the tenth and twelfth centuries. This diversity is clearly not the result of a steady evolution towards more sympathy for the secular world. The earliest text, the Spanish *Vita*, presents the most nuanced and sympathetic interpretation of this tension. Alexis himself weeps to see his family's suffering, and they are moved by their son's example, sell all of their

[81] C. Stephen Jaeger notes that the account of Christina's escape from her parents, which is disproportionately long and detailed compared to the rest of the *Vita*, contains "a furtively arranged meeting, horses at dawn, a secret sign of recognition, a disguise, a dramatic, unexplained delay, an agile leap into the saddle, a desperate race to safety where the 'beloved' waits, life, love and freedom hanging in the balance" ("The Loves of Christina" 103-104).

possessions, and join him in paradise. The later Roman *Vita* is not as overtly sympathetic to the saint's family; nonetheless, when Peter Damian compares the mother, father, and wife in the Roman *Vita* to the pagan persecutors of a martyr, he does not claim that they are as wicked as pagans. Instead he claims that the parents' "pietas" and the "alluring, meek, and lovely" face of the wife are actually more threatening than the "armed hands" and "terrible rage" of torturers and judges. Less overtly hostile to the secular world than Christina's *Vita*, the Roman *Life of Saint Alexis* is perhaps more condemning. The very things that the world considers good – familial affection, beauty, and kindness – are a threat to the holy man who must dedicate himself exclusively to God.

Both of these perspectives are different from the almost caricatured portrayal of worldly clerics and selfish, violent parents given by the twelfth-century *Vita Christinae*. The *Life of Saint Alexis* might have been read by Christina of Markyate as a "pièce justificative" for her flight from her marriage, but her own experience of overt hostility and violence is not representative of the way the Alexis legend was understood by Latin hagiographers in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Even at the height of the Gregorian Reform and even when read by a passionate advocate of monasticism like Peter Damian, the Latin versions *Life of Saint Alexis* offer a subtle and complex reading of the tension between personal salvation and pastoral ministry, monasticism and the world, and contemplation and charity.

The parallels and differences between the *Vita Christinae'*s account of a young woman's flight from her controlling parents, a lustful bishop, and an easily-evaded fiancé and the *Vitae*'s portrayal of Alexis's relationship with his family provide an interesting

prospective on the relationship between history and literature. In this case, it is the "historical" text that makes a more diametrical distinction between good and evil than the literary one. Is this because Christina's parents, Bishop Flamstead, and Burthred really behaved the way they are portrayed in the *Vita*, or because the author wanted to emphasis his protagonist's comparative holiness or simply tell an engaging and entertaining story? In the absence of other historical evidence, there is no way to know for sure, but there is also no reason to discount the text just because it conforms to hagiographic models. It is very likely that there were lustful and vengeful bishops who tried to seduce young women in the early twelfth century, and it is not unreasonable to imagine that there were parents who were complicit in those bishops' machinations in exchange for money or influence. They of course did not see themselves as the equivalent of the pagan persecutors of early Christian martyrs, but Christina may very well have understood her situation in those terms. It is not just writers who understood and portrayed events according to the schemas they found in literature, people also interpreted their lives in light of the narratives they had read or heard. Read in light of one another, the Spanish and Roman *Vitae Alexii* and the *Vita* of Christina of Markyate reveal that there were multiple ways of understanding the relationship between secular and monastic values and the tension between the self and others in both medieval life and literature. The Old French versions of the Alexis-legend reveal the persistence and evolution of these issues in a different linguistic and cultural context.

Part 2

"An ices secle nen at parfait amor"[82]

The perspectives on the Alexis-legend gained by examining the case of Christina of Markyate are also relevant to the French versions of the legend that were composed as early as the eleventh century. Both of the *Vitae* read in the previous section are important to understanding the Old French *Vies* because, as Mario Perugi argues, the model for the original Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis* was probably a Latin text containing features of both the Roman and Spanish versions. The *Vie de Saint Alexis*, however, is not the sum of its Latin models: the transposition of the Alexis-legend into the vernacular literary and cultural context leads to new questions and responses in addition to those raised in Latin.

The first and most obvious feature of the Old French *Chanson* and *Roumans* that distinguishes them from the Spanish and Roman *Vitae* is their poetic form.[83] Until the end of the twelfth century, all Old French literature, whether *chanson de geste*, romance, or hagiography, was written in verse. The poetic form was what gave vernacular literature the distance from regular, spoken discourse that it needed to be considered worthy of being recorded in writing.[84] Both the *Chanson* and the *Roumans* are written in decasyllabic lines grouped in stanzas that share the same assonance. In the *Chanson* all

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[82] This phrase is spoken by Alexis as he takes leave of his wife in the *L* version of his *Vie* (v. 68).
[83] There were certainly poetic versions of the Alexis-legend in Latin and prose versions in French. The most well-known Latin verse account of the Alexis-legend is the "Pater Deus ingenite" found in the Codex Vaticanus Palatinus 828 and edited by Erwin Assman, "Ein rhythmisches Gedicht auf den heiligen Alexius." Neil Cartlidge mentions the prose *Life of Saint Alexis* found in Paris BN fr. 1534 and edited by G.C. Keidel as *An Old French Prose Version of 'La Vie de Saint Alexis.'*
[84] Paul Zumthor discusses the connection between verse and the invention of a "monumental" register separate from the normal spoken word as the key to the creation of Old French "literature" even before it was committed to writing in *Langue et techniques poétiques à l'époque romane* (33-34).

of these stanzas are five lines long, while in the *Roumans* they are more appropriately called "*laisses*" because, like the building-blocks of a *chanson de geste* such as the *Song of Roland*, they vary in length from two to forty-five lines in the case of *S*. This flexibility allows the *S*-poet to pass over certain episodes of the story quickly while substantially expanding others. In both the *Chanson* and the *Roumans*, the poetic form highlights the aesthetic dimension of the text's language itself. It is not just the narrative content of the story that is significant, but the way that content is communicated. This is true of all texts, especially works of literature, but it is all the more apparent in poetic texts.

The *Chanson* and the *Roumans* respond to many of the same questions as the Roman and Spanish *Vitae*. They are concerned with the opposition and tension between the spirit and the world, secular values and the monastic model of holiness, the need to seek absolute solitude to assure one's own salvation, and the desire to remain in relationship with other people to help them work for their salvation. Despite being on the same side of the vernacular-Latin divide, the *Chanson* and the *Roumans* give quite different interpretations of the Alexis-legend. In order to understand how this occurs, I will look at the way the *Chanson* and the *Roumans* present the four stages in Alexis's journey to sainthood: the first growth of the *herba* in his refusal of marriage, the development of the *spica* during his exile in Syria, the emergence of the *plenum frumentum* back in Rome, and finally the harvest of his death and burial.

Wedding and flight

Not surprisingly, the description of Alexis's marriage is more secular in these two Old French *Vies* than in either the Roman or the Spanish *Vita* (Cartlidge 81-82). The authors of the vernacular text display more familiarity with the secular culture whose values their protagonist rejects. Euphemian's aspiration for his son to marry is explicitly connected to his desire to see the continuation of his family line assured before he dies. "Quant veit li pedre que mais n'avrat amfant," the narrator explains in the *Chanson*, "Dunc se purpenset del secle en avant: / Or volt que prenget moyler a sun vivant" (36, 38-39; cf. *S* 82-86). There is no religious foundation for this decision, nor is there any mention of Alexis's thoughts on the matter. The marriage is described as a purely secular affair, a transaction made between two aristocratic fathers to guarantee the future of their lineage, "Ansemble an unt li dui pedre parlé / Pur lur amfanz cum volent assembler" (L 44-45; cf. S 92-93). When describing the wedding ceremony itself, the *Roumans* does mention that it takes place in "el moustier saint Jehan de Latran" (96), but the *Chanson* makes no reference to a church at all.[85] The Old French *Vies* strongly contrast this secular vision of marriage with Alexis's own feelings on the matter, "Mais de cel plait ne volsist il nïent: De tut an tut ad a Deu sun talent" (L 49-50; cf. S 99-101). There is "nïent" in marriage that interests Alexis, because his desire for God is "de tut an tut." The grammatical construction itself portrays an exclusive opposition between marriage and God; it is all or nothing.

Even though the *Vies* agree almost word for word in this initial portrayal of the mutual exclusivity of marriage and holiness, their presentation of the wedding-night

[85] "Quant vint al fare, dunc le funt gentement; Danz Alexis l'espuset belament" (47-48).

conversation between Alexis and his bride is quite different. This is the most important point of divergence between these two versions of the *Life*, because it defines the role of Alexis's wife in the story and what kind of relationship she will have with the saint. In terms of the actantial terminology developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas and adopted to the *Life of Saint Alexis* by Evelyn Birge-Vitz, Alexis's bride can most obviously be defined as an *opposant*; she literarily stands in the way of Alexis's quest for sanctity ("Narrative Analysis" 142). In all four versions, Alexis overcomes the obstacle his wife represents by teaching her about the superiority of the spiritual life over the earthly one. The four versions differ, however, in their qualification of exactly what Alexis is rejecting. It is clear that he is refusing marriage as a sexual relationship and a social contract that entangles a man as husband and father in worldly affairs. But is he rejecting his bride as a person and as a fellow Christian who must work for her salvation? Is he rejecting marriage as consensual spiritual friendship in which the partners co-operate on the path to holiness?

The Old French *Chanson* agrees with the Roman *Vita* in presenting the almost inhuman Alexis and silent, passive bride so vehemently denounced by Emil Winkler at the beginning of the twentieth century (Cartlidge 81-83). But even these two versions are more nuanced, they might seem at first. The *Chanson* presents Alexis's state of mind in great detail; in fact, one third of the wedding-night scene is devoted to the saint's reaction to the sight of the bed and the bride. This erotic vision reminds Alexis of his "seinor celeste" whom he holds dearer than any earthly possession (56-58), and his thoughts are reported as direct dialogue, "E! Deus…cum fort pecét m'apresset! / Se or ne m'en fui,

mult crime que ne t'em perde" (59-60). Cartlidge understands these words to be addressed to the maiden herself and interprets them as proof of the fact that, as Petit de Joinville puts it, Alexis "veut la conquérir au ciel par violence et mériter pour elle et pour lui la réunion éternelle par la vertu d'un double sacrifice" (Cartlidge 93-94). Cartlidge and Joinville are arguing that instead of being a heartless man who values his own sense of holiness over his wife, Alexis is afraid that sin will cost them both their salvation and that it is better to leave his wife now and be reunited with her in paradise than live with her in his life and lose her in the next. This interpretation is not entirely baseless, and it certainly applies to later French versions of the *Vie* like the *Roumans*. In the *Chanson*, however, it is somewhat overstated. It is not a grammatical impossibility for the words Cartlidge cites as proof of Alexis's concern for his bride to be addressed to the girl, but the structure of the poem suggests that they are instead directed at God. At the beginning of stanza 12, Alexis sees "la pulcela" but then remembers "sun seinor celeste"; the second person singular that appears in the following direct discourse could refer to either. Either way, the Alexis portrayed in this version is not totally lacking in concern for her: he commands her to take as a spouse the one "ki nus raens de sun sanc precïus" because there is no perfect love in this world and all joy turns to sadness (66-70). It is important to note that even this laconic account of the saint's departure leaves space for a description of Alexis's internal monologue. Both *Vies* give much more emphasis to the psychology of the characters than the Latin *Vitae*.

Among the four versions of the *Life* examined here, the wedding-night scene is given the most detailed treatment in the twelfth-century French *Roumans*, where it

extends over a seventh of the total poem. Some of this length is due to the *laisses similaires* and the epic formulas that characterize this version,[86] but most of the additional lines consist of new material. First, Alexis is very explicit about his desire to save his wife as well as himself. Second, the wife does give her consent to his departure, but only after first objecting to Alexis's plans, questioning his motives, and then offering to join him in exile. Finally, rather than simply extolling the virtues of the spiritual life over the earthly one, Alexis divulges his plans to his wife in great detail. Overall, the character of Alexis's wife emerges much more clearly in the *Roumans* than in any of the other three versions; in fact, *S* is the only version which gives her a name, "Lesigne" (90, cf. Elliott 30).

From the beginning of the scene, Alexis states repeatedly that he is working for his wife's salvation as well as his own. He says to God, "Regarde moi de tes clers ex en terre, / Que ne perdés ne moi ne la pucele; / Donnés moi, sire, itel service faire / C'onques diables de nous .ii. n'ait poeste" (131-134). Alexis is not afraid that *he* will lose his bride, he is afraid that *God* will lose them both. Furthermore, Alexis's affection for his bride appears in the tender way he refers to her as "bele" (ten times), and in his comforting response to her fears that he does not love her, "Ains vous aim plus que riens que Dius fesist, / Sans cel signour qui nous forma et fist" (228-229). In addition, Alexis does not remain impassive in front of his bride's distress. When she accuses him of having a "dur cuer" for leaving her and his parents, the saint "ploura…des biaus oels de

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[86] The first two lines of laisses 15 and 16 offer a good example of this repetition and variation. Laisse 15 begins: "'Bele,' dist il, 'celui trai a garant / qui nous raienst de son precious sanc'" (143-144), whereas 16 opens with "'Bele' dist il, 'celui trai a espous / qui nous raienst de son sanc precious'" (148-149).

son chief" (253). The narrator later asks the audience to imagine that the weeping couple is standing right before their eyes, "Estes les vous belement departis; / Plorent des oels, ne se porent retenir" (283-284). This tender and pathetic treatment of the wedding-night scene is a marked departure from the *Chanson* and the Roman *Vita* and greatly exceeds even the more sympathetic account given in the Spanish *Vita*.

The bride's character can be seen in the objections she raises to Alexis's departure. Rather than immediately giving her consent or silently watching him leave, the maiden in the *Roumans* repeatedly questions Alexis's actions, obliging him to teach her another lesson about the superiority of the spiritual life over the earthly, until she is finally won over by his reasoning. The back and forth rhythm of these exchanges creates an effect not unlike the *laisses similaires* of the *Chanson de Roland*. As in the three laisses in which Olivier asks Roland to blow his horn before the battle of Roncesvalles and the three laisses after the battle in which the roles are reversed,[87] it is not clear here whether the narrator is presenting several different exchanges or one exchange viewed from several different perspectives. In either case, the repetitions and variations raise the emotional tension of the scene, highlight the bride's fears of abandonment, and give the narrator multiple opportunities to teach the audience through the saint's voice.

The saint's lesson is an expansion and elaboration of the opposition between the passing transience of the earthly world and the permanence of the spiritual. Flesh and bone will whither and fade, but God will return the just to life (184-186); the wicked, however, will be brought down "sous limo tere" (191, 202) and thrown into hell by the

[87] *La Chanson de Roland*, Ed. Ian Short, laisses 83-85, 129-131.

Evil One. Alexis's lesson to his bride, and hence the narrator's lesson to the audience, is based on the binary opposition of salvation and damnation.[88] The amplified didacticism in *S* conveys a lesson congruent with the theme of all the versions of Alexis's *Life*: it is necessary to refuse pleasure and satisfaction now in order to ensure eternal happiness in the future. Here, however, the saint's desire to make sure his bride has heard his message is much clearer than in *Roumans* or the Latin *Vitae*. Alexis is locked in conversation with his bride, repeating the same objections and the same lessons, until she and the audience have learned to take Christ as their spouse and reject the transient pleasures of the world.

S is also much more explicit than the other versions about the fact that the bride has been won over by her husband's reasoning. She says explicitly, "Sire, voir avés dit" and, perhaps with the audience in mind, "Les vos raisons doit on bien retenir" (283-284). Indeed, Lesigne is so convinced of Alexis's reasoning that in one of the most touching scenes in this version of the *Life*, she offers to join him in his exile, promising to cut her hair, take up a pilgrim's staff, and wash his clothes, assuring him that she would never demand "luxure…Ne adultére ne autre puttee" (313-314). On one hand, this is a sign of the love and affection she feels towards her husband, but on the other, it is a result of her own desire to refuse the earthly world and embrace the spiritual. Rather than simply making her lament his departure, the young woman's devotion to her husband makes her want to imitate his austere way of life. Alexis, of course, does not accept her offer to flee with him. Even if the *Roumans* poet goes much further than his predecessors in developing and valorizing the bride's character, he cannot change the *Life* so radically as

[88] Cf. Delaruelle's discussion of the centrality of salvation in medieval Christianity in *La Piété Populaire au Moyen Âge* 88, 198.

to allow her to go with Alexis to Syria. The historical "fact" of Alexis's abandonment of his bride and family would be well known to any potential audience; the story of a husband and wife that went into exile together would be the *Life* of another saint.

The final innovation in the *Roumans'* account of this scene is the explanation Alexis gives of his flight. In the other versions, Alexis's departure and voyage seem to be spontaneous. He sees his wife, fears that marriage will cost him his salvation, and flees from his house without any forethought to where he is going. He simply goes to the seashore and gets in the first ship he finds. In the *Roumans*, however, Alexis reveals to his bride that he is planning a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, saying that he is going to seek the Lord, "u il fu mors et vis, et au sepulcre u il rexurexi" (230-231). Furthermore, Alexis does not envisage this pilgrimage as a permanent exile, but rather a dangerous journey from which he intends to return. The sword and the ring, which appear in the *Chanson* and the Latin *Vitae* and symbolize the saint's rejection of marriage and his aristocratic identity, are used in the *Roumans* to a quite different effect. Alexis does not explicitly give the sword to his wife, he uses it to cut the ring "dont il l'ot espousée" in half (157). One part he gives to his bride and the other part he keeps for himself, so that if he ever returns to this country his family will be able to recognize him by these "ensegnes prouvées" (163).

The Alexis described in the *Roumans* is not a passionless, selfish saint, and his wife is not a nameless, mute symbol of marriage and the secular world. The seeds of a dialogue that first appeared in the Spanish *Vita* have come to fruition here in a complex, almost melodramatic wedding-night departure. The wedding-night scene in the *Roumans*

depicts Alexis and his wife as subjects, that is, it explicitly describes each character's vision of the world and their motivations. Furthermore, this vision is not static. Alexis's wife in particular begins the scene with one perspective – Alexis must hate her because he is planning to leave – and ends with another – Alexis is right in saying that there is no hope for happiness in the world and that the only thing to do is dedicate oneself entirely to God. This is in contrast with the Roman and Spanish *Vitae* and the *Chanson.* In the Roman *Vita*, no insight is given into the psychological states of either character, and Alexis's bride never appears as the grammatical subject of any verb. Alexis's words to his wife and his departure are described as "facts," actions with no subjective motivation. The Spanish *Vita* narrates that Alexis was "filled with a God-fearing spirit" and gives his wife a voice, but does not explain why the young woman agrees with her husband. The *Chanson* describes Alexis's motivation in detail, but, like the Roman *Vita*, it affords absolutely no subjectivity to the bride.

The attention given to psychology and even the form of the debate between Alexis and his wife in *Roumans* are typical of the literature of the later twelfth century and beginning of the thirteenth. Alexis and his bride display the inner awareness and ability to imagine a path that leads to personal fulfillment described by Robert Hanning as the key elements of the representation of the "individual" in twelfth-century romance.[89] The presence of this kind of subjectivity in the *Life of Saint Alexis* offers a different response to the questions posed by the religious horizon of expectations and raises new questions in turn. In the Roman *Vita*, the *Chanson*, and, to a lesser extent, the

[89] *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* 3-5. See also Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual* and R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*.

Spanish *Vita*, the question of whether it is better to reject all other relationships in order to dedicate oneself exclusively to the contemplation of God is asked only from Alexis's perspective. At this stage in the *Life*, he is the only character concerned for his salvation, and his wife is merely an obstacle on that path. It is still Alexis who takes the initiative in the *Roumans*, but once he speaks, his bride Lesigne is able to express her anxieties about the future. At first these anxieties are focused on her immediate fate and her fears of being rejected and homeless, but eventually she too decides to serve God as best as she is able, even if Alexis will not permit her to accompany him on his pilgrimage. Once Alexis and the audience see Lesigne as a subject concerned for her own salvation, it is much more difficult for them to reduce her to a mere symbol of marriage and the secular world that the saint rejects and a source of dramatic tension that makes his ascetic victory that much more impressive.

Spica

The *Chanson* agrees with the Roman and Spanish *Vitae* in bringing Alexis directly to Syria after he flees from Rome. *S*, however, continues with the innovation of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem introduced in the conversation between the saint and his bride. Rather than being taken to Syria, Alexis first travels to Jerusalem, where he prays and confesses his sins at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and then goes to the Jordan, where Jesus and the apostles were baptized. The saint only leaves and travels to "le Lice" for fear of the Jews, because, as the narrator comments, "a cel jour que li sains i fu / N'i avoit il des Crestiëns nesun" (344-355). This new episode can perhaps be understood

in the context of the importance given to pilgrimages to the Holy Land during the crusades. Alexis, of course, does not travel to Jerusalem with a sword to free the Holy Sepulcher from the infidel, but, as Vauchez and Leclercq describe, the spirit of the crusades included more than just armed conflict; it was tied to the "mystique du pèlerinage" (Vauchez, *Les Laïcs* 59). The very act of traveling to Jerusalem to walk on the ground where Jesus "fu mors et vis," as Alexis himself says, was believed to have great expiatory power (Vauchez, *Les Laïcs* 58-60, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 165-170). By traveling to Jerusalem, Alexis acts less like an ascetic who definitively cuts himself off from his family and the entire secular world than a layman who hopes to find salvation in a pilgrimage to Jerusalem after which he could perhaps return to his old life. But once he finds that there are no Christians in the Holy Land, he goes on to Lelice to serve God. There Alexis's story rejoins the familiar pattern found in the Roman and Spanish *Vitae* and the *Chanson*: he sells all of his possessions, gives the money to the poor, and takes his place among the beggars.

Like the *Vitae*, the Old French *Vies* include the scene in which Alexis is not recognized by his own servants. As in the Roman *Vita*, the *Chanson* emphasizes the saint's happiness at receiving alms from his own servants. It also dramatizes the external changes in the young man's body that represent his internal conversion, "Des – at li emfes sa tendra carn –mudede" (116).[90] The *Roumans* dramatizes the servants' unsuccessful search for Alexis by having the saint overhear a conversation between them

[90] Mario Perugi points to this as an example of what he calls "t-mèse", the separation of a prefix from the word it modifies. It is a Latin rhetorical device whose use here, "montre combien profondément ce poème est imprégné d'éducation latine et rhétorique" (112-114). It theoretically could be a form of "God", but the manuscript very consistently uses "Deus" as the *cas sujet* and "Deu" as the *cas régime*.

and the innkeeper with whom they are staying. Once again, the narrator emphasizes Alexis's tender feelings towards his bride and even makes him question his decision to leave her. After hearing the servants talk about her suffering and continued fidelity,[91] Alexis says, "E, cuers…com estes adurés! / Gente pucele, mout de mercies et grés; / Jou t'ai fait mal et tu m'as houneré" (493-495). This surprising statement that Alexis, the saint, believes he has wronged his bride while she has honored him changes the dynamic of the story. Gone are the "economy and sureness of expression….and intense concentration on its essential themes" that Neil Cartlidge argues make the *Chanson* "strikingly beautiful" and at the same time "stark and remote" (80). The Alexis in the *Roumans* is less admirable from an ascetic and perhaps aesthetic point of view because his devotion to God and to the path of holiness is less absolute and self-assured. Even after he has taken his place among the beggars in Edessa, the saint still thinks about his wife and is concerned for her plight. He has escaped from the shipwreck of the secular world and found refuge on the shores of asceticism, but rather than turning his mind exclusively to the contemplation of God, he thinks back to those who are still drowning.

This scene introduces an important element in the *Roumans*. The principle dramatic tension of the Alexis-legend derives from the protagonist's ability to persevere in his asceticism and anonymity even while watching his family suffer because of his presumed absence. In many versions, including the *Chanson*, this tension must be read into the text by the audience. Alexis himself is described as totally indifferent to his family's distress; his dedication to his notion of holiness is so complete that he does not

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[91] The servants' words about Alexis's wife are lost to a lacuna in *S*, but the parallel passage in the related *M*[2] version of the *Vie de saint Alexis* mentions her tears and her loyalty to her spouse (319-355).

feel any tension at all (*L* 241-245). In the *Roumans*, however, this tension exists within the protagonist. He himself wonders and indeed is convinced that the suffering he is causing his family is a sin. Alexis is not a self-assured hero in the *Roumans*, he is a man struggling to do what he believes is right but haunted by the fear that he has chosen incorrectly.

After he has taken his place among the beggars in Edessa, the narrative point of view in both of the *Vies* leaves Alexis and returns to Rome to recount the family's grief at his disappearance. The focus is on Alexis's mother, who vents her rage at the loss of her son by tearing apart the bridal chamber and adorning it with sackcloth and rags. As the *L*-poet so effectively conveys, she is externalizing her emotional passage from joy to sadness. The description of the mother's grief, "A tel turnat sun talent, / Unches puis cel di ne se contint ledement," is echoed in her apostrophe to the chamber, "Cambra, dist ela, ja mais n'estras parede, / Ne ja ledece n'ert an tei demenede" (140-142). Alexis's wife joins his mother in her grief, declaring that she will never marry again, but instead live "an guise de turtele" (149), referring to a tradition that if a turtledove loses its mate it will never take another.[92] The mother and bride discover one another as companions in their loss, but the only thing that unites them is their incurable grief, "Plainums ansemble le doel de nostre ami, / tu pur tun per, jol ferai pur mun filz" (155). Their friendship is not a source of new direction and growth, but a dramatization and deepening of their sorrow.

[92] Perugi explains this reference, which also appears in the Roman and Spanish *Vitae*, in his commentary on this line, "Presente dans le *Physiologus* et très répandue dans la prédication vernaculaire…l'image de la tourtre…en plus de symboliser la fidélité conjugale, véhicule les notions de chasteté et de solitude" (212-213).

This scene is repeated in the *Roumans*, but, like the wedding-night departure, it is amplified substantially, and the additions markedly change its signification. The tone is even more tender and pathetic than in the *Chanson*, but the focus is on the bride's relationship with God and not her relationship with her mother-in-law. Lesigne has taken Alexis's lessons to heart. Rather than stopping at "Nen ai tun filz, ansembl'ot tei voil estra" (*L* 150, cf. *S* 429) as she does in the *Chanson*, Lesigne continues and says, "Servirai Dieu, car miex ne puis jou faire. / S'il ne revient, ne a toi ne repaire, / Jou me tenrai devers le roi celestre…Trés or tenrai Damediu a mari; / ne me faura se jou le voel servir" (430-432, 446-447). Having lost her earthly husband, Lesigne will take God as her Bridegroom and undertake the path of asceticism herself. Alexis's mother and father find some small consolation at their daughter-in-law's conversion, and the family's grief at Alexis's disappearance is tempered by their trust in God. "Quant ot la mére que la pucele dit, / Que Damediu servira pour son fil, / Tout em plourant le baise enmi le vis. / Plourent ensamble del duel de lor ami, / L'une son fil et l'autre son mari" (450-451).

Alexis's return from Syria to Rome is motivated by the same narrative expedient in the *Vies* as in the *Vitae*. An image of the Virgin Mary speaks to the sacristan in the church outside of which Alexis sits and tells him to go and get "l'ume Deu" because, "il est dignes d'entrer en paradis" (*L* 173, cf. *S* 528). Alexis is not the one who decides to leave Edessa. Once he sits among the beggars, Alexis ceases to make active decisions about his life. It is God who takes the initiative, as the narrator of *Vie* recounts, "Quant tut sun quor en ad si afermét / Que ja sum voil n'istrat de la citied, / Deus fist l'imagine pur sue amor parler" (*L* 166-168, cf. *S* 515-517). As Evelyn Birge Vitz states in "*La Vie*

de Saint Alexis: Narrative Analysis and the Quest for the Sacred Subject," Alexis is an unusually passive subject; indeed, according to Vitz's students, he is a "blob" and a "lump" whose main activity is sitting (138). Of course, as Vitz argues, this passivity is actually an index of Alexis's total submission to God. In the *Chanson,* this passivity and submission to God will be emphasized throughout the rest of the story, but in the *Roumans* it will be attenuated by continued references to Alexis's subjective decisions about how to be holy.

After the image of the Virgin has torn him from his anonymity, in the *Roumans* the saint tells the sacristan who he is and what he has done, and once again he reveals his uncertainty about his conduct, "Feme espousai et mes nueces en fis, Ain le guerpi que li plais departist. Qui çou a fait, comment porra garir?" (563-565). In the *Chanson*, however, Alexis says nothing about his life; the simple fact that the image spoke about him attracts the veneration of the people, not his story of wealth and renunciation. It is divine election, not personal holiness, that makes someone a saint. Furthermore, the crowd's reaction to this declaration of holiness in Edessa foreshadows the Roman people's reaction to Alexis after his death, "Trestuit l'onurent, li grant e li petit, E tuit le prient que d'els aiet mercit" (*L* 184-185). The honor and veneration due to a saint after his death are actually detrimental to his quest for holiness during his life. Alexis's relationship with the larger Church can only begin after his death.

Plenum frumentum

When Alexis is brought back to Rome by the winds of fate, his initial reaction at the sight of his homeland in the *Vies* is fear, “Quant vit sun regne, durement s’en redutet / De ses parenz qued il nel recunuissent, / E del honur del secle ne l’encumbrent” (*L* 198-200, cf. *S* 591-594). Alexis is afraid that if his parents recognize him they will take him “par pri ou par poeste” and will drag him into ruin (*L* 204-205, cf. *S* 605-606). The *Roumans* is even more explicit about Alexis’s fears, playing on the word “compaignie” to contrast how his parents will deprive him of God’s “compaignie” by drawing him back into their “compaignie.”[93] His words recall Peter Damian’s warning not to swim back out into the sea to save those who are drowning for fear of being pulled under oneself (Grandjean 162). In the *Chanson*, this fear is overcome by Alexis’s confidence that his family will not recognize him, “Or ne lairai nem mete an lur bailie,” he prays to God, “Nem conuistrunt, tanz jurz ad que nem virent” (209-210). If his servants did not recognize him right after he arrived in Edessa, surely his parents will not recognize him now after so many years. Furthermore, Alexis’s encounter with his father is described as a coincidence that could be ascribed to either fate or providence: immediately after

[93] Ajue, Diex, qui nous a em baillie;
Se vel avoir le vraie compaignie,
Et deservir vostre durable vie.
Se me counoist ma mére l’esmarie,
Et mi parent, et m’espouse, et me sire,
Il me tolront le vostre compaignie,
Sil me rembatent en ceste compaignie,
Deffent me Dieux, de toutes males visces (607-614).

entering the city, "n'altra pur altre mais sun pedre i ancuntret" (213). Alexis does not decide to seek out his family, he merely resigns himself to being found by them.

In the *Roumans*, however, Alexis is much more of an active subject. As in the Latin *Vitae*, the saint does not "accidentally" meet his father, but he himself decides to seek hospitality from his father rather than burdening someone else. In the *Roumans*, this choice is dramatized in such a way as to emphasize the psychological process of decision-making. Rather than entering Rome immediately after disembarking from his ship, Alexis goes to rest under a pine tree and begins to read his psalter. There he reads "Que la mére a son enfant a garder .vii. ans tous plains…/ Et puis li pére…tout sa vie que il a a durer" (636-639).[94] This reference to a supposedly Scriptural basis for familial solidarity incites Alexis to go and speak to his father and ask him for food and shelter. Alexis is very clearly the narrative subject here. The narrator describes his desire, "Or vauroit sur son pére araisonner," and his active need to hide his "Roman" accent, "Par itel guise peust a lui parler, / Nel couneust a son roumanc parler." The scene closes with an explanation of Alexis's decision seek alms at his father's house which closely follows the Latin *Vitae*, "Si vauroit miés ses aumosnes user / Que les autrui dont il fust emcombrés, / S'en esteroit plus sauls a Damedé" (640-647). Rather than passively accepting his return to his father's house as part of God's providential design for his life, Alexis reads Scripture, deduces what God's will for him must be, and then decides to act on it.

The concern for his family's suffering typical of the *Roumans*, and the fear that he has sinned in causing it, appears at the end the initial encounter between Alexis and his

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[94] This passage is not found in the Book of Psalms nor anywhere else in the Bible. It may be based on Proverbs 4:3, "When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother's favorite."

father. The *Chanson* mentions that Euphemian "Plurent si oil, ne s'en puet astenir" when he hears the strange pilgrim speak of his son (*L* 221-222). The *Roumans* adds to this grief by adding Alexis's mother. Rather than meeting Euphemian and "Asembl'ot lui grant masse de ses humes," (*L* 214), as he does in the *Chanson*, in the *Roumans* Alexis first encounters his mother and father coming from church and walking down the street hand in hand, a small detail which is typical of the *Roumans'* sympathy for the saint's family. Throughout the scene, Euphemian's lamentations are doubled by his wife's,[95] and the sight of all this suffering causes Alexis to question his own actions, "Ces felonnies que jou lor fac si grans / Me sont legiéres, ses trouverai pesans; / Al grant juise me revenroit devant, / Pour pére et mére qui me pourmetent tant, / Que si fac coreciés et dolans" (739-742). Despite this dread of the final judgment, Alexis hides his feelings for fear of being recognized. As the narrator recounts, "De tout a mis en Jhesus son talent; / Mieus aimme Diu ke nul home vivant" (747-748). This brief soliloquy, unique to the *Roumans*, reinforces the dramatic tension that animates this version of the *Life*. Alexis has chosen to dedicate his life entirely to the love of God, but he is not immune from the fear that in doing so he has sinned against another good, love for his family.

The account of the years Alexis spends unrecognized in his father's house accentuates this difference even further. The *Chanson* emphasizes Alexis's ability to withstand hunger, poverty, and the injury and insults of his servants. A strong contrast is drawn between the family's non-recognition of Alexis – they see him but never realize who he is or even ask his name or where he is from (236-240) – and Alexis's indifference

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[95] *S* 672-673, 715-716, 731-734.

towards the "grant duel" he sees them in because of his absence. Alexis's parents cry "de lur oilz mult tendrement", but he "le met el consirrer: / Ne l'en est rien, issi est aturnét" (244-245). The difficult passage[96] seems to mean that Alexis considers his parents' tears but considers them nothing, because he was turned elsewhere. The parallel lines in the *Roumans*, "Il les esgarde; sel met el consirer, / N'a soig que l' voie si est a Diu tornés" (763-764) are a bit clearer, indicating that Alexis's path was turned to God.

After this similar passage, however, the *Roumans* radically departs from the *Chanson* with a series of encounters between Alexis and his family that deepen the ambiguity of the saint's feelings towards his family. The difference is as significant as the differences already seen in the wedding-night scene. Whereas the *Chanson* says directly that no one ever asks Alexis for his identity the whole time he was in his family's house, the *Roumans* vividly describes three conversations about the saint's identity. In the first, Alexis's father sees him on his cot and says, "Biaus crestïens, ne savons vostre non? / Faut vous conrois? De coi aiés besoing?" (795-796). Alexis answers that the generic title of "Christian" used by his father is actually his name, "Crestïens ai a non, / Et trestout cil qui levé sont des fons" (797-798). By assimilating himself to all good Christians, Alexis is able to keep his identity hidden and avoid lying to his father. Interestingly enough, when Alexis responds to his father's inquiry of whether he needs anything, he again asks him to provide for him for the love of God, so that God may have mercy on the child whom he loves. Euphemian responds by saying of his missing son, "Salve en est l'ame se Dieus l'a commandé / Et Dius em penst par sa grant pieté / Mout a

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[96] In his commentary on the line, Perugi refers the reader to Sckommodau's discussion of its meaning in "Zum altfranzösichen Alexiuslied" 190-191.

dur cuer qui si m'a oublié" (813-814). In a reversal of roles, it is Alexis's father who tells him he will be saved if he has listened to God's commands. Nonetheless, in keeping with the fundamental tension of this version, he also comments that Alexis must have a hard heart if in his dedication to God he has totally forgotten his father.

The narrator of the *Roumans* also comments on the fear Alexis felt when he saw his mother and wife walk up and down the stairs under which he slept. Rather than an opportunity for Alexis to demonstrate his indifference to the "blanda, mitis atque venusta facies" of his wife, the sight of them demonstrates the tension still present in the saint's heart. He is afraid to speak to wife and mother, lest they recognize his "roumanc parler" and "nel rembatent ens el pecié mortel" (827-828). They however, take the initiative and speak to him, because, as the mother says, "Quant jel regart, membre moi de mon fil / Pour un petit nel resamble del vis" (842). Recalling Lesigne's offer to accompany Alexis on his pilgrimage and wash his clothes, the mother suggests, "Car li faisons ses drapiaus relaver; / Çou iert aumosne" (836-837). Alexis is not as anonymous here as he is in other versions of the *Life*, and the charity his parents offer him is not as gratuitous. Some of his mother's desire to do good for him comes from the fact that he reminds her of his son. When she and the "pulcele," Alexis's wife, approach the saint and ask him who he is, he does not hide behind the name "Christian" as he does when approached by his father. Feeling that his death is close at hand, Alexis declares that he cannot lie, "Car par mençoignes pert on saint Paradis" (851), and simply refuses to answer the question. Instead he asks his mother to come close to him, kisses her, and asks for "merci" (860-862). The mother is quite taken aback at this request for forgiveness, but she complies

and says, "Sire…tout vous soit pardonné." Not satisfied with this generic pardon, Alexis pushes the matter further, "Vostre grant painne que eü en avés, / Pour amour Diu, si le me pardonnés" (866-868). Again his mother forgives him, as does his wife, who is standing silently by all the while. When the two women leave, Alexis, "est mout liés remés" (871). The saint's fears at having sinned by causing pain to his family are not overcome by a single-minded dedication to God, but by obtaining his mother's and wife's forgiveness.

The final encounter recounted in the *Roumans* has no parallel in any of the other three versions of the *Life* and actually takes place after the saint has written his letter and the divine voice has spoken and told the people of Rome to search for the "man of God" in Euphemian's house. Before discussing this encounter, however, it is important to analyze the crowd's and the family's reaction to Alexis's death. Interestingly enough, in both the *Chanson* and the *Roumans* the divine voice speaks when Alexis is close to death but not quite dead.[97] In the *Chanson* the celestial voice tells the people of Rome to seek the man of God and pray to him, "que la citet ne fundet / Ne ne perissent la gent ki enz fregundent" (298-299). The people are then afraid and "ne guardent l'ure que terre nes encloe" (305).[98] The "salvation" that Alexis represents for the people is very concrete: he will save the city from physical destruction and its inhabitants from death.

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[97] *L* 289-290, *S* 920-925. In the Spanish *Vita* Alexis clearly dies ("migravit ad celum", §17) before the voice speaks, whereas in the Roman *Vita* his death is never described. He is not yet dead when the voice speaks, but when Euphemian and the crowds find him he is "jam defunctum" (§8).

[98] The *Roumans* omits the voice's warning but includes the people's fear about being swallowed up, presenting it as an almost irrational reaction to hearing a disembodied voice and not indicative of any real danger (931-938).

In the *Roumans*, the postponement of Alexis's death opens a space for a third encounter, which is unique to this version. Having already spoken directly to his mother and father, Alexis is given a chance to speak to his wife one last time before dying. The conversation takes place literally at the moment of the saint's death. After describing the leaders of the city sitting and wondering where to find the Man of God, as in the *Chanson*, the narrator of the *Roumans* says, "Desoivre l'ame del cors saint Alessins; / D'iluec en va tout droit em Paradis / Ja iert en transe quant la pucele vint" (967-969, cf. *L* 331-332). It is as if Alexis's soul is in the process of leaving his body to ascend to heaven when he sees his wife and pauses just long enough to speak to her. Surprisingly, however, the main purpose of the saint's speech is not to comfort the young woman, but to reassure himself. Using the same tender "bele" as during the wedding-night scene, Alexis tells his bride that he is near death and has "grant paour" of dying. Once again, the saint is unsure of his salvation. He instructs his bride, who still does not recognize him, to have him buried in the church of Saint Boniface, and adds, "quant tu morras tu i vauroies estre" (983), referring to their still-valid marriage. Then, in response to Alexis's wish for a sign that there is a place for his soul in Paradise, God makes all the bells of the city ring out. Alexis is finally assured of his salvation, despite his fears that the suffering he caused his family might have been counted against him as a sin. He gives his wife precise indications about how to arrange his body in the tomb, asking her to make crosses out of the palm branches he has brought with him from Jerusalem and place them at his head and feet, and then finally says, "Jou ne sui mie de mout lontaing païs / Quant mi parent seront al sevelir, / Si ert mes pére et ma mére autresi: / Et une espouse que jou ai

deguerpi" (1010-1012). With this last hint about his identity, Alexis dies and his wife realizes who he is, exclaiming, "E Dius…jou quic c'est mes amis!" (1014).

Even though the *Roumans* preserves and even expands the *Chanson*'s descriptions of Alexis's fear at being drawn back into the world of sin if his parents discover his identity, the addition of these three conversations dramatically alters the representation of the saint's relationship with his family. Alexis's father, mother, and wife are no longer the background against which the saint's ascetic triumph appears more heroic. Like Alexis himself, they are portrayed as subjects. They actively seek to discover the unknown pilgrim's identity and are attentive to his needs. The amplification of the wedding-night scene is mirrored in the deathbed conversation between Alexis and his wife: despite the doubts that have troubled him throughout the *Life*, the saint's belief that it is better to reject the secular world and devote oneself exclusively to God is confirmed by the miraculous ringing of the bells. His pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the stated goal of his departure, is recalled by the palm branches. And Lesigne, who wanted to accompany her husband on his journey to serve him and wash his clothes, now arranges his body for burial. The symmetry introduced to the Alexis-legend by the saint's return to Rome (Cartlidge 90-91) reaches its highest stage of development here in the *Roumans*.

Much more so than the other versions of the legend studied here, the *Roumans* raises the question of whether Alexis's single-minded dedication to God is good. It answers in the affirmative, of course, but not without planting the seeds of doubt and presenting the issue in a complex way. Alexis's need to be forgiven by his mother and wife is part of a very different psychological dynamic than that portrayed in other

versions of the legend. Far from being the self-assured "warrior" praised by Peter Damian for looking impassively on his family's suffering, the *Roumans*'s Alexis is so concerned that the pain he has caused them is a sin that he is psychologically dependent on their forgiveness. Rather than rejecting human affection, he kisses his mother and appeals to her compassion and pity in order to assuage his guilty conscience. Not only is Alexis a more complex figure, but his mother and wife are given a much more important role in the narrative. They are not merely obstacles or sources of temptation; they are subjects whose decision to comply with their guest's strange request for forgiveness encourages the saint to preserve on his path to holiness.

Harvest

The conclusion of the Old French *Vies* is similar to the *Vitae* in all of its major points. Both the *Chanson* and the *Roumans* report the lamentations of the saint's father, mother, and wife and contrast them with the people's joy at having found the Man of God (*L* 386-505, *S* 1137-1237). They both report that Alexis is buried in the Church of Saint Boniface and that his body is the source of miraculous healing.[99] Two important differences, however, must be noted. The first differentiates both Old French *Vies* from the Latin *Vitae* and the second the *Roumans* from the *Chanson*.

As we have seen, in the Latin *Vitae* Alexis's father laments the fact that no one will take care of him in his old age, his mother marvels that her son saw his parents'

[99] The miracles are narrated in *L* 551-560 and *S* 1267-1276. In the *Chanson* the selection of Saint Boniface as the burial place is mentioned in the following stanza (566-570), whereas in the *Roumans* it is chosen by Alexis himself and communicated to his wife before his death, as we have already seen (979-984).

suffering and never once spoke to them, and the bride declares that now she is a widow and her pain will have no end. In the Roman *Vita* she says that her "mirror is broken and her hope has died,"[100] and at the sight of her pain all the people weep; in the Spanish *Vita* she herself asks the people to weep with her and aid her with their prayers, so that she might be wedded to Alexis in eternity (§21). In the Old French *Vies*, the father's lament, in particular, expresses the secular values from which Alexis fled. Euphemian chastises his dead son for having caused his mother so much suffering, and then he goes on to talk about all that he could have done if he had lived, emphasizing both the land-holding and the military roles of the secular aristocracy. He says that his "larges terres" and "granz paleis de Rome" would have come to Alexis after his own death, as would his "grant honur" (*L* 401-407, cf. *S* 1153-1160). He also reminds him of the place he should have held among the peers of the realm wearing helm and mail, wielding a sword, commanding battalions, and carrying the emperor's standard (*L* 411-415, cf. *S* 1168-1172). The mother's lament focuses on the natural affection between a mother and her child. It is rooted in the physicality of childbearing and the desolation of being left without any children (*L* 421-465, cf. *S* 1173-1209). The Old French Alexis tradition is more explicit about the secular values, both feudal and familial, which the saint rejects. The translation into the vernacular brings the saint's life into closer contact with the secular world. Rather than accentuating the spiritual and ascetic values that Alexis's embraces and which the monastic or clerical audience of a Latin *Vita* would have

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[100] "Nunc ruptum est speculum meum, & periit spes mea..." (§10).

identified as their own, the vernacular *Vies* accentuate and criticize the values of their lay, aristocratic audience that Alexis rejects.

The tension between secular and spiritual values is highlighted in a surprising way by the pope's rebuke of the family's weeping, an episode which does not occur in either of the Latin *Vitae*, which both say that the crowds actually joined in the family's lamentation.[101] In the *Roumans* the pope simply asks the family, "Que vous ajue cil deus ne ciste cose?" and declares, "Car par celui arons boine victoire" (*S* 1236-1237, cf. *L* 502, 504), but the *Chanson* is much more explicit, "Qui que seit duel, a nostr'os est il goie" (*L* 503). The very thing which is a cause for mourning for the family is a joy for the people of Rome. They have found the Man of God who will save them from the earthquake threatened by the celestial voice. It matters little that he is dead; in fact, it is better that he is dead, because if he were still alive he would have fled from their veneration and supplication just as he fled from Edessa after his holiness was revealed. As a dead body, however, Alexis can fulfill his role as saint. The man who fled from his family is surrounded by a throng of the poorest and most desperate people of the city who hope to be "saved", that is, physically healed, through physical contact with his body.[102] The man who refused wealth and possessions in his life is placed in a marble, gem-encrusted sarcophagus and buried with pomp and honor.

The religious values contrasted here with the secular values expressed by Alexis's family are not the monastic values of asceticism, solitude, and the contemplation of God.

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[101] Cf. Spanish *Vita* "Et dum audisset congregation, que ibi advenerat, ululatum eorum, plorauerunt planctum amarissimum," (§22) and Roman *Vita* "Populus autem videns hæc, lachrymabiliter flebat" (§10).
[102] For the role of relics, the need for a tangible connection with the divine, and the tendency for this to devolve into "superstition" see Manselli, *Religion Populaire* 63, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 312, Vauchez, *Les Laïcs* 15-21.

They are the “popular” values of common lay-people for whom salvation does not entail the refusing the comfort of the present material world in order to assure oneself eternal joy and glory in the world to come but rather being saved from sickness, poverty, and the violence of natural disasters here on earth. The pope is not rebuking Alexis’s family because they have failed to see that their son has earned his salvation through his actions, nor because they have failed to imitate him. He is rebuking them because they are placing their own, private loss at a higher value than miracles and deliverance from an earthquake that the discovery of Alexis’s body means for the city. Indeed, the attention devoted to the family’s laments, the pope’s rebuke, and the scenes of the crowds rejoicing in the *Chanson* creates another opposition, the tension between the family’s and the crowd’s reaction to Alexis’s death.

Like the Spanish *Vita*, the Old French *Vies* do not leave Alexis’s parents weeping at their son’s grave. The bride’s lament does not end with the tragic image of the broken mirror and the hopelessness of the Roman *Vita*. Her sadness at the death of her husband is not an end, but a beginning; with nothing left for her in this world, she will finally follow Alexis’s example and dedicate herself entirely to the spiritual life: “Ne charnel hume n’avrai en tute terre: / Deu servirei, le rei ki tot guvernet, / Il nem faldrat s’il veit que jo lui serve” (*L* 493-495, cf. *S* 1230-1231). The fruits of this conversion appear at the end of both the *Chanson* and the *Roumans*. At the conclusion of the poem, after the saint’s burial and after the crowds have gone away, the narrator declares that Alexis’s family is saved and the saint and his wife are reunited in heaven. The two stanzas are worth citing in full:

> Vait s'en li pople, e le pere e la medra
>
> E la pulcela unches ne deseverent,
>
> Ansemble furent, jusqu'a Deu s'en ralerent:
>
> Lur cumpainie fut bone ed honorethe,
>
> Par cel saint cors sunt lur anames salvedes.
>
> Sainz cest icil senz neüle dutance,
>
> Ensembl'ot Deu e la compaignie as angeles,
>
> Od la pulcela dunt il se fist estranges:
>
> Or l'at privee, ansemble sunt lur anames,
>
> Ne vus sai dirre cum lur ledece est grande (*L* 601-610, cf. *S* 1310-1314, 1320-1324).

This salvation is described in different terms than the salvation that concludes the Spanish *Vita*. Alexis's mother, father, and wife are "good and honored" but they do not explicitly sell all of their possessions and convert to the Lord (cf. Spanish *Vita* §23). The use of the passive voice in the *Chanson* indicates that Alexis's mother, father, and wife are not saved through any particular merit of their own, but through the "holy body" of their son: "Par cel saint cors *sunt* lur anames salvedes." Even though their salvation is defined in terms of everlasting life and eternal glory, it operates according to the same principle as the miraculous healing and protection from natural disasters obtained by the people of Rome. Alexis's body, like a talisman, has the power to save those who touch or invoke it, regardless of whether they imitate his holy life. The saint saves by metonymical association, that is, by physical or familial proximity, not by metaphorical association, that is, by inspiring others to live as he did.

Despite this overall emphasis on veneration in the *Chanson*, a seed of imitation can be found in the wife's declaration that she will take Christ as her spouse and serve God as long as she lives. This seed emerges as a fully-developed flower in the *Roumans*. In order to understand how, we have to go back to the discovery of Alexis's dead body and the revelation of his identity. All four versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* analyzed here contain a scene in which the pope reads the letter that reveals the saint's identity. In all four versios, Euphemian first tries to take the letter from the saint's dead hands, but is unable to do so. In both Latin *Vitae* and the *Chanson*, the pope then takes the letter and has it read. The message is clear: Alexis belongs to the universal church, not his blood family. In the *Roumans*, however, the letter miraculously flies out of the pope's hand and, to the embarrassment and discomfiture of all present, "A la pucele s'en ala a la place, / Ens en son sain, en son blïaut de paile" (1076-1077). The *laisse similaire* that follows is even more explicit about the letter's trajectory: "Tout droit en va el sain de la pucele, / Sous son blïaut, entre ses deus mameles " (1087-1088). The bride, of course, is shocked and embarrassed at this strange turn of events, and she expresses her fear that she has done something to displease the holy body (1106-1107, 1111-1112). The pope, however, assures her that this is a good sign and that the letter is hers by right: "Bele…buer fuisses tu ains née. / Toie est la carte que Dius le t'a donée" (1108-1109). The narrator is even more imaginative in his interpretation of this miracle:

> Oiés, signour, con grande loiauté
>
> Tout home doivent a le moiller porter.
>
> Car tel moustrance fist le jour Damedés

Que a sa mére ne vaut carte aler

Ne a son pére qui l'avoit engenré,

Mais a l'espouse ki bien avoit gardé

Le compagnie de son ami carnel (S 1093-1099).

Other than a few exclamations of "e vous,"[103] this is the only time the narrator directly addresses the audience outside of the prologue and the conclusion of the *Vie*. It comes as something of an intrusion into the Alexis legend; at the climax of a story about a man who leaves his wife to dedicate himself to God, the reader finds an example of the "grande loiauté" that all men should have toward their wives! It is impossible to know how this commentary and this scene were added to the *Life*; it does not appear in any of the earlier Old French *Vies* and may have originated with the *S*-poet.[104] For Neil Cartlidge, this scene and commentary are an indication that the *Roumans* "has now been wholly emptied of its original force, for it now reinforces precisely the institution which the 'original' Alexis so contemptuously rejected" (99). It is true that the *Roumans* is much more favorable to marriage than the "original" Alexis legend, but this favor is not unambiguous and the model of marriage is not the purely secular institution from which the Man of God as a symbol of the earthly world set on the path to ruin.

This extraordinary scene also accentuates Lesigne's active role in the pursuit of her own salvation. In the first *laisse* describing the "glorious miracle", the letter – and the reader – discovers that the bride "Empress sa car ot vestue la haire; / Ele ne veüt

[103] E.g. to draw attention to the image of Alexis's mother and wife walking up and down the stairs in his sight (817-818).

[104] The rhymed *Vies* contained in the two *M* and seven *Q* manuscripts, which derive from the *Roumans*, all contain the flight of the letter to the wife and the narrator's intervention (M^2 (ed. Elliot) 935-947, *Q* (ed. Pannier) quatrains 166-168).

c'omme ne feme nel sace" (1077-1078). In the second *laisse*, the bride's breast is described as the place where, "ele pleure les mals et les souffertes / Que li sains hom sour le degree a traites" (1089-1090). The hair shirt and compassion for another person's suffering are signs that Lesigne as acted on her repeatedly stated intention to make God her spouse and serve him.[105] In imitation of her earthly husband, "son ami charnel", she has adopted a quiet, humble ascetic practice. She too has rejected the comfort of the present world and placed her hope in the spiritual life. In light of this revelation of Lesigne as a subject in her own salvation, the slight difference in wording that we find in the conclusion of the *Roumans* seems significant. When describing the salvation of Alexis's family, rather than saying, "Par cel saint cors sunt lur anames salvedes," as in the *Chanson*, the *Roumans* uses the active voice and reads, "Pour cel saint home ont lor ames sauvées" (1314). The difference is small enough to be dismissed as an unmotivated textual variant. But it is emblematic of the portrayal of Alexis's bride and her relationship with her husband in the twelfth-century *Roumans de saint Alessin.* Alexis is no longer just a holy body that metonymically saves those who happen to be near it, he is a holy man whose actions can be imitated metaphorically.

The evolving figure of Alexis's wife is the key to understanding the *Life*'s perspective on marriage. Neil Cartlidge argues that the *Chanson de saint Alexis* presents a different attitude towards marriage than the Latin versions of the Alexis legend, and that these differences can be ascribed to the evolving attitudes towards marriage among the clerics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He claims that in the Syriac original, in

[105] In his discussion of "The Marriages of Christina of Markyate," Thomas Head traces the use and evolution of the concept of "bride of Christ" from the late antiquity to the twelfth century (116-118).

which the Man of God never returns to his wife and family, marriage is rejected outright as a barrier to asceticism and an obstacle to an exclusive relationship with God. Introducing what Cartlidge calls “some of the methods and sensibility of romance,” the Greek and Latin medieval rewriters of the legend reintroduce Alexis into his family home, allowing for a dramatic scene of recognition that provides closure to the saint’s relationship with his family, highlights the contrast between secular and ascetic values, and allows Alexis to be venerated and honored as a saint. By introducing the “familiar narrative pattern” of return and recognition, Cartlidge argues that these “innovators” make the legend, “both devotionally and aesthetically more satisfying” (87-88). The dramatic tension between “the legend’s original asceticism and the romanticism of its development” (90) that arises in these versions coalesces around the figure of Alexis’s wife, who in romantic terms is to be praised because of her faithful and pure love for her husband, and in ascetic terms is to be rejected as the symbol of the secular world and its failed values (90-91). According to Cartlidge, the reunification of Alexis and his bride in Paradise at the end of the *Chanson* is simultaneously both a rehabilitation of marriage as a spiritual relationship and a denial that such a relationship can be realized in this life (91-98). By separating marriage from sexual consummation, the clerical writers of the twelfth century could imagine the possibility of a marriage based on the spiritual values of charity, humility, and mutual encouragement rather than the worldly values of procreation, affection, and the mundane responsibility of a family and a household. In the *Chanson*, this sort of relationship is only possible after death. While they are still alive, the threat of being dragged into mortal sin by sexual attraction and familial

responsibility is too great for Alexis and his wife to live together or have any sort of real relationship. Marriage can only be saved by a transposition from the physical world, which is set in ruin, to the spiritual plane of the fullness of redemption. The *Chanson* ends with Alexis and his bride living happily ever after, but this bliss can only be found in heaven.

The *Roumans* does not fundamentally alter the structure of the Alexis legend. As I have mentioned, Lesigne does not accompany Alexis into exile, nor does the saint reveal himself to his family. It does, however, chip away at the edges of the barrier of non-recognition and indifference that separates Alexis from his wife and family. Alexis tells his bride about his decision to flee the world and teaches her about the superiority of the celestial life over the fleshly one until she agrees with him and gives him permission to leave. He thinks about her while in Syria and compares her faithfulness to him favorably with his own abandonment of her. Finally, before dying, he summons her to his side and confides in her his fear of not being saved, instructs her on where and how he wants to be buried, and, when all risk of sin has passed, reveals his identity. Lesigne, for her part, does not wait until Alexis's death to take his lesson to heart. Even before he leaves, she promises to dedicate herself to God and her imitation of Alexis goes as far as mortifying her flesh with a hair shirt. In the *Chanson*, the true subject of the narrative is God, as Evelyn Birge Vitz suggests, and even Alexis only becomes a subject in so far as he submits his desires to God's ("Narrative Analysis" 145). God is still the ultimate subject of the *Roumans*, but Alexis and Lesigne are both given the opportunity to act as subjects, that is, to express their wishes and doubts in the narrative, choose between

alternatives, and ultimately achieve what they desire, despite the obstacles they encounter along the way. Despite these changes, the basic fact that Alexis abandons his wife and fears that any reunification with her in this life will lead to mortal sin remains. A mutual spiritual relationship between Alexis and Lesigne is still impossible, even in the *Roumans*.

The *Roumans* gives a slightly different vision of sainthood than the other versions. Alexis's mother and his wife are portrayed as subjects. Their forgiveness assuages the saint's guilty conscience and helps him continue on his path of asceticism and anonymity. Alexis is psychologically dependent on others, not a solitary, passionless hero. He is also not the only one who actively pursues salvation. Lesigne takes his recommendations to heart and adopts an ascetic discipline according to her own measure. The *Roumans* does not totally transform the legend; it introduces another point of view that exists in tension with the older perspective still present in the story.[106] This is the heart of the phenomenon of rewriting, and it is an important part of the human experience. Various frameworks for interpreting the world and planning for the future can coexist and interact within a single society and even a single individual.

Christina and Spiritual relationships

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[106] It is important to note that all of the later versions of the branch of the Alexis legend to which the *Chanson* and *Roumans* belong preserve many of the distinguishing features of the *Roumans*, including the expanded dialog between Alexis and his bride the night of their wedding, the conversation in which Alexis asks his mother and bride for forgiveness, the deathbed conversation between Alexis and his bride, and the flight of the letter from the pope's hand to the bride's breast (M^2 128-190, 686-728, 840-879, 935-955, *Q* quatrains 22-34, 129-138, 152-158, 166-169).

The risks and benefits of spiritual relationships also play an important role in the *Vita* of Christina of Markyate, and indeed, despite what Talbot argues, it may be because of the spiritual relationship between Alexis and his bride and not the saint's refusal of marriage that the *Chanson de saint Alexis* is included in the St Albans Psalter.[107] After successfully escaping from her family, convincing Burthred to renounce any marital claims over her, and establishing herself as the prioress of a convent at Markyate, Christina would develop a deep, intimate friendship with the abbot of St Albans, Geoffrey of Gorham (*De S. Christina* §56). Their relationship is described as both intensely spiritual and mutually beneficial: the holy woman dedicated herself to the spiritual growth of the abbot, and he dedicated himself to her material well-being (§57-58).[108] When Christina first met Geoffrey, he was somewhat arrogant and worldly, but through her influence and prayer, he dedicated himself more and more to the spiritual life. The love between Geoffrey and Christina is described in very passionate terms, and, according to her *Vita*, many of Christina's mystical visions are concerned with her relationship with the abbot. Once when Christina was afraid that Geoffrey would leave her and go to Rome, she had a vision of herself in the presence of Jesus and saw Geoffrey, "whom she loved above all others, encircled with her arms and held closely to

[107] Jane Geddes agrees that the *Life of Saint Alexis* is included in the psalter as a message to Christina, but, basing her argument on the specifics of the *Life* and the illustration and prologue that accompany it, she argues that it actually reflects the spiritual relationship between Christina and Abbot Geoffrey of St Albans and may be an attempt to reassure Christina in light of the abbot's planned departure for Rome ("Saint Albans Psalter", 207-210).
[108] In "The Loves of Christina of Markyate", C. Stephen Jaeger argues that Christina and Geoffrey's relationship (at least as it is described in the *Vita*) is "a purely spiritual love based on moral improvement" (112).

her breast."[109] She fears that since Geoffrey is a man, and stronger than she is, he will break free from her grasp, but then she sees that Jesus has wrapped his own arms around hers and is helping her hold on to her friend. A short while later, the voyage to Rome was cancelled (*De S. Christina* §73). Christina's devotion to the abbot grows so deep that she even begins to wonder whether she would rather have God love Geoffrey more than her. Only after another vision reveals that she, more than Geoffrey, deserves a place at God's right hand does she admit that, "there was only one thing in which a person should not place another before self, God's love."[110]

This is hardly the conviction that "I alone and God are in this world," which Peter Damian recommended as the only sure path to peace (Grandjean 168). Being concerned for an abbot is hardly the same as being married, but it is also quite different from the total dedication to personal salvation characteristic of a hermit. Moreover, any intense, passionate relationship, no matter how spiritual, risks turning sexual. Christina had already suffered from tremendous sexual temptation when, during her period of hiding, she had to share a small cell with a male cleric.[111] Having mastered her sexual passion during this trial, Christina was never sexually attracted to Geoffrey, but the potentially compromising nature of her and the abbot's close relationship did not escape the notice of their contemporaries. Even though the author of the *Vita* insists on the purity and spirituality of their relationship, he admits that it was a source of scandal (§76). For

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[109] "Illumque suum pre cunctis familiarissimum intra brachiorum suorum grium pectori suo constrictum inclusisse" (§73).

[110] "Solam esse Dei dileccionem in qua nullus alium sibimet preferre iuste liceat" (§79).

[111] This passion was so strong that the cleric sometimes "came before her without any clothes on," and at other times, Christina was "so inwardly inflamed that she thought the clothes which clung to her body might be set on fire." Through fasting and prayer, Christina was able to resist these temptations until God miraculously relieved her of them (*De S. Christina* §43-45).

Christina, entering the religious life did not mean cutting herself off from human relationships. She had to deal with sexual temptation fiercer than anything she had felt during her marriage. She also found herself worried about a man. But this worry, at least in her eyes and her biographer's, was spiritually laudable. Christina's relationship with Geoffrey offers another model of spirituality, one in which it is good to reach out one's hand to save someone else, even at the cost of one's own ability to contemplate God in complete peace and solitude. Christina and Geoffrey live out the spiritual friendship that is denied to Alexis and his wife, even in the *Roumans*. The prioress of Markyate and the abbot of Saint Albans were not joined by any form of marriage, spiritual or otherwise, and they did not live together. They were heads of religious institutions working for their mutual benefit, not a young couple encouraged to carry on the family line by producing children.

Nonetheless, Christina and Geoffrey's friendship was not without limitations of its own. Christina was so concerned for the abbot's safety that on three occasions when the abbot was ordered to undertake the long, dangerous journey to Rome, she prayed for him not to have to go, and three times the orders were rescinded (§71-74). As Jane Geddes argues, Geoffrey may actually have included the *Chanson de Saint Alexis* in the St Albans Psalter he had made for Christina as a message to her to "let him go," i.e. to Rome, just as Alexis's bride let him leave her (Geddes 212-213).

The rhymed prose prologue that precedes the *Chanson* in the Saint Albans Psalter justifies this interpretation.[112] The prologue is unique to this manuscript and offers a singular interpretation of the poem's message. Referring to the *Vie* as an "amiable cancun e spiritel raisun," it summarizes Alexis's life from his birth until his departure from his wife. The prologue depicts this departure in a very positive light: "par l'amistet del surerain pietet la sue spuse iuvene cumandat al spus vif de veritet ki est un sul faitur e regnet an trinitiet." Unlike in the *Chanson* itself, here the friendship of the sovereign mercy is given as the reason for Alexis's departure, not the vanity of earthly honor and joy. The prologue, it would seem, focuses more on the positive nature of Alexis's choice rather than on the frailty of the mundane world he is leaving behind. In fact, the prologue ends with this remarkable sentence, a very positive statement of the purpose of the story: "Icesta istorie est amiable grace e suverain consulaciun a cascun memorie spiritel, les quels vivent purement sulunc castethet, e dignement sei delitent es goies del ciel & es noces virginals."

The prologue offers a very clear interpretation of the *Vie de saint Alexis*: it is "amiable grace" and "suverain consulacion" for a very specific group of people – those who live according to chastity and delight in virginal marriages. Christina and her fellow nuns at Markyate would certainly be among this group. Rather than Alexis, who leaves his wife, the nun is invited to take as her model his bride, who in her fidelity to her departed husband never takes another "charnel hume," but dedicates herself to the service

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[112] An excellent reproduction of the folio containing this image and the prologue, along with a transcription of the text it contains, can be found in the facsimile of the St Albans Psalter in a website hosted by the University of Aberdeen: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans057.shtml>.

of God. As the *Chanson* indicates, this faith will be rewarded after death, when the nun, like Alexis's bride, will be united with her absent husband, who is none other than Christ himself.

A more personal interpretation of this prologue is hypothesized by Jane Geddes (208-209). It is possible that Geoffrey intended the example of Alexis and his bride to be a more specific consolation for Christina than a simple allusion to her "noces virginels" with the Bridegroom Christ. It is not unreasonable to imagine that Geoffrey included the *Chanson de Saint Alexis*, together with the illustration of the "beata sponsa semper gemebunda" and the prologue, in order to give "amiable grace e suverain consulaciun" to his beloved Christina. The message is that Christina should not keep Geoffrey from fulfilling his ecclesiastic duty and leaving for Rome, just as Alexis's wife did not keep him from following the path to holiness into exile. This hypothesis cannot be proven with any sort of definitiveness, but it is certainly not contradicted by the evidence available from Christina's *vita* or the Saint Alban's Psalter itself. According to the author of Christina's *Vita*, she and the abbot Geoffrey lived the sort of spiritual relationship that was denied to Alexis and his wife, even in the later *Roumans*. It is interesting to imagine, then, that Geoffrey proposed Alexis and his bride's separation and joyful reunification in heaven as a model and a promise to Christina so that he could leave on a journey from which he would never return.

Whether or not this interpretation is strictly true, it highlights some of the limitations of spiritual friendship. Geoffrey and Christina were not married to each other in "noces virginels," despite their intense friendship. Christina was a bride of Christ, not

Geoffrey's wife.[113] They had no cultural or legal obligation to one another. Nonetheless, Christina tried very hard to keep Geoffrey from leaving her, and he apparently resisted her attempts to limit his movement. It is possible that by encouraging Christina to strive for a heavenly reunion – either specifically with him or more generically with Christ – Geoffrey is trying to avoid the complications and compromises of a concrete, real-life relationship. All relationships put limits on the subjectivity of the people they involve.

As Alexis's wife's own subjectivity emerges more fully in the *Roumans*, she tries to change her husband's mind about leaving, and, barring that, at least alter his plans enough to allow her to come with him. But he will not let her desires deflect him from the course he has set. In the male-dominated context of the *Vie*, a woman does not have the cultural or physical power to keep Alexis from acting on his own subjective desires. This is expressed most clearly in the Roman *Vita* and the *Chanson*, where the bride does not even speak. In the Spanish *Vita* and the *Roumans*, Alexis at least gives his wife the chance to voice her opinion and feels the need to obtain her consent. But he is the master of language and doctrine, and her arguments for the importance human affection and companionship melt away in the face of his declarations that the world is set in ruin and there is no time to waste before totally and exclusively converting to God. Similarly, if Jane Geddes' interpretation is true, Geoffrey respected Christina enough to want to obtain her consent before leaving for Rome, even though she had no legal or cultural power over him. He valued Christina's friendship, but in so far as it limited his own subjective desire

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[113] The *Vita Christinae*'s account of her consecration as a nun refers to her as a "sponsa Christi" and to the ceremony as a "Christi sponsal" (*De S. Christina* §62).

to travel to Rome at the pope's request, he urged Christina to exchange their current, imperfect relationship for the promise of a better one in heaven.

The *Roumans* calls into question the clarity of purpose that defines Alexis in the earlier versions of the legend, such as the *Chanson* Geoffrey gave to Christina. Neil Cartlige bemoans this as a betrayal of the purity and force that make those stories so aesthetically appealing, but it can also be seen as an intrusion of the complications and compromises of human experience into the stark, otherworldly narrative of the Man of God who leaves his family without ever looking back or ever regretting his decision. In the *Roumans* and its successors, Alexis is anxious to obtain his wife's consent before leaving and anxious to convince her that his pessimistic vision of the secular world is correct. But even after she grants him permission to do as he wants, Alexis is still haunted by the fear that the pain he is causing her and his parents is a sin. Their forgiveness eases his conscience almost as much as the miraculous ringing bells that assure him God will accept him into paradise. The *Life of Saint Alexis* still postpones the ultimate resolution of its major conflict until after the death of its protagonists, but explores the implications of the saint's decision more fully and at least gives the opposing view point serious consideration. Is it better to enter into real, living human relationships and deal with the risks and complications they entail, or is it better to avoid temptation and compromise in this life while hoping for some future paradise where all contradictions can be resolved? That is the question I read in the *Life of Saint Alexis*.

Conclusion

The four different versions of the *Life of Saint Alexis* read in this chapter demonstrate the wide range of nuances and responses that the rewriting of a single hagiographic legend can bring to a group of religious and cultural questions. As can be seen, these four rewritings of the *Life of Saint Alexis* introduce a whole series of new questions and answers to the religious horizon of expectations in which they were written. All four respond to the tension between fleeing from the world to save oneself and staying in it to help others be saved, but the answers they provide and even the way in which they frame the question differ, and these differences, seen in light of the experiences of Christina of Markyate, can be understood in terms of the evolving and contradictory religious context of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

A work of literature that began as a Syriac tale exalting asceticism was translated and transposed into Greek and then Latin and entered the literary and religious horizon of expectations of Western Europe. The anonymous Man of God became Alexis, and instead of dying in Syria he returned to Rome and died in his father's house. The Roman *Vita* is particularly susceptible to an interpretation that supports and justifies the monastic notion of a world divided between the masses of the laity, rich and poor alike, enmeshed in the sin and violence of the secular world, and the monks and hermits who refuse all of that, dedicating themselves to the contemplation of God and the construction of an ideal society which can become a foretaste of the celestial life to come. According to the interpretation given by Peter Damian in his Sermon, the Roman *Vita Alexii* suggests that a person can only assure his or her salvation by abandoning the secular world, including the seemingly positive values of familial affection, and dedicating him or herself totally

to an exclusive relationship with God. The fact that Alexis returns to his family unrecognized, refuses the food, wealth, and power that could be his, and remains unmoved by his family's suffering only glorifies his single-minded devotion to God. If Alexis's parents are upright, pious people and his wife is beautiful and faithful, his ascetic triumph is only that much more impressive.

But even in the tenth and eleventh centuries and even within the Latin-speaking clerical world, not everyone agreed that those outside of the "ark" of monasticism, or, more generally, those who did not embrace asceticism and separation, were doomed. The Gregorian reform met with sincere opposition among those who believed that it was permissible for a priest to marry and that a king or emperor might have a legitimate sacred function. And even within the reform, there were many, like Ives of Chartres, who believed that the proper role of the priest was to be a pastor concerned with the salvation of his flock (Grandjean 350-392). Even if he adopted an ascetic way of life, as the canons did, he still had to go out into the world to preach to those who "have not reached the summit of spiritual life and are given over to secular activities and tied by the bonds of the conjugal couple."[114] The older Spanish *Vita* represents another way of looking at Alexis's relationship with his family, one that is more in keeping with this pastoral mentality. Marriage and the secular world are still traps for the man or woman who seeks perfect holiness, but there is space for human sympathy and the conversion and redemption of those whom the holy person has abandoned. Their salvation, of course, is predicated on the same sort of renunciation made by the saint, but at least his

[114] To use Peter Damian's description of the laity in his Sermon on Alexis (col. 653B).

holiness is not totally self-serving. Alexis's return to his family in the Spanish *Vita* allows his asceticism to be an example for his family. Like the canon, Alexis can live in the world but apart from it, and the presence of his holy example in the midst of the secular world can contribute to the salvation of others.

The Old French *Chanson* and *Roumans de Saint Alexis* each take the range of interpretations made available by the Spanish and Roman *Vitae* and then move in different directions. They also take the Alexis-legend and move it into the vernacular space, offering to lay people and the female religious who could not understand Latin the story of a man who rejects his family and the secular values they represent to adopt a life of asceticism. The *Chanson* is more severe in its portrayal of Alexis than the Spanish *Vita*. The saint feels no pity for his family and never speaks to them while alive. He has returned to the raging sea of the secular world, but not to save his family from drowning. Indeed, to have returned on his own initiative would have been a foolish risk of his salvation. It is God who brings Alexis back to Rome in the *Chanson*, and one result of the saint's return is that his ascetic triumph shines brighter in contrast with his family's secular values, including their sadness at his absence. Another result is that the people of Rome are given an intercessor who can save them from an impending natural disaster and provide healing and consolation. The healing powers of Alexis's body also appear in the Roman *Vita*, but the *Chanson* highlights the people's joy at having found such "boen adiutorie" when the pope explicitly contrasts it with the family's mourning. The *Chanson* emphasizes another aspect of sanctity and another vision of salvation. A saint serves the community not as an example of holiness, but as a talisman that can save

people from physical ailments and physical destruction by the metonymical association of touch or family relationship.

Finally, despite the fact that Alexis's wife never speaks before his departure and that the saint apparently never feels any pity for her, she is saved, not in this life, but in Paradise. Her salvation is not just due to her proximity to Alexis; after his death, she herself declares that she will serve God. Alexis and his bride are in heaven, enjoying forever the spiritual intimacy which they were denied on earth. This "happy-ever-after" ending sheds its light on the whole narrative. When Alexis leaves on his wedding-night, it is not necessarily because he scorns his wife or the notion of marriage. He is sacrificing the present, transient joy of being with her now in the failing, secular world in the sure hope of gaining the future, eternal joy of being with her in paradise. This is the interpretation suggested by the prologue that accompanies the *Chanson* in the Saint Albans Psalter. The Alexis-legend not only offers a justification to those who have chosen to leave their family, it also consoles those who have made the difficult choice not to take a human spouse by assuring them they will be reunited to their celestial Bridegroom after death, or, in the specific case of Christina of Markyate and Geoffrey of Saint Albans, encourages the prioress that her spiritual relationship with the abbot will continue in Paradise even if he never returns from his voyage to Rome.

The *Roumans de saint Alexis* takes the relationship between Alexis and his family, especially his wife, to an entirely new level. Rather than a passive obstacle to his flight from the world, the bride, here given a name, Lesigne, argues with Alexis and must be convinced of the righteousness of his decision before she will let him leave, and even

then she does not want to be separated from her husband and offers to take on the ascetic life herself and accompany him into exile. Alexis, too, is depicted with much more sympathetic features. Far from being indifferent to his family's suffering, the saint is in constant fear that the pain he has caused them in leaving will be counted against him as a sin. The barrier of non-recognition that separates Alexis from his family once he has returned to Rome is eroded by the conversations he has first with his father, then his mother, and finally his wife. In the *Roumans*, the return to Rome is not just a backdrop for a glorious ascetic triumph, nor is it just an opportunity for Alexis's family to learn from the saint's example. Alexis himself asks his mother and wife for forgiveness and, just before dying, reassures the latter that he has come back as he promised. The saint's salvation does not depend solely on his rejection of the world and his single-minded dedication to God; he has to reestablish the broken relationships with his family before he can be assured a place in heaven. More so than any of the other versions read here, Alexis's return to Rome in the *Roumans* is an essential part of his own path to sainthood.

As is made abundantly clear in the wedding-night scene and confirmed by the curious flight of the letter from Alexis's hand to his wife's breast, the saint's self-imposed exile is intended from the beginning to ensure Lesigne's salvation as well as his own. The romance elements that Cartlidge and others noted in the addition of the return to Rome to the Man of God legend are fully realized here; the *Roumans de saint Alexis* is the story of two spiritual "lovers" separated by the demands of a system of values that will not permit them to enjoy the full consummation of their relationship until the man has proven himself. The reunification of Alexis and Lesigne in paradise, where, in the

Roumans, they "conversent et si lisent lor salmes" (1323), is the redemption of their love and their marriage. As in the *Chanson*, however, there is no place for this redemption in the world, set as it is on the path to ruin. The fundamental elements of the Alexis-legend, in particular the saint's exile, the time spent in solitude in Syria, and the discovery of the unknown man of God whose identity is revealed in a letter cannot be changed so much that Alexis and Lesigne could enjoy each other's company before death. There are limits to how much a hagiographic rewriter can change a story before it becomes the *Life* of a different saint.[115] The pure, spiritual love that Alexis feels for Lesigne is impossible in the fallen world. Even Christina and Abbot Geoffrey, who were not bound by the legal and cultural bonds of marriage, found obstacles to their spiritual friendship. Detractors questioned the purity of their relationship (*De S. Christina* §76) and Gregory himself may have urged Christina to hope for a reunion in paradise rather than keep him from traveling to Rome. It is hard enough to totally dedicate oneself to God when sitting alone in the desert and even harder when living unrecognized among friends and family. The kind of stoic, single-minded spirituality promoted by Peter Damian is all but impossible in the context of real, two-way human relationships.

The *Roumans* also differs from the other three versions in the level of subjectivity ascribed to the characters, with special attention again given to Alexis's wife. By subjectivity I am referring to the foregrounding of a character's motivations and the process by which they evaluate their circumstances and arrive at decisions. The Roman *Vita* is the least explicit about the subjectivity of its characters, describing what happened

[115] Even the addition of the return to Rome to the Man of God legend led to the re-imagining of the anonymous saint as "Alexis."

and what people said with little or no indication of why they did or said those things. The Spanish *Vita* offers a little more motivation for its characters actions, but a qualitatively richer subjectivity only begins to emerge in the Old French *Vies*. The *Chanson de saint Alexis* reports Alexis's thoughts, often expressed as prayers, about everything from the sight of his wife on their wedding night to his fear of being recognized by his parents after his return to Rome. The *Roumans* repeats many of these soliloquies, expands on them, and adds to them Alexis's fears that the suffering caused by his flight from Rome may actually be a sin. It also reveals the motivations of Alexis's family. Euphemian wonders what the name of the pilgrim staying in his house might be, and so he goes to ask him. Alexis's mother fears that the pilgrim hates her, because he never speaks to her, and she notices that he strongly resembles her son. And Lesigne, as we have seen, tries to convince Alexis not to leave her, offers to accompany him, and finally, as he dies, recognizes that the foreign pilgrim is actually her long-lost "ami."[116] Furthermore, as the flying letter reveals, she has herself set off on the ascetic path to holiness by enduring the mortification of a hair shirt beneath her clothes.

The experience of Lesigne, Alexis's wife in the *Roumans*, raises questions that belong to a new religious horizon of expectations. In the middle of the twelfth century, the ecclesial reforms had made considerable progress and the ascetic model of holiness they proposed became a point of reference for all of the faithful, especially those aristocrats, male and female, who had some level of instruction and the leisure and opportunity to imagine undertaking the difficult path of holiness themselves. They, too,

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[116] When Lesigne realizes that the dying pilgrim may be her husband, Alexis, she exclaims, "E Dius..jou quic c'est mes amis!" (1014).

became subjects in their religious practice. Some, like Christina of Markyate, would find a place, albeit perhaps with some difficulty, in the traditional religious orders of the Church. Others, inspired by the example of saints like Alexis, whose lives they might have heard declaimed in the public squared by jongleurs[117] as well as in Church on the saint's feast day, took it upon themselves to live a life of holiness without becoming a monk or a nun. Some men, including some who were already priests or monks, left their communities, parishes, and ecclesiastic offices and went into the wilderness to pursue the higher ideal of eremitism. But like Alexis, they did not stay isolated from the rest of society forever. Men and women, attracted by their ascetic rigor and clear, direct message, flocked around these hermits to listen to their preaching and many were inspired by their example, left the world, and joined them in the wilderness. But as the *Life of saint Alexis* warns when it denies the possibility of Alexis and his wife living together in virginal, spiritual marriage here on earth and as Christina of Markyate experienced, human relationships are hard to reconcile with a stoic model of holiness that requires total and exclusive devotion to an internal God who is reached through asceticism and meditation. But was this the only model of holiness available to the twelfth or thirteenth century man or woman?

New questions arise from these experiences. Was it possible to live a life of holiness without physically separating oneself from the secular world? Could chastity and a hair shirt assure salvation to someone like Lesigne who continued to live in an aristocratic home with a father-in-law concerned with military honor and landownership

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[117] As Elliott imagines was the case for the *Roumans* (The *Vie de Saint Alexis* 69-76).

and a mother-in-law obsessed with the physical survival of her offspring? Was the secular world truly "set in ruin," as Alexis and the narrators of the *Chanson* and *Roumans* insist? Could men and women live together in spiritually beneficial relationships? Another saint's life, the *Life of Pope saint Gregory*, and the experiences of another woman, the countess Ermengarde of Anjou, will show how the rewriting of a hagiographic legend responded to these questions and proposed new questions in turn.

Chapter II

La Vie du pape saint Grégoire and Ermengarde of Anjou

In the prologue to the Old French *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, the narrator is very explicit about the subject of his tale, his motivation for telling it, and the lesson his listeners should take from its example. The tale is the life of a “bon peccheor” from Aquitaine whose sin and suffering are so extraordinary that “Mut est granz paors a retraire.”[118] The narrator assures his audience that it is not because of pride that he wants to tell this story, but so that other sinners might learn from its example. He is speaking in particular about the sort of people who believe their sins are so great they can never be forgiven. He promises that if they stay long enough to hear the end of his tale, they will learn that they are denying themselves the “fruit de penitence.” The “bon peccheor’s” guilt was serious indeed, the narrator explains, but he did not fall into despair, and, after repenting and doing penance, even became pope (A_1 17-46, cf. B_1 17-46). At this point the audience is probably wondering what this man’s frightful sin might be, and the narrator obligingly satisfies their curiosity, “Tant fu mesfait icist bons sire…Que un suens uncles l’engendra, / Une soe ante le porta.” And not only was this holy man the son of his uncle and aunt, the devil made him do worse, “Quar serorges devint son pere, / E maris fu sa charnel mere!” (A_1 47-53, cf. B_1 47-53).

The example of frightful transgression and hard-won redemption offered as proof that all sins can be forgiven is the fantastic story of a man born from the incestuous affair

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[118] $A_1$1-5, cf. B_1 1-5. All citations are taken from Sol, *La Vie du pape saint Grégoire* and are referenced by version and verse number. The two versions studied in this chapter are known as A_1 and B_1 because they are the earliest examples of the A and B families of manuscripts.

between a brother and sister who later compounds his guilt by unwittingly marrying his own mother. As in the Greek legend of Oedipus,[119] this mother-son incest is eventually revealed, but in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, the revelation is not grounds for despair and suicide, it is the catalyst that moves the protagonist to undergo seventeen years of self-imposed penance chained to a rock in the middle of the sea, which in turn earns him God's forgiveness and miraculous election as pope. The choice of incest as the "worst sin" that proves all sins can be forgiven is an interesting one and not uncommon in medieval literature.[120] It draws on the deep-seated taboos against sexual relationships between members of a nuclear family and the almost visceral revulsion those taboos elicit among people conditioned to accept them, while at the same time enticing the audience with a tantalizing account of sexual transgression. Elizabeth Archibald argues in *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* that the prevalence of incest in medieval literature shows that "incestuous desire was not regarded as a rare and barbaric perversion, but rather as a constant danger for all" (7). No matter what sin a member of the audience might have committed, it probably was not as serious in the popular imagination as marrying one's own mother. If Gregory could be forgiven for incest, then the members of the audience could be forgiven for their lesser sins.

The purpose of the story is to alleviate the despair that accompanies guilt. The narrator encourages his listeners not to despair that their sins can never be forgiven, because by obtaining forgiveness they will no longer have to despair about their chances

[119] Known to medieval readers through Statius's *Thebaïd* and its romance rewritings (Archibald 57-63).
[120] Referring to Jean-Charles Payen's *Le Motif du repentir*, Archibald notes that "from the twelfth century on [incest] became very popular among clerical writers as the literary 'péché monstrueux' or monstrous sin which demonstrated that divine grace is available to even the most wicked sinner, as long as s/he is truly contrite" (6-7).

of salvation. This is a slightly different way of understanding the purpose of a saint's life than the opposition between veneration and imitation presented by André Vauchez and Brigitte Cazelles. The legendary Pope Gregory is certainly presented as an ascetic champion and a miraculous healer, but the audience is not specifically invited to venerate him. Conversely, they are not expected to imitate him either – what real person could ever hope to survive seventeen years chained to a rock in the middle of the sea? Instead, the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* teaches a specific lesson – sinners should repent and seek God's forgiveness – by telling a fantastic, exaggerated, and memorable story. The audience does not have to imitate Gregory's superhuman penance because presumably their sins are not as grave as his were. Their penance will be more mundane and manageable in so far as their sins are less fantastic. This creates a tension in the saint's life, however. On one hand, the story is made as improbable and marvelous as possible in order to engage the audience and teach them a clear, memorable lesson. But this very improbability and marvel can threaten the story's coherence as a narrative and the audience's ability to relate to and identify with the characters. A large part of the interest of this saint's life derives from this tension.

Can all sins be forgiven?

The lesson promised by the narrator in the prologue to the *Vie* is born out by the rest of the story, but not without important nuances and complications that have a significant impact on the way the *Vie* questions and is questioned by the religious horizon of expectations of the times and places in which it was written, read, and re-written. The

Vie du pape saint Grégoire deals very directly and explicitly with one of the fundamental questions of the medieval Christian world: what must one do to be freed from sin and gain salvation? As Etienne Delaruelle describes in *La Piété populaire au Moyen Age*, the fate of one's soul after death was a pressing concern in the Middle Ages, and the fear of damnation was ever-present. Salvation, Delaruelle proposes, means "essentiellement d'être racheté de l'Enfer et donc d'être relevé d'un péché d'autant plus mortel qu'il est plus inéluctable" (88). The example of Pope Saint Gregory, marked at birth by his parents' incest and guilty even before he consciously sins, corresponds to the Christian notion of original sin. Unless they turn to God, admit their sin, and actively do penance, all men and women are damned and inclined to continue sinning and worsening their conditions. But what kind of conversion and penance is necessary? An analysis of these two versions and their different responses to the narrator's promise of an example of how God will forgive any sin offers a fascinating, narrative response which resonates with the experience of medieval men and women struggling to be saved and find meaning in their lives in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The religious practices proposed by the Christian religion in the Middle Ages were at least in theory meant to alleviate people's guilt and calm the anxiety they felt about salvation, which meant both having clarity of purpose and peace of mind in this life, and avoiding eternal punishment after death. Baptism was supposed to wipe away the guilt of original sin, but men and women who were baptized as infants invariably sinned again. Making a radical conversion and entering a monastery was one way to experience something like a second baptism (Grandjean 89, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 227),

but not everyone had the opportunity or the disposition to become a monk or nun. The path to salvation offered to the majority of lay people was a moral life with moderate asceticism and simple devotions. In the early Church, those who failed on this path and committed grave sins were given the opportunity to confess their sins publically and permanently live in a state of penance. By the seventh century, however, the practice of private confession and penance emerged, allowing the faithful to expiate their sins by temporarily adopting a more severe ascetic practice or more intense devotion (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 21-23). The practice of confession, which was eventually defined as a sacrament that could only be administered by an ordained priest, became one of the lynchpins of lay spirituality. Entangled in the sexuality and violence of the secular world, lay people could hardly avoid sinning, but each time they sinned, they could confess their sins to a priest, do the penance he assigned, and thereby obtain God's forgiveness (ibid. 155-156). The practice was a two-edged sword, however. Forgiveness was readily available, but it required the intervention of an ordained priest. As Étienne Délruelle observes, the practice of confession placed the laity in a position of absolute dependence on the sacerdotal order, which considered itself the sole proprietor of the keys that could loose sins (94). The role of the Christian religion in assuaging people's guilt and giving them clarity of purpose and peace of mind is more ambiguous than the prologue to the *Vie* would make it seem. The religion promises forgiveness, but it also declares people guilty, apparently even for things like being born of an incestuous relationship that they did not choose.

The *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* offers important insight into this tension. The *Vie* presents a world view in which the sacramental nature of confession has not yet been totally codified. The prologue speaks only of confessing to God, not to a priest, and the narrative itself never explicitly mentions the need for confession as a sacrament. It focuses much more on penance than confession, and the penance, in Gregory's case, is self-imposed. Gregory's election to the papacy, however, does bring the sacerdotal order into the narrative, and the final scenes of the *Vie* make a strong if implicit argument for the need for priestly confession. The saint's life illustrates the complexity and the ambiguity of the Christian religion's response to the human need for forgiveness and peace of mind.

An apocryphal hagiographic legend and an extended exemplum

The A_1 and B_1 versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* represent a different type of rewriting than the successive reinterpretations of the Life of Saint Alexis in Latin and French studied in the previous chapters. Rather then being written in different forms and languages, A_1 and B_1 are both Old French poems in rhyming octosyllabic couplets and in many places they are very similar in wording, even closer than the *Chanson* and the *Roumans de saint Alexis*. They are two different ways of interpreting the same legendary material in the same literary and cultural context. The prologue itself is almost identical between the two versions and there are many other passages that are closely parallel. Occasionally the wording in parallel passages is subtly but significantly different, but the most important variations between the two versions are the passages that appear in one and not the other. In most cases it is A_1 that is more verbose than B_1, and most significantly A_1 reports an episode that is entirely lacking in B_1.

The sigla A_1 and B_1 designate the oldest of the six manuscripts that contain the Old French octosyllabic *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*.[121] The version B_1, found in the British Museum Egerton 612 manuscript, dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century, whereas A_1 is found in the famous Tours 927 manuscript, which dates from the middle of the thirteenth century and also contains the hybrid Latin-French *Jeu d'Adam*, one of the oldest examples of vernacular drama (Sol xv-xix). The six Old French octosyllabic poems, as well as the better-known German *Gregorius* by Hartmann von

[121] All six are printed separately in Hendrik Sol's remarkable edition. The designations were first proposed by Mario Roques, who divided the manuscripts into two families of three versions each and hypothesized that B_1, the only version lacking the final reunion between Gregory and his mother, was the closest to the original (Roques, "Deux particularités métriques" and "Notes pour l'édition de la *Vie de saint Grégoire*").

Aue and four Middle English poems, are similar enough to one another that they clearly derive from a common Old French archetype which has since been lost, but which probably dates to the twelfth century (Sol xiii).

The origins of this archetype are "wrapped in mystery."[122] It is certainly not the historical account of the life of any historical popes named Gregory, although the life could possibly be intended to refer to Pope Gregory the Great, who, elected in 590, was initially reticent to accept the papacy, somewhat like the Gregory in the legend.[123] A_1 gives credence to this identification by declaring that Gregory was "uns de ceauz qui chant trova," (2721), referring to the traditional association between Gregory the Great and liturgical song. Conversely, the version B_1 explicitly denies this connection, saying that there were several popes named Gregory, and the one whose story it recounts "ne fud cil Gregories mie / Qui fist les livres e les chanz" (2034-2035). The fantastic nature of the legend has led some scholars to argue that the anonymous poet who wrote the Old French archetype actually invented the material, but A. van der Lee observes that the legend can be traced through analogous Coptic and Syriac texts to Greek-speaking Christians of the Middle East in the sixth or seventh century (124-136).[124] According to van der Lee, the legend of the good sinner was eventually translated into Latin and used to illustrate sermons on the certainty of God's forgiveness, and it must have one been of

[122] "Die Entstehung und der Entwicklungsgang der Stoffe, in denen sich die mittelalterliche Dichtung bewegt, sind Vielfach in Dunkel gehüllt" (van der Lee 31).
[123] Emile Littré, the first modern critic to study the *Vie*, had no doubts about the identification of the protagonist with Gregory the Great (171).
[124] The similarities between the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* and the Coptic account of the patriarch John are too great to be coincidental, and scholars who argue for the originality of the Old French *Vie* claim that it is the Coptic text that derives from the Old French, and not vice-versa; but as van der Lee notes, such a relationship introduces all but insurmountable problems of chronology (124).

these Latin texts that provided the Old French poet of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* with his source (255-256).[125]

The global effect of the *Vie* supports this theory. As J.C. Payen observes, the *Vie* resembles nothing so much as a "long exemplum illustrant de manière démesurée le sermon en vers qui en constitue le prologue" (106-107). The *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* seems to have been written or adapted to teach a lesson, the "le sermon en vers" found in the prologue, as J.C. Payen puts it, rather than composed to illustrate the power and influence of a saint whose relics are preserved in the author's monastery, for example. The existence of two versions of the *Vie* with substantially different endings means that the medieval scribes who copied and reinterpreted it did not have the same vision of how to interpret and present that lesson. In both versions of the legend, Gregory leaves his mother after they have discovered their true identity. In B_1, this is the last time she appears in the story. She does not appear alongside her son in paradise in the epilogue to the *Vie* and her ultimate fate remains unknown. In A_1, however, Gregory's mother reappears after he is elected pope. When the new pontiff and his mother recognize one another in this new setting, their relationship is no longer a source of guilt and sadness, but the joyous reunion of a long-separated parent and child. Pope Gregory makes his mother the abbess of a convent in Rome, and the two continue in spiritual friendship until their death, after which they both merit "la corone pardurable / Ensemble o vie esperitable" (A_1 2593-2698).

[125] The oldest extant medieval Latin version of the Gregory legend, a chapter in a collection of *exempla* known as the *Gesta Romanorum*, is probably younger than the Old French versions and in any case is a cousin and not an ancestor of the *Vie* (ibid.).

It is unclear which of these two versions is closer to the common archetype shared by the A and B families of manuscripts, although extratextual evidence points to A_1. The Coptic and Syriac texts cited by van der Lee as ancestors or analogues to the Gregory-legend both conclude with a reunion between the protagonist and his mother, as does the Latin version found in the *Gesta Romanorum.* Despite this evidence, Mario Roques, one of the first scholars to compare the different versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* argued that B_1, the oldest and shortest surviving version, is the closest to the Old French archetype ("Deux particularités métriques" 60-61). Hendrik Sol, on the other hand, concedes that the remarkable differences between A and B, "pourrait évidemment résider en ceci que l'auteur de l'archétype A a amplifié l'ancêtre commun, tandis que le poète de l'archétype B l'a écourté" (xiii). As they stand, A_1 and B_1 offer two different interpretations of the same legendary material, neither of which can claim precedence over the other as somehow more faithful to historical fact or to the creative impulse from which the legend originated.

The A_1 and B_1 versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* are not distinguished by language and cultural milieu, like the Latin and Old French versions of the *Vie* de saint Alexis, nor are they separated by a century of religious and literary evolution, like the *Chanson* and the *Roumans de saint Alexis*. They represent a different model of rewriting than the one explored in the previous chapters. Instead of embodying the varying re-readings and re-writings of a saint's life across different horizons of expectations, A_1 and B_1 offer an example of how divergent two interpretations made within the same cultural and religious milieu can be. Even within the same religious horizon of expectations, the

same saint's life can be made to give different answers to the same questions and then to ask different questions in turn. The dissimilar endings of A_1 and B_1 and other points of departure between the two versions are made all the more significant by the many points of similarity. Taken on its own, the absence of Gregory's mother from the end of his *Vie* is significant, but it is made more meaningful in B_1 by the fact that Gregory's mother is explicitly saved in other versions. Surrounded by so much similarity, even minor differences can become significant. For example, at the very beginning of the poem, the narrators of both A_1 and B_1 announce that they will tell the story of a "bon peccheor" from Aquitaine. As I have noted, the narrator of A1 goes on to say that "Si peché furent molt estrange / Mut est grands paors a retraire" (3-5). The narrator of B_1 says almost the same thing, but instead of noting that the protagonist's sins are "estrange" he says, "Pur ses pechiez suffri grant peine / Ke grant poür est a retraire" (4-5). The discrepancy may be no more than an unmotivated variant based on the fact that "peine" gives a better rhyme for "Aquaitaine" than "estrange" does, but in light of the larger differences between the two versions, it is interesting to note that the same narrator who maintains that no one in the audience could imitate Gregory's seventeen-year penance comments that the saint suffered "grant peine" for his sins. The differences between A_1 and B_1 demonstrate that even within the French-speaking world of the twelfth century, there were various ways to answer the question of whether all sins can be forgiven and what must be done to earn that forgiveness.

Ermengarde of Anjou, Countess of Brittany

In order to ground my analysis of the A_1 and B_1 versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* in the historical context, I compare the experience of Gregory's mother, the fictional Countess of Aquitaine, with the life of a historical noblewoman, Ermengarde the daughter of Count Fulk IV of Anjou and wife of Count Alan IV of Brittany.[126] She was a remarkable woman whose position as a powerful aristocrat allowed her to explore many of the different forms of religious life available between the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The path that she traveled as she negotiated a compromise between the anxiety of salvation and the responsibilities of power offer an important point of comparison and contrast with the simple yet fantastic lesson taught by the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*.

Born around 1069, Ermengarde was a powerful, strong-willed woman whose beauty, intelligence, and virtue were deemed worthy of praise by the Latin poet Marbode of Rennes.[127] She is also remarkable because one of the few surviving documents written by the wandering preacher Robert of Arbrissel is addressed to her. Robert was one of the most charismatic preachers of the early twelfth century and the founder of the mixed male and female monastery of Fontevraud, in which a female abbess ruled over both sexes.[128] Ermengarde's connection to such a figure is only one aspect of her deep involvement in the major religious and political currents of her time. She was briefly

[126] No writing of Ermengarde's survives, although several letters written addressed to her exist. Pétigny offers a brief biography of Ermengarde in his 1854 edition of Robert of Arbrissel's letter to the Countess. Philippe Carrer published an extensive biography of Ermengarde in 2003, but he does not reference the medieval primary sources. Both men's work derives from the extensive study of the history of Brittany published by Dom Lobineau in the early eighteenth century.
[127] Marbode studied in Angers, Ermengarde's native city. He was elected Bishop of Rennes in 1096, and Pétigny conjectures that it was at this time that he wrote the verses in praise of Ermengarde (214). The poem itself is published in *Patrologia Latina.* vol. 171 cols. 1659C-1160B.
[128] See Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin and Salvation* for a modern biography and Verdrade, *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Religious Life* for translations of and commentary on the medieval sources of his life.

married to William IX of Aquitaine, the first troubadour, she ruled Brittany in her husband's stead when he traveled to the Holy Land with the first Crusade, and after Alan's death, she shared power with their son Conan (Pétigny 220-221).

Over the course of her life, Ermengarde entered the cloister "trois ou quatre fois," but never stayed for long (Pétigny 214). Ermengarde spent a few years in Fontevraud with Robert of Arbrissel, and later in life she entered a Cistercian priory near Dijon through the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux (222), only to quickly leave and embark on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where her brother, Fulk V of Anjou, had ascended the throne of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (222-223). Shortly before dying, Ermengarde entered another religious house, the same Saint-Sauveur monastery in Redon, Brittany, where her husband had withdrawn from the secular world and died almost thirty years earlier (224). Between these forays into the religious life, Ermengarde played a role "aussi actif que brillant" in the government of Brittany, as Pétigny writes: "son nom figure dans toutes les chartes, elle assiste à toutes les assemblées politiques ou religieuses, et l'on pourrait presque dire qu'elle gouverne sous le nom de son fils" (220-221).

Appraisals of her volatile character have been as varied as her interests. The portrait that emerges from Pétigny's mid-nineteenth century description of Ermengarde recalls a romantic heroine: fervent but inconstant, capable of great leaps of enthusiasm, especially when inspired by a charismatic male figure, but unable to remain committed to her vocation after the dimming of that initial flame. Writing in the late-twentieth century, Régine Pernoud describes Ermengarde's inconstancy with a bit more sympathy, declaring

that Ermengarde was "a very noble soul, undoubtedly marked by a degree of instability but also by this capacity for overcoming oneself that is so characteristic of her time" (128). In her biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Alison Weir overextends the scant evidence available and diagnoses the "violent mood swings" from which Ermengarde suffered during her first, brief marriage to the troubadour William IX of Aquitaine as "symptoms of what was possibly manic depression or schizophrenia" (9-10).

Like Gregory's mother, Ermengarde was not a saint. She did not have the single-minded zeal and the exceptional dedication to holiness that would have led her contemporaries to revere her after her death. Instead, like Gregory's mother, she was an ordinary albeit privileged Christian who negotiated a path between the compromises and responsibilities of the secular world and her desire for the tranquility and clarity of religious life in a monastery. Her experience was probably not typical for women of her time because her rank and wealth gave her a freedom of self-determination almost unimaginable for a woman, or man, of lesser means. But it is precisely this exceptional freedom that makes Ermengarde's story so appealing. Given the opportunity to enter into and withdraw from the religious life almost at will, how did this notable woman respond to the religious questions of her time and work towards salvation? What drew her to Fontevraud and the Cistercian priory at Larrey, and why did she leave? Answering these questions sheds light on the religious horizon of expectations that questioned and was questioned by the complex and contradictory example of forgiveness found in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*.

Incest and consanguinity

Ermengarde of Brittany is also related to the *Vie* in another remarkable way: incest. Like many of the men and women of her time and almost of all the aristocrats, Ermengarde's life was directly affected by the Church's teaching and practice that marriages contracted between a man and a woman who were too closely related were not only illegitimate, but could and must be annulled when a forbidden relationship was discovered after the fact. Elizabeth Archibald offers an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, known as consanguinity. The Church, like the Roman society in which it emerged, had always forbidden marriages between descendants and ascendants, like Gregory and his mother, as well as between brothers and sisters, even though the Biblical tradition offers many examples of this latter practice among the ancient patriarchs.[129] By the seventh century of the Christian era, this ban had been extended from siblings to include all relatives up to the fourth and then seventh degrees, including people related by marriage, known as affines, and those connected by the "spiritual" bonds of kinship formed by serving as a godparent.[130] At first these relationships where calculated according to the Roman system, which counted one degree for each generation up to a common ancestor and back down to the relative in question. According to this system, a

[129] Archibald makes the interesting point that Christian thinkers, starting with Saint Augustine, recognized that the practice of sibling marriage in the Old Testament meant that "the supposedly natural and universal law prohibiting incest was in fact socially constructed, and thus open to interpretation and alteration by the Church authorities" (24-27).

[130] Curiously enough, Archibald states that Pope Gregory I was thought in the Middle Ages to have been the first to specify the number of degrees as seven (28 note 71). Whether or not this is true, it is interesting to note that the same Gregory often connected with the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* is also connected to legislation about consanguinity.

man is related to his first cousin in the fourth degree.[131] Sometime in the second half of the eighth century, however, the Church began to switch from the Roman method of counting degrees to the Germanic one, which merely counted generations back to a common ancestor, making four Roman degrees equal to two German ones (Archibald 28-29).

Even though its theological foundations were shaky, the consequences of this policy were far-reaching and somewhat surprising. There was no Scriptural basis for such a drastic restriction of eligible marriage partners, and the motivation for this practice can be traced instead to Saint Augustine and other Church Fathers. Augustine argued that although incest was permitted and even necessary – "compellente necessitate" – in the newly-created world because of the lack of people, once the population had grown sufficiently, it became important to marry outside of one's kin group to "spread the net of 'socialis dilectio' (social affection)" (ibid. 24). Because records and memories seldom reached back far enough to accurately calculate seven degrees of kinship, the practical consequence of this ban was that no one could marry anyone he or she knew to be a relative, and that the residents of smaller communities could not legally marry anyone they knew at all (ibid. 41). By the thirteenth century, the Church itself recognized that this policy was causing "considerable hardship," and the Fourth Lateran Council reduced the number of prohibited degrees from seven to four, where it would stand until the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent (ibid. 40-41).

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[131] One degree up to the father, two degrees to the grandfather, three degrees back down to the uncle, and then four degrees to the cousin.

During the height of the seven-degree ban, however, those who had the initiative and freedom of action were actually able to turn the Church's prohibition to their advantage. As George Duby describes in *Le Chevalier, la Femme, et le Prêtre*, the lay people of the Middle Ages, and in particular, the aristocrats, held a different view of marriage than the clergy. The clergy maintained that marriage, once contracted, was indissoluble. Jesus himself had claimed that Moses had only permitted the Israelites to divorce because of their hardness of heart, and that "what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:3-12). Furthermore, as the centuries progressed, Christian thinkers began to see marriage less as a necessary evil required for the continued existence of humanity and more as a loving relationship based on mutual consent and affection with mystical overtones that could serve as a metaphor for God's love for the Church (Duby 1183, Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage*).

For lay aristocrats, Duby writes, marriage was a means to an end. Marriages were contracted to forge alliances between families and expected to produce heirs. Consequently, if a man was not satisfied with his wife's ability to provide either of these things, he felt he had the right to repudiate her and marry someone else. Besides, even in cases where a marriage produced children and continued to be politically useful, many medieval men and women simply decided they could no longer live with their spouse, whether because someone else had caught their eye or because cohabitation had become intolerable (Duby 1186-1188). In the eyes of these aristocrats, the Church's insistence that marriages contracted between people related by less than seven degrees could and should be dissolved was not a limit on whom they could marry, but a way around the

prohibition on divorce. The possibility that a future spouse might be related within a prohibited degree was either ignored or not investigated before a marriage, but once the marriage ceased to be desirable, it was relatively easy for genealogists to turn up a common ancestor recent enough to allow for separation. Even in cases where two people were known to be related, the Church was often willing to grant a dispensation, depending of course on the political agenda or simple greed of the bishops and popes involved (Archibald 42-45). In his study on marriage litigation in medieval England, R.H. Helmhoz declared that aristocrats married "sub spe dispensationis" (87, as cited in Archibald 44, cf. Archibald 42), that is, that they knowingly contracted marriages with relatives distant enough that the Church would not prevent the marriage from going forward, but close enough to allow for the possibility of divorce if things did not turn out as well as expected.

The issue of consanguinity is both a symbol and a concrete example of the sinfulness and ambiguity of lay life. On one hand, it represented the constant threat of sin hanging over every married person. It was often impossible to know whether one's spouse was related within the forbidden degree or not. In this sense, the Church's teachings on consanguinity exacerbated the laity's guilt and made them even more dependent on the intercession of priests (Archibald 47-48). It placed marriage – the most secular institution of all – under the control and supervision of the clerical order. On the other hand, consanguinity was also used by the laity, with the help of accommodating genealogists and prelates, to circumvent the religious ban on divorce. Medieval society was not a monolithic block with only one point of view, and even the Church itself did

not always speak with one voice. There were multiple, intersecting sources of power that together defined a complex and contradictory world.

Ermengarde and consanguinity

Divorce on grounds of consanguinity was as much a reality in Ermengarde's time and place as legal divorce is today. Ermengarde's own mother died very young, and her father, Fulk IV, married five other women before dying, some of whom he divorced on grounds of consanguinity, and one of whom was literally kidnapped and married by Philippe I of France, who himself was married at the time (Carrer 28-32).[132] Ermengarde herself was divorced on grounds of consanguinity from her first husband, William IX of Aquitaine, after a marriage so brief that it was never consummated and therefore may never have been official (Pétigny 214-215).[133] Having seen so many men free themselves from unwanted wives by appealing to the prohibition against consanguinity, Ermengarde tried to prove she was related to Alan of Brittany as a way to escape from her marriage. As Pétigny describes, life with the coarse Alan in the rough and comparatively barbaric region of Brittany must have been difficult for the young Ermengarde, who had grown up in the "riantes contrées arrossées par la Loire," in the city of Angers, the Athens of Western France (214). Sometime in 1106 or 1107, Ermengarde had tolerated all she could and fled to Fontevraud and tried to gather the necessary proof that she was indeed related to Alan within the prohibited degree and that their marriage should be dissolved

[132] Duby describes at length the affair of Philippe and Bertrade, which resulted in the king's excommunication and was a major event in the papacy's struggles against the lay aristocracy (1163-1176).
[133] Cartlidge discusses the controversy over whether consent or consummation was the "efficient cause" of marriage (*Medieval Marriage* 15-20).

(Pétigny 216). But the ecclesiastic courts that had been so accommodating to her father and others denied Ermengarde's request, probably not because her case was any less legitimate, but because she did not wield enough influence to secure a favorable judgment (Carrer 124). Ermengarde was forced to return to her husband, but she did not abandon her hopes of leaving him and entering the religious life at Fontevraud, as indicated by a letter addressed to Ermengarde by the monastery's founder, Robert of Arbrissel shortly after her return to Brittany (Pétigny 216-217). Robert's response hints at the failed attempt at separation by consainguinity. He takes Ermengarde's continuing desire to leave the world seriously, but reminds her that she is "conjuncta" and that she cannot be legally separated because she does not have the "witnesses who would prove her case."[134] Ermengarde eventually would enter Fontevraud after her husband's own retirement to a monastery, but for the time being, the Countess of Brittany found her religious vocation blocked by the Church's unwillingness to dissolve her marriage on grounds of consanguinity.

Throughout her life, Ermengarde negotiated a path between the different answers commonly given to the religious questions of her time. Ermengarde was not an exceptional sinner, and so she never felt the deep need for penance that drove Gregory and his mother. But in her own way she responded to the uneasiness and dissatisfaction with life that the medieval Christian ascribed to the ever-present threat and effect of sin, while at the same time recognizing and perhaps enjoying her important role in promoting

[134] "Conjuncta es: non potes disjungi lege. Non habes testes qui probare velint" (Pétigny 227).

the growth and peace of the land over which she ruled.[135] Ermengarde's complicated and paradoxical path through life provides a fascinating point of comparison to the example of sin and forgiveness offered by the pope Saint Gregory and his mother.

How do they sin?

In order to understand how the different versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* respond to the question of sin and forgiveness, one must begin with sin, which, as it turns out, is not a straightforward matter. For the narrator, it is clear that Gregory is a sinner; indeed, at the very outset of the poem the audience is invited to listen to the life of a "bon peccheor." This description is repeated throughout the poem: Gregory and his mother are called sinners and their actions are called sins. This much is clear. But when the nature of Gregory's sin is examined more closely, it quickly becomes apparent that the question of his guilt is more complicated than the narrator indicates. At the end of the prologue, the narrator explains the nature of Gregory's sin by laying out in detail the web of twisted relationships which make up his family. First, his uncle engendered him and his aunt bore him, and then the devil made him become his father's brother-in-law and his own mother's husband. According to this description, Gregory's sin is not caused by anything he has done, but instead is the result of who he is. It is the fact that Gregory was born of an incestuous relationship and the fact that he entered into one that make him a sinner; there is no question of choice or intention.

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[135] Carrer describes how soon after Ermengarde's retirement, Brittany fell into a devastating three-way war between her son, son-in-law, and grandson, which ended with the Duchy under English domination (263).

At first glance, Gregory's sin seems more akin to the ancient model of impurity and defilement than the rational model in which sinning required a voluntary act that was beginning to appear in theological writing of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. According to this latter model, Gregory certainly could not be held accountable for his mother and father's incest. Even if it is written in Exodus that God said, "I…am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents" (20:5), medieval theologians could counter that "A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent" (Ezekiel 18:20), and conclude logically that no one could incur punishment for the sin of another (*Summa* 1-2, q. 87, a. 8). And insofar as an action cannot be considered voluntary if committed unknowingly, even Gregory and his mother's marriage can be excused because they were ignorant of the true nature of their relationship.[136]

In her article "Schuld oder Nichtschuld," Brigitte Herlem-Prey lays out the various ways of understanding Gregory's need to do penance. First, this penance could be for the incest he committed with his mother, which is an objective fault even if Gregory remains subjectively guiltless; in this case, the *Vie* would represent the popular perception of sin rather than the theological definition (Herlem-Prey 4). Second, Gregory's sin could also be seen as an allegory for original sin, in which case his penance would be inspired by the recognition of humanity's inherent sinfulness and not specific,

[136] Archibald cites Peter Abelard's use of incest with an unrecognized sister as an example of the importance of intention in defining sinful actions (46). Thomas Aquinas discusses the role of ignorance in defining whether an action is voluntary or not in the *Summa* (1-2 q. 6). In general, Aquinas concedes that ignorance can cause "involuntariness" and hence mitigate guilt, but he also observes that a person can be guilty of not having taken the proper steps to remove ignorance, for example, by shooting an arrow into the road without checking to see if anyone is walking by.

personal fault. Finally, Gregory could be considered guilty of a personal, subjective sin, but this sin would be something other than incest (Herlem-Prey 3).

All three of these perspectives are valid, and all three contribute to a better understanding of how circumstance, malevolent influence, and choice lead to sin in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*. The first two perspectives accurately reflect the pessimistic worldview that animates the first half of the poem: human beings are born guilty without ever having done anything wrong personally, and, in the absence of God's mercy, they cannot avoid committing further sins, even when they do not consciously intend to do so. The only chance men and women have to escape from this cycle is to recognize their guilt and hence their need for God's mercy.

The question of sin and guilt is not as one-dimensional as what is seen in the prologue. As the narrative unfolds, the causes and effects of characters' decisions and actions are described with remarkable subtlety. While not totally able to free itself from the simplistic equation of sin with unnatural relationships, on a whole the *Vie* presents a much more interesting and compelling vision of the interaction between free-will and determinism than might be expected. Gregory, his mother, and the other characters in the *Vie* are not completely subject to external forces, but their choices are strongly conditioned by their circumstances. Understanding this interaction is essential to understanding how the *Vie* functions as a narrative and how it responds to the question of sin and forgiveness that was so important in the lives of medieval men and women like Ermengarde of Brittany.

Sin begets sin…

Like an ancient Greek tragedy, the plot of the first half of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* is shaped by the inescapable consequences of one initial transgression, specifically the incestuous relationship between the brother and sister who become Gregory's mother and father. The inevitability of tragedy is not ensured by an *ineluctabile fatum* uttered by an oracle, but by the machinations of a very personal devil who can influence nature and human emotions to trap people in sin. The *Vie* begins with the birth of Gregory's mother, the second child of the old Count of Aquitaine, and it is this birth that sets into motion the chain of events that leads to the marriage of a mother and son. The Count's daughter is described as famously beautiful, but the narrator immediately warns that "Mais sa grant biauté mar vit," (A_1 71, cf. B_1 69), and indeed, it is from this beauty that proceeds the tragedy that animates the first half of the *Vie*. The most immediate tragic consequence of the daughter's birth is not directly related to her beauty, but is grammatically connected, "Mais sa grant biauté mar vit, / Quar a grant duel li revertit. / De ces enfans mourut la mere / E enprés prist la mors al pere" (A_1 71-74, cf. B_1 69-72). The girl's mother apparently died in childbirth, and the pain of the loss then caused the death of her father.

The rapid succession of the mother and father's death in one sentence would seem to indicate that the Count of Aquitaine died soon after his daughter's birth, but his dying words to his son hint that enough time had passed for the girl to grow to a marriageable age and that the Count is not entirely blameless with respect to his children's incest. On his deathbed the Count implores his son to look after his sister and to find her a suitable

husband, because his only regret is that he did not marry her off while he was still alive. He is so concerned for her, in fact, that he echoes the narrator's statement that it would have been better for the girl never to have been born (A_1 81-106, B_1 79-94). As several scholars have observed, the Count's regret is well-founded: by not having found a suitable match for his daughter, he has left her vulnerable to her brother's lust (Legros 516, Gaunt 198-212, Archibald 116).

It is clear that the Count is responsible for leaving his daughter under the authority of her brother and hence exposing her to incest, but there is possibly more to the father's guilt than simply having run out of time. The reason the Count gives for not having found his daughter a suitable match is striking. He tells his son that his soul is grieving "Por ta seror, qui est tant gente, / Que, en mon vivant, ne l'ai mise / O sa biauté fust bien acise" (A_1 86-88, cf. B_1 84-86). The result clause formed by "tant gente que" – according to one reading of the Old French – indicates that the Count did not marry off his daughter because she was exceedingly beautiful and noble.[137] It is not that the Count was looking for a husband for his daughter but was unable to find one before dying; he purposely kept his daughter at home because she was so physically and emotionally attractive. Gregory's grandfather may not be guilty of incest himself, but he is guilty of excessive and misdirected affection towards his daughter, perhaps exacerbated by the loss of his wife.[138] The Count expects his son to give his sister away to another man, but he could

[137] That is, in English, "who is *so* beautiful/noble *that*, while alive, I did not place her, etc." According to another reading the count would be telling his son that he is grieving "for your sister, who is so beautiful/noble, *because,* while alive, I did not place her, etc." Either reading is possible, but the motif of a father not being able to part with his beautiful daughter after his wife's death is a common one in medieval literature.

[138] See Archibald's discussion of Father-Daughter incest (145-191).

not bring himself to do so. Sin begets sin in the first half of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, and at the beginning of it all is a father who found his daughter too beautiful and charming to give away.

Foles cunsentes et trop privees amistiez

After the old count's death, his son ignores the command to find a suitable husband for his sister, but instead he keeps her by his side and eventually rapes her. There is no doubt about the young man's guilt: the narrator even speaks of his "volenté mauvaise" (A_1 164, cf. B_1 144), and makes it clear that he is very aware of what he is doing. Nonetheless, this violence is not the product of sheer malice or blind lust. The road to sin is described in careful detail and ascribed to the interaction of circumstance, the devil, and choice. The first step towards incest is the great pleasure the brother and sister take from each other's company and the increasing amount of time they spend together. In a passage whose lyrical repetition and accumulation effectively communicate a sense of growing intimacy, the narrator describes how the siblings come and go together, eat together, and even sleep in the same room within sight of each other (A_1 141-148, cf. 121-128). Unfortunately, this intimacy draws the attention of the devil, who endeavors to see if he "torner peüst par son art / Cele amistié a male part" (A_1 153-156, cf. B_1 133-136). As the imperfect-subjunctive "peüst" indicates, the outcome is in doubt. The devil cannot force the brother to sin, but must use his "art" to turn sibling affection into unnatural lust. When he eventually succeeds, the narrator is careful to note that it is "par l'achaison del baisement / Que demenoient trop sovent" (A_1 157-158 cf. B_1 137-138). Too many kisses is all it takes for the devil to enflame the brother with such passion that nothing can keep him from carrying out his "volenté mauvaise" with his sister. By indulging his affection for his sister beyond what is safe, the young man

exposes himself to the power of the devil and cannot stop until he comes into his sister's bed one night "tot deschaus et nus" and rapes her (A_1 183, cf. B_1 159).

The account of this first incest sets the pattern for the rest of the sins in the *Vie*. The first error is to blindly enter into a morally ambiguous situation, which offers the devil just enough of a foothold to turn it into a heinous sin. The first half of the *Vie* offers a pessimistic view of human psychology in which the devil represents and concretely embodies the principle of original sin, which, like fate and hubris in an ancient tragedy, poisons human relationships and turns them to evil. The human ability to make rational choices can eventually be overwhelmed by the passions, but this does not eliminate moral responsibility. The choice must be made earlier, when it is still possible to recognize and avoid the threat of seemingly innocent pleasures. The young count is guilty because he indulged his attraction and affection for his sister to the point where he could no longer resist his lust.

Shame and Sin

If the brother's guilt in raping his sister is undeniable, the question of whether she has sinned is more complex. She is clearly terrified by her brother's embrace, so much so that "tot si gens cors l'en tressue" (A_1 190, cf. B_1 166). This reaction leads Simon Gaunt to claim that the young girl is "entirely guiltless," despite the medieval – and modern – tendency to blame the victim in cases of rape (204-205). Gaunt certainly does not hold the young woman responsible for failing to cry out, as is typical when an abuse victim is trying to protect the abuser. The *Vie*, however, is not as willing to absolve the young girl

of this sin of omission. Reporting her thoughts in indirect free discourse (Marnette 144-149), both versions make it clear that the young girl is aware of the consequences of crying out and keeping silent.

> La pucele est forment hontose,
> E trespencive e angoicose.
> Car s'ele concent le peché
> En fin sont dampné e jugé ;
> Se ele fet noise ne cri,
> De tot a son frere honi (A_1 195-198 cf. B_1 171-174).

The conflict is between damnation and judgment on one hand and shame on the other, and the girl chooses to avoid immediate shame for her brother at the risk of future damnation for them both. The indicative plural "sont dampné" leaves no room for doubt: if the sister consents to the sin, they are both damned. In his discussion of the German *Gregorius*, Siegfried Christoph notes that the poem represents the conflict between the "shame culture" of a secular, heroic society and the "guilt culture" of a religious society (as cited in Archibald 116). Here the "shame culture" wins out, but its victory is negatively marked. By not crying out, the sister refused to exercise the one dimension of free will she had left; alone in her bed with her brother, she cannot resist his advances and "vueile ou non" is raped (A_1 201, cf. B_1 175). The narrator of A_1 makes the girl's guilt even clearer, commenting that "Ne dist onc, mot, anceis se tot: / Ce ful del pis que faire pot" (A_1 199-200).

Gregory is conceived by this very first act of incest, and the narrator is quick to point out the irony that this "saintisme engendrement" (A_1 216, cf. B_1 186) will lead to the expiation of his parents' sin even as the devil believes he has them firmly in his grasp. The redemptive power of Gregory's conception first shows itself when his mother realizes she is pregnant. Once the young girl decides to avoid shame rather than guilt, there is nothing to stop them from continuing to sin until her pregnancy threatens to reveal her shame for all to see.[139] Gregory's conception disrupts the status quo and forces his parents to deal with the consequences of their sin.

When she confronts her brother with the fact of her pregnancy, neither of them can imagine a way to both protect their honor and keep the child safe from harm, and so the young count decides to seek counsel from one of his barons, a trusted man highly recommended by his father. It is worth noting that at the crucial moment of recognizing their sin, Gregory's mother and father do not go to a priest or bishop to seek forgiveness, they seek out a secular advisor whose ties of vassalage to the old count and role as a counselor are made abundantly clear in the text (A_1 285-296, cf. B_1 235-246). As Guerreau-Jalabert observes, a lay feudal counselor is usurping the exclusive right of clerics to hear confessions and determine penance, and the shortcomings of the solution he proposes can be seen as a critique of the overly-secular world represented by Aquitaine (1311-1312). It is an interesting and perhaps not-entirely-unmotivated coincidence that this land without priests is the same territory ruled over by William IX, Ermengarde's first husband. William IX was famous for his womanizing, his temper,

[139] In A_1, the sister herself declares that God has revealed their sin despite their attempts to keep it hidden (247-256).

and his lack of respect for the sacerdotal order. In fact, he was excommunicated twice, once for refusing to pay the tithes he owed the Church and the second time for openly taking his vassal's wife as his mistress despite the protests of his wife, Phillipa of Toulouse.[140]

The advice given by the baron is not immediately portrayed in a negative light by the poem, and it does allow Gregory's mother and father a way out of the immediate impasse between guilt and shame, even if it does not lead to a long-term solution. The baron wisely recommends that the young count embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Not only will a visit to the Holy Land help to expiate his sins, especially if he dies along the way, but it will also provide an excuse for him to put his sister under the baron's care, where she can be pregnant and give birth in secrecy. The resonances with the crusades present in this episode cannot be ignored. As Vauchez observes, the plenary indulgence promised to all those who participating in the conquest of the Holy Land offered the laity a way to work for their salvation by performing the role allotted to them by the Church, that is, by fighting. If the young Count died while traveling to Jerusalem, his sin would be forgiven whether or not he ever confessed them to a priest.[141]

Despite this oblique reference to the indulgences promised to those who died in the Holy Land, the solution offered by the baron is focused more on hiding the shame of the young countess's pregnancy than on alleviating the guilt of the sin of incest. In fact, the need to hide her shame will prevent her from seeking forgiveness for her sin. At first,

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[140] Humiliated, Phillipa actually left William and retired to Fontevraud, where she met William's first wife, Ermengarde of Brittany (Carrer 43, 141).

[141] In an oblique reference to the promise of plenary indulgences to all those who embark on Crusade (Vauchez, *Les Laïcs* 59), the baron tells the young count, "Se tu i mors, sauvés seras" (A_1 396, cf. B_1 334).

the baron's plan seems to be a success. After a tearful parting, the young count leaves Aquitaine and his sister carries her child to term under the protection of the baron's wife. But once the child is born, his mother takes matters into her own hands, and in doing so she adds to the guilt she incurred by not crying out when her brother came into her bed. The problem arises when the young mother realizes she cannot abide the contradictory feelings her son represents; on one hand she is happy at his beauty, but on the other, she "le tint a vil / Quar par peché fu engendrés / Que ne pot estre mostrés" (A_1 456-458, cf. B_1 384-386). Her plan is to set the child adrift at sea, but in a successful effort to build suspense and drama, the poet does not reveal this until the very last moment. The transformation of the girl from a passive victim into a strong-willed young woman is remarkable. First raped by her brother and then placed under the protection and control of an older woman, Gregory's mother has had almost no influence on the course of her life. Now, however, she seizes control of the situation by threatening the one thing left under her own power, her body: "Si ne faites d'icest enfant / Tot ce que je comenderai, / Certes ja mais ne mainjerai," (A_1 460-462, cf. B_1 388-390). The threat has its effect: baron and his wife are afraid she means to kill the baby and reiterate their promise to raise him in secret as their own grandchild.

What the young mother has in mind, however, is actually a complex, but poorly thought-out plan to eliminate her son and the shame his existence would bring from her life while mitigating her guilt as much as possible. She puts the child in a cradle and places around him various objects that will help secure his future. She cannot raise the child herself, but she puts ten silver and four gold marks in the cradle to provide for him.

She does not have the child baptized, presumably because doing so would mean revealing his existence, but she does supply the salt required for the sacrament. From an extradiegetic perspective, she certainly could have had the baby baptized in secret, but that possibility is not even mentioned in the *Vie*. This inconsistency heightens the drama and the sin of abandonment. It also reveals how strongly the young girl's thoughts and actions are conditioned by the logic of shame. The narrator repeatedly mentions her fear of "huntage" (A_1 524, cf. B_1 434) but makes no mention of any fear of damnation.

This intense fear of shame is not absolute, however. Perhaps confident that the child could never be traced to her, the young mother provides a way for him to understand who he is and why he was abandoned. She takes two ivory tablets and writes a long and detailed message addressed to whomever should find the child and to the child himself. These tablets will play an important role throughout the rest of the *Vie* as a symbolic and concrete link between Gregory and his past. The message composed by Gregory's mother can be divided into three parts. In the first part, the mother explains why she abandoned her son, referring to the fact that she and his father were brother and sister, and that she feared the shame and social debasement that they would suffer should their incest ever be discovered.[142] The second part gives whomever finds the child instructions on how to raise him, insisting in particular on her desire that he be taught to read and sing so that he will be able to pray to God (A_1 525-538, cf. B_1 435-446). The child is also to be given the tablets when he is old enough to understand them, so that he will know "De qui e coment il fu nés, / Puis priera, s'il est senés, / Por ses mesfais e por

[142] "Si en cremeit aveir hontage, / Que ele en fust depeuplee / E entre la gent abaissee, / Ne sis frere ne fust honis: / Si fu getés li fis petis" (A_1 520-524, cf. B_1 432-534).

les nos" (A_1 541-543). The final part of the message is addressed directly to the child, whom the mother calls, "Amis, beaus fils," and it simply instructs him to read the tablets often and to remember her. The purpose of the tablets is clear. Gregory's mother believes that her son is guilty because of his parents' sin, and she feels obligated to communicate this fact to him so that he will know he has to do penance to earn God's forgiveness. And at least in A_1, she also hopes that his penance will help her and her brother as well.[143] As we shall see, these tablets will reappear throughout the *Vie*, destabilizing every attempt a temporary resolution threatens to block Gregory's path from sinner to saint. This is the first time the model of wrongdoing as a sin whose guilt can be eliminated by God's forgiveness appears in the *Vie*, but it has not yet totally replaced the shame driven-model that has reigned so far.

Before putting her son in a barrel, and having him put off to sea in a boat, Gregory's mother recognizes the sin she is committing, at least in A_1.[144] She declares, "Peché ot grant en l'engendrer, / Mais pis sera de l'afoler. / Lasse! Metrai le a morir? / Miaus est que jel face norir / E que en sosteigne le blasme" (A_1 569-573). The mother's decision to send her son away rather than raise him demonstrates the tension and the incompatibility between the secular notion of shame and the religious view of sin and guilt. Shame can be avoided, if kept hidden, but once it is exposed, it is impossible to erase. The guilt of sin, on the other hand, can be erased by God's forgiveness, but only if the sinner confesses, that is, admits the existence of the sin and its consequences, and is

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[143] It is worth noting that B_1 instead reads, "…si entendra / Quels hoem il est, e qu'il deit faire / Si s'alme veit d'emfern retraire" (448-450). Just as Gregory's mother is not saved at the end of B_1, so here the focus is on Gregory's personal salvation, not his ability to intercede for his parents.

[144] This passage is lacking in B_1.

willing to do the necessary penance. Gregory's mother tries to negotiate a path between the two sets of values. Killing the child outright would have been the surest way to avoid shame, but she is unwilling to commit so grave a sin. Instead she keeps the child alive, but risks his death by putting him out to sea in a boat without food or water. Sending the child off with no message or token indicating who he is would have kept her shame hidden forever, but Gregory's mother is anxious about her child's salvation and her own. Unwilling to admit her sin and do penance herself, she gives her son the knowledge she hopes he will be able to use to earn God's forgiveness for them both. Amazingly, the young woman's desperate gamble pays off, but it requires a miracle.

Against all odds, the boat carrying the newborn baby is found by fishermen and the child is rescued from death. In both versions of the *Vie*, this coincidence is directly ascribed to God, who in A_1 is described as capable of saving all those "Que li plaist, en terre e en mer" (771-778) and in B_1 as "si merciables" and "as pecheurs…sucurables" (600-603). Before describing Gregory's rescue, however, the narrator tells what becomes of his mother and father. A messenger arrives to announce Gregory's father, the guiltiest character in the *Vie*, died only twenty-four hours after leaving his beloved sister. He has performed the ultimate penance for his sins, and as the baron suggested, this may be enough to earn him forgiveness, without even having had to confess his sins to a priest. But whatever the spiritual consequences of this kind of death within the story, it performs an important narrative function in the *Vie*. With her brother gone, Gregory's mother is the sole heir of the County of Aquitaine, and, as the poem describes, all the "vavassor e li

marchis" and "baruns" (A_1 718, B_1 555-557) come to do her homage as their feudal suzerain.

The young Countess's position offers a realistic appraisal of the paradox of female political power in the Middle Ages (Pernoud 185-221). Unlike at other times and in other places, Gregory's mother is legally and culturally permitted to rule over an important territory under her own name and authority, but she is constantly exposed to the marital ambitions of rival dukes and counts who could gain control over Aquitaine by marrying her. Without a father or brother to arrange a marriage for her, the Countess could have chosen a match herself, but, as the narrator describes, "La dame dist bien e jure / Que ele de seignor n'a cure" (A_1 727-728, cf. B_1 563-564). For Gregory's mother, married life is incompatible with the life of holiness she wishes to live as a penance for her sins. The elements of this moral life mentioned by the narrator are worth citing in full. In order to do penance for her and her brother's sins, the Countess has dedicated her entire heart to God. "Tot a son cuer en Deu servir," the narrator writes, "Por l'arme son frere acheter / Se peine molt de jeüner / E des iglises essaucier / E des povres Deu herbergier" (A_1 732-736, cf. B_1 568-571). But before Gregory's mother can test the efficacy of this kind of moral life, a powerful Roman duke, who had come to ask her hand in marriage, lays siege to her city and devastates her lands. As the narrator comments, she will never have peace until the child she put out to sea comes to avenge her. This simple, self-imposed penance will not be sufficient to obtain for the Countess the clarity of purpose and peace of mind that come with forgiveness. It is too much of a compromise with the logic of shame that keeps her from revealing what she has done. In

order to be truly saved, she will have to be forgiven by the highest ranking cleric in the Church, her son the pope.

Gregory's Sin

If Gregory's parents' guilt is both clear and nuanced, Gregory's own sin is much more difficult to pin down. Both the narrator and the saint's mother consider the simple fact that Gregory was born in incest a sin, and the entire structure of the *Vie* as well as the narrator and all the characters operate under the presumption that Gregory's unwitting marriage to his mother is a sin that can only be expiated by seventeen years of penance chained to a rock in the sea. As Herlem-Prey observes, this sin could be understood simply as the stain of having been born into incest and unwittingly committing it again, or it could be seen as an allegory for the original sin of which all men and women are guilty. Insofar as Gregory's personal, subjective sin is concerned, however, it is not unreasonable to argue that he sins in refusing to dedicate himself to a life of penance in order to obtain God's forgiveness and instead following his natural inclination to become a knight and embarking on a quest to find his parents. But even this can only be considered a sin if one concedes that Gregory is already guilty having been born into incest. The subjective guilt Gregory incurs by leaving the abbey cannot be understood without reference to the guilt incurred by his parents' incest.

The process by which Gregory is transformed from a bright, charismatic young boy into a troubled knight in search of his mother and father begins with the revelation of his true origins. After being cast out to sea, Gregory is rescued by two fishermen who live in a territory under the rule of an abbot. This abbot baptizes the foundling, giving

him his own name, and entrusts him to the care of the richer of the two fishermen.[145] The abbot reads the ivory tablets and keeps them safe, and once the boy is old enough, he brings him to be educated in the monastery, just as Gregory's mother had requested. Before Gregory is fully of age, however, the boy gets in a fight with his supposed cousin, the son of the other fisherman, and the boy's mother, enraged, tells him that he is a foundling and not her real nephew. Gregory runs to his mentor, the abbot, and demands an explanation. The abbot does not deny the fisherwoman's story, but he promises Gregory that no one else will ever know the truth. The older man's first concern is to maintain the status quo. The best thing for Gregory to do is remain under the abbot's care and become a monk; indeed, the abbot promises the boy that he will take his place at the head of the monastery after his death. But instead of satisfying him, this promise draws out Gregory's hidden desire to become a knight. No explanation is given for this desire, even after the abbot tells Gregory that no man can equal his learning and wisdom and that he is much better suited to be an abbot than "malfesant ne chevalier," as we read in B_1 (890), or, as happens in A1, even after the abbot clearly tells him not to become a knight because "molt est mauvaise lor vie" (1128). All Gregory can say is that "Se m'est or venu en talent / Et si n'en puis laisser nient" (A_1 1133-1134, cf. B_1 895-896). The narrator gives no explanation of the origin of this conviction, and it is up to the reader to decide whether it comes from fate, a genetic predisposition to chivalry, or the adolescent rebellion of a young man who wants to distance himself from the man who had been like

[145] The abbot is the only character in the *Vie* other than Gregory himself to be given a personal name, and this, of course, is only because his name is the source of the saint's.

a father to him. Interestingly enough, the devil plays absolutely no role in this conviction; Gregory's desire to become a knight is entirely dependent on his own will.

At Gregory's stubborn insistence, the abbot relents and against his better judgment dubs the young man a knight. As was often the case in the Middle Ages, the abbot is not only a religious leader in charge of an important monastery; he is also a feudal lord with lay vassals under his authority. Because of this secular role, the abbot is able to promise Gregory wealth, land, and a marriage "de grant parage" (A_1 1150, cf. B_1 912), if he agrees to remain in the abbot's territory as his vassal. The young man refuses, insisting that all he wants is to find out more about his mother and father. In short, the abbot offers Gregory everything that a knight could wish for, including an exogamic marriage sanctioned by a cleric, but the young man prefers instead to recreate a relationship with his natural family. At each step of the debate, the abbot gives Gregory what he says he wants, only to have Gregory make another, more specific demand. When Gregory declares that "jamais nul jor joie n'avrai / Deci a tant que je savrai / De quel lignage fu mis pere / E quel feme fu ma mere" (A_1 1153-1156, cf. B_1 915- 918), the abbot takes him at his word and shows him the ivory tablets that reveal his aristocratic but incestuous origin.

After having read his mother's message, Gregory is aware of his incestuous origin, the sin it represents, and his need to do penance. Summarizing the tablets' contents, Gregory declares that they tell the story of a "trespecheur enfant," as B_1 puts it (932), or a child who "trestot fu en peché nés," as we read in A_1 (1171). As in the prologue, this sin is nothing other than the fact that "uns suenz oncles l'engendra / E sa

tante celui porta!" (A_1 1173-1174, cf. B_1 933-934). Gregory adds that the child was the son of a rich count, and that his mother sent him off because of her fear of the "honte" she would incur by raising him. When the abbot reveals that Gregory himself is the child-sinner mentioned in the tablets, the young man, in a moment of lucidity, asks his godfather and spiritual mentor what he should do. The abbot's response could not be more categorical: "Je te dirai. / Si tu maintiens chevalerie, / L'arme sera en fin perie. / Mais remain ci, en cest mostier, / E si ser Deu de ton mestier" (A_1 1206-1210. cf. B_1 1012-1016). In the version B_1 he even explains why he should serve God: "Ke te parduinst, par ses buntez, / Les grans mesfaiz dunt tu est nez" (1017-1018). The choice is clear: either Gregory can stay in the monastery and live a life of prayer and asceticism, perhaps earning forgiveness for his sins, or he can become a knight and lose his soul. In fact, the abbot is offering Gregory a compromise between the secular fear of shame and the religious need for confession and penance. He promises to keep Gregory's incestuous origin a secret and invites him to enter the monastery where he can live a life of prayer and asceticism without attracting any unwanted questions about his reasons for taking on such a penance. But the young man's desire to find his parents is stronger than his fear of damnation, and he rejects the advice he had just requested. "Repos n'avrai," Gregory insists, "Deci a tant que je savrai / De quel lignaje je fu nés / E por quei fu ici getés" (A_1 1211-1214, cf. B_1 1020-1024).

This moment represents the lowest point in the relationship between Gregory and his mother and the clearest instance of personal sin for the young knight. Gregory's fault can be understood as a misreading of his mother's words, a misreading made more

egregious by his failure to accept the interpretative key offered by the abbot. The mother had intended to impress on her son the need to pray and be mindful of his salvation, but he can only see the hole that his parents' absence creates in his life and his identity. But rather than satisfying Gregory's desire to know who his parents were and why he was abandoned, the message only increases his longing to find them. Gregory's failure betrays his lack of understanding about sin and forgiveness. The written account of the incest committed by a mother and father he has never met is not immediate and pressing enough to convince Gregory to lead a life of prayer and penance; in order for Gregory to comprehend his need for God's mercy, he will have to experience sin first hand. It is the narrator's intention to make sure the readers of the *Vie* do not make the same mistake.

A Marriage of Convenience

The final and most dramatic sin in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* is the marriage between Gregory and his mother. It is the climax of the first half of the *Vie* and the apex of the devil's plan to ensnare the ruling family of Aquitaine and seal their damnation. It is also the episode in which the protagonists' ability to make active decisions is most severely constrained by intra- and extradiagetic exigencies. After Gregory takes leave of his godfather, the abbot, he sets off across the sea in search of his parents, and the first place he comes to is none other than Aquitaine, the land "de quel sa mere dame estoit," as the narrator reminds his audience (A_1 1230, cf. B_1 1039). Like the discovery of the barrel by the fishermen, this remarkable coincidence requires no suspension of disbelief in the diegesis created by the *Vie*. It is clearly the work of the devil who has used his power over natural phenomena like the wind to bring Gregory and his mother together in hopes of luring them into greater sin (A_1 1235-1240, cf. B_1 1037-1042).

When Gregory arrives in Aquitaine, he is no longer presented as an obstinate young man on a quest to find his family, but as a mercenary soldier looking for money. The first question he asks the burgher who offers him lodging is whether there is any war in the region in which a knight might find employment (A_1 1258-1260, cf. B_1 1059-1060). When the burgher responds that the land suffers greatly from war because its ruler, a beautiful maiden with no brothers or sisters, has refused the marriage proposal offered by a powerful Roman duke, Gregory asks to speak to this maiden, even though her description does not match what he knows about his parents. Gregory's search for his family has moved out of the foreground. This detail could be explained away as a

narrative inconsistency that dramatizes his unexpected encounter with his mother, or it could be understood as the actions of a man ashamed of his past who does not reveal that he is searching for his incestuous parents.

In either case, Gregory does not suspect that the young countess is his mother, as is confirmed by the description of their first meeting. The narrator declares poignantly that "La mere veit iluec son fil, / Mais ne seit pas que ce seit il. / Gregoire sovent la regarde,/ Mais ne se done nule garde ; / Ne tant ne quant ne se mescreit / Que la dame sa mere seit (A$_1$ 1323-1328 ; B$_1$ 1129-1134). The alternation of the indicative and subjunctive moods reveals the distance between the real and the possible, between seeing and understanding. The mother and son's mutual non-recognition is based on the fact that neither expected to find the other. Either Gregory has forgotten his quest, or he expects to find a brother and sister, not a single woman. Before going to speak to the Countess, Gregory locks the ivory tablets bearing his mother's message in a coffer and gives it to his burgher host. It is significant that at the very moment when Gregory enters into a new relationship with his mother based on military service and mutual attraction, he hides the tangible symbol of his incestuous origins and the concrete evidence of his true relationship with the Countess of Aquitaine.

From an extradiegetic perspective, Gregory and his mother's marriage is an important element of the lesson taught by the *Vie*. By doubling the protagonist's guilt with the addition of a second incest, the example of a "péché monstrueux" that can still be forgiven is made that much more striking. The second incest is also completely consistent with the logic of tragedy that animates the first half of the *Vie*. No oracle

declares that Gregory will some day marry his mother, but the devil's power over the natural elements, human passions, and public opinion ensures that once the Countess has made the mistake of trying to hide her shame by sending her child out to sea, she will inevitability duplicate that sin by unwittingly marrying him. The lesson is that there is no escape from the consequences of sin outside of God's redeeming grace. From Gregory and his mother's perspective, however, the decision to marry is as surprising and inconsistent as Gregory's desire to enter into his mother's military service. Nevertheless, it reveals the difficulties of striving for salvation in the secular world.

Not long after Gregory agrees to fight for the Countess, the Roman duke renews his assault, and Gregory leads the counterattack. He defeats the duke in single combat and takes him prisoner, triumphantly returning to the city as a conquering hero who has saved the people from the ravages of war. Faced with the question of how to reward such outstanding service, the Countess takes council with her people, which is a wise decision according to the narrator of A_1 (1608). The people logically advise her to take the young bachelor as her husband, "Quar ele ne pot aveir meilor / De hardement ne de poër, / Ne de bonté ne de saveir" (1620-1622). They had just suffered the violent consequences of their Countess's lack of a male protector, and it is perfectly reasonable for them to suggest that she marry the young man who had just defeated their greatest enemy. They are no more aware of the potential incest than Gregory and his mother. Credit for this plan of action must also be given to the devil, who has been working for another incestuous marriage ever since Gregory first left the abbey where he was raised. Once again, his power is not absolute, but suggestive. The ancient enemy takes the people's

natural desire to have Gregory as their protector and encourages them to demand the mother-son marriage he believes will ensure Gregory's and the Countess's damnation (A_1 1614-1616, cf. B_1 1268-1270). All of these decisions and suggestions are reasonable and consistent with the model of human and supernatural interaction portrayed by the *Vie*. Everything seems to indicate that a marriage between the Countess and her champion is an excellent idea, everything except the fact that they are mother and son. But that is something only the devil, the narrator, and the reader know.

Although the marriage between Gregory and his mother appears perfectly reasonable to the people of Aquitaine and desirable to the devil, it seems inconsistent with the plans and intentions expressed by Gregory and the Countess at earlier moments in the *Vie*. After his victory over the Roman duke, the young knight's thoughts quickly turn to the next profitable adventure. Gregory presents himself before the Countess to collect his earnings and take his leave, not to ask her hand in marriage. However, it is not unreasonable to imagine that a solider of fortune might be attracted by the most prestigious and valuable reward of all: the Countess herself and lordship over the entire County of Aquitaine. But Gregory is supposedly looking for his parents; by agreeing to marry, he would have to abandon all hope of ever finding them. From the extradiegetic point of view shared by the narrators and readers, it makes perfect sense for Gregory to stop looking for his parents after he has met and married the Countess of Aquitaine. She is his mother and any further searching would be in vain. But from within his own limited, intradiegetic point of view, Gregory has no idea he has found his mother, and so has no explicit motivation for abandoning his search. Has he lost all hope of ever finding

his family? The text gives no indication of any such desperation, and indeed states explicitly that Aquitaine is the first place Gregory looks. Is diabolical influence to blame? The devil is credited with a direct role in making the marriage happen. "Tant s'est diables entremis," we read in A_1, "Que la mere a son enfant pris" (1623-1624), and B_1 comments that, "Il fait l'un l'altre aveir mult chier / Pur le pechié bien aducier" (1277-1278). The devil's power is much stronger and less nuanced here than it was in the description of Gregory's father's descent into incest. Rather than fanning the flames of a passion that were already smoldering, he completely and without any explanation changes the mind of a young man who had just sworn that he would never rest until he knew his lineage and why he was cast out to sea.

The devil's influence overwhelms the careful exposition of psychology and motivation that has characterized the *Vie* thus far. He operates as a diabolical *deus ex machina* that forces the narrative into a direction that makes the story more engaging and the lesson more powerful but compromises the characters' independent subjectivity. The long argument about becoming a monk or a knight increases the subjective guilt Gregory incurs by leaving the abbey to find his parents, but it makes his decision to marry his mother harder to believe. This inconsistency and the narrator's recourse to diabolical influence highlight the inescapability of sin. It is more important for the story to offer an incredible example of God's forgiveness than present a consistent character.

Gregory's mother's change of heart is easier to understand in light of her position and circumstances. As the narrators clearly stated, Gregory's mother decided to dedicate her life entirely to the service of God after her brother's death and her installation as

Countess. Her refusal to marry the Roman duke was not based on any specific, personal dissatisfaction with him as a husband, but on the more general conviction that the Countess "n'a soing de lui ne d'autre ome" (A_1 740). Indeed, after the duke's capture, it is revealed that his desire to marry the Countess is not motivated by greed, but genuine love: "Dame, dist il, gardez mei bien, / Quar je vos aim sor tote rien" (A_1 1579-1580, cf. B_1 1231-1232).[146] And rather than disinheriting her, he instead promises even greater wealth and honor than what she already has, declaring that "dis contes de haut parage / Vos ferunt tuit par mei homage" (A_1 1585-1586, cf. B_1 1235-1236). The Roman duke is precisely the sort of match the Countess' brother and father would have looked for if they had tried to marry her off themselves, a man who would honor and respect the Countess. If the Countess was willing to endure years of war and the total destruction of her lands rather than marry this powerful and generous duke, why is she now so acquiescent to the suggestion that she marry a young bachelor whose rank and family are unknown? And what happened to her pledge to serve God? As in Gregory's case, the devil is certainly to blame, but the Countess's eventual acceptance of marriage also reveals an important limit on the extent to which women, even powerful aristocratic women like the Countess of Aquitaine, could actually pursue a life of holiness in the secular world.

A woman like the Countess of Aquitaine could hold considerable political power in her own name and accept the homage of barons and lords, but she could not escape the need for a male protector in a society where military service was still strongly dependent

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[146] A_1 develops this theme even further. Before reporting the duke's speech, the narrator declares, "Quant li dux fu devant la dame, / Il ot el cuer d'amor la flame" (1577-1578). Furthermore, the Countess's response that she will never let her enemy out of prison until he has paid a large ransom is characterized by the adverb "fierement" (1588), marking her as a hard-hearted lady who refuses to be swayed by a man's declaration of love.

on the personal ties between fighting men and their warlord rather than institutionalized allegiance to the political authorities (Bloch 233-240, 337-353). As Countess, Gregory's mother's primary responsibility was to provide for the security of her people, but by refusing to compromise her moral values and her personal independence, she attracted the violent interest of a man who wanted to marry her, and so she saw her lands reduced to poverty. Therefore it is easy to imagine the difficult position in which she found herself after Gregory defeated the Roman duke. She was safe from one suitor, but there was no guarantee that another would not appear as soon as Gregory had gone. Her counselors had already seen enough destruction, and now they were anxious to obtain more permanent security, something a marriage between their lady and her young champion would provide. It is not clear whether the Gregory-poet was explicitly aware of this dynamic as he wrote the *Vie*, but these sorts of questions were certainly part of the horizon of expectations of the twelfth century and could have been raised by the poem's readers if not its author. Despite the simplistic vision of being born into sin given in the prologue, the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* actually presents a nuanced vision of sin as the product of the complex and contradictory interaction between circumstances, passions, diabolical influence, and personal choice. It combines to form a vision of a world entangled in sin, where even good intentions often lead to negative consequences. This vision is not far from what was experienced by the men and women who might have read the *Vie* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including Ermengarde of Brittany.

"If you had not suffered marriage": Ermengarde's sin

Ermengarde's experience of sin was very different from Gregory and his mother in its specifics, but it was analogous in overall effect, therefore the differences are instructive. Unlike the legendary Countess of Aquitaine, Ermengarde did not endure a long war because she refused to marry; instead she endured marriage and all of the ambiguous sexuality, childbearing, and lack of independence it entailed. Ermengarde was not left without a husband. When she was of marriageable age, her father dutifully married her off first to Duke William IX of Aquitaine, and after that marriage quickly fell apart, again to Count Alan IV of Brittany. Nothing of Ermengarde's own writings has survived to the present day, but there are several pieces of evidence indicating that she saw married life as less than desirable.

Ermengarde was not conscious of a grave offense like sibling incest, but she had internalized the monastic model of spirituality championed by the Gregorian reform to the point that she could not escape the notion that secular life itself was at best morally ambiguous.[147] In the preface *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin, and Salvation*, Jacques Dalarun argues that the cultivation of this sense of guilt was a deliberate strategy employed by the reformers to make the laity dependent on the Church and the sacraments. But even without imagining such a deliberate program, it is easy to see how the exaltation of chastity, fasting, and voluntary poverty could make a lay person uneasy, especially an aristocrat who lived in relative comfort.[148] The poem addressed to Ermengarde by Marbode of Rennes offers a good example of this dynamic. Marbode

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[147] See supra (Chapter 1, 25-26). Ermengarde was an active supporter of the reform in Brittany (Carrer 97-98, 125-127), and Robert of Arbrissel, the preacher with whom she had such a close relationship, was himself a reformer (Dalarun 17-22).

[148] "It suited papal purposes to persuade every Christian that he was a sinner, to exacerbate in every individual the sense of guilt" (xiv).

begins by praising the daughter of Fulk, calling her "beautiful, modest, graceful, bright, fair, and fresh, " and goes on to claim that she could be like Artemis, the beautiful virgin goddess of the moon, if only she had not "suffered marriage and the labors of childbirth."[149] After this ambiguous comparison, the bishop's eloquent, classically inspired praise becomes a series of warnings about the transience of beauty and earthly wealth. Ermengarde is like a goddess among women, he writes, but her beauty will quickly fades like smoke and turns to dust, or, if death is long in coming, she will become an old hag.[150] Her hair will become ashes and her body food for worms, and thieves will take away her wealth. The only way to avoid this horrible fate is to love Christ, scorn the world, and give food and clothing to the poor: "This will make you beautiful and precious to the Lord; / neither death nor old age will destroy this prize."[151] Some readers might dismiss such warnings as the exaggerations of an overzealous, celibate preacher, but Ermengarde was apparently quite susceptible to these themes, as other evidence shows.

Ermengarde's dissatisfaction with her state and her sense of living in sin can be seen indirectly in the letter Robert of Arbrissel addressed to the Countess after her failed attempt to have her marriage annulled on grounds of consanguinity so that she could enter Fontevraud. In several places Robert's words seem to respond to questions raised in an earlier letter or conversation and to indicate that Ermengarde was troubled by more specific sins linked to her position as a ruler, a married woman and a mother. First

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[149] "Pulchra, pudica, decens, candida, clara, recens / Si non passa fores thalamos, partusque labores, / Posses esse meo Cynthia judicio" (*Patrologia Latina.* vol. 171 col. 1659).
[150] "In grege nuptarum credi potes una dearum... Sed tuus iste decor... Transiet ut fumus, et cito fiet humus. / Aut si dilato current tua tempora fato, / Heu dirum facinus! efficieris anus" (col. 1659).
[151] "At quod amas Christum, quod mundum despicis istum / Et quod pauperibus vestis es atque cibus, / Hoc te formosam facit et Domino pretiosam; / Nec mors, nec senium destruet hoc pretium" (col. 1660).

Robert responds to the Countess's fear that it is a sin to put murderers and other wrongdoers to death, a fear connected to her position as a secular ruler responsible for administering justice in her realm.[152] Robert concedes that the Gospel instructs the believer to turn the other cheek, but he counters by citing the Old Testament and Saint Augustine as proof that the risk these people present to the innocent justifies killing them (Pétigny 226). Second, when commenting on Ermengarde's failed attempt at an annulment, he says clearly, "your will may be to leave the world, and deny yourself, and naked follow the naked Christ onto the cross, but pray to the Lord your God that your will not be done, but his."[153] More pointedly, Robert also speaks of an actual sin, which Ermengarde must have confessed to him. "Concerning your sin of incest," Robert writes, "and the sin of your daughter, whom you handed over to death, fervently and anxiously pray to God and humbly beg him to free you lest you perish."[154]

The "sin of incest" is apparently a reference to the consanguineous relationship with Alan that Ermengarde had hoped would free her from their marriage. Was Ermengarde truly concerned about living with the sin of incest, or was her overly scrupulous fear of consanguinity just a show to justify her demand for annulment? There is no way to know for sure, but it might have been possible for a sensitive, pious woman like Ermengarde to have taken the ban on consanguinity to heart and considered herself

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[152] Even before her husband's retirement into the monastery, Ermengarde had ruled over Brittany personally while Alan was participating in the first crusade (Carrer 77-78).
[153] "Voluntas tua esset ut mundum reliqueres, et te ipsam abnegares, et nuda nudum Christum in cruce sequereris. Sed ora Dominum Deum tuum ut non voluntas tua sed sua fiat" (Pétigny 227).
[154] "De peccato tuo incestus et de peccato filiae tuae quam morti tradidisti, sollicita et anxia ora Deum humiliter et supliciter ut te liberet ne pereas" (Pétigny 233).

guilty of incest.[155] Robert, for his part, is not overly concerned. He writes, "According to the law of the Church you can not be separated. You did what you could, you fled."[156] Unlike Gregory's mother, who remained silent to save her brother's honor as he raped her, Ermengarde did all she could to avoid sinning, even though she was ultimately unsuccessful. She has no need for any special penance or atonement.

The preacher is much less sanguine about the marriage of Ermengarde's daughter, however. He commands her: "concerning your daughter, try everything to have her separated. If you cannot, you must forever hold the pain of this detestable act in your heart."[157] Pétigny explains this reference at some length, because for him it holds the key to dating this letter (217-220). Ermengarde's daughter Hedwig was married to Baldwin, the son of Count Robert II of Flanders, and, like many other medieval marriages, it was suspected of being consanguineous. A first, unsuccessful attempt to dissolve this union was considered by Archbishop Raoul of Reims on the evidence presented by Ives of Chartres that the house of Anjou, from which Ermengarde was descended, and the house of Flanders were each connected to the royal house of France, and hence that Hedwig and Baldwin were related within six degrees (218). While it may be possible that Ermengarde and Robert considered marriage to even such a distant relative to be the equivalent of spiritual death, Pétigny argues that their real concern was for the immediate physical safety of the young Hedwig. Baldwin of Flanders was in fact a ferocious man

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155 As Archibald argues, "There is certainly evidence to suggest that some people who committed or abetted incest in the Middle Ages felt the prick of conscience, no doubt in part at least as a result of the clergy's constant harping on the sin" (47); she cites among others the case of a 15th century man troubled on his deathbed by the fact he had let his son marry within the prohibited degree (48).
156 "Per legem ecclesiasticam non potes disjungi. Quod potuisti fecisti, fugisti" (Pétigny 233).
157 "De filia quibuscunque modis quere seperationem. Sin autem, dolorem in corde semper habeas de tam detestabili facto" (Pétigny 233-234).

who had earned the nickname of "à la hache" because of his habit of keeping by his side a battleaxe, which he personally used to carry out executions (219-220). Ermengarde's real sin might have been letting her daughter be married to such a brutal and vicious man. The claim of consanguinity might have been a means to an end rather than the true problem. Fortunately, the Countess did not have to live with the pain of this detestable act forever. About a decade after Robert wrote this letter, the pope Pascal II dissolved Hedwig and Baldwin's marriage because of further evidence proving they were related through Hedwig's father, Count Alan, as well as through Ermengarde (220).[158]

This letter reveals the compromises and potential for sin that characterized a cleric's view of the secular world, a view that Ermengarde herself apparently shared. She was troubled by use of violence in the service of justice and security, as her opposition to capital punishment shows. What was considered a normal and necessary part of political rule even by a cleric like Robert was too much of a compromise for a woman committed to the highest standards of evangelical perfection. Secondly, if her attempts to annul her marriage were genuine, she was also apparently troubled by the sin of incest, even with a man only related to her in five degrees. Finally, Ermengarde's fear that she had sent her daughter to her death reveals a woman who could not reconcile herself to the morally ambiguous decisions that are made in the name of political and dynastic necessity. Ermengarde's situation offers a fascinating real world counterpart to Gregory and his mother. Like the protagonists of the *Vie*, she has been drawn into a state of sin not by

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[158] Incidentally, this claim is based on the fact that the counts of Brittany were descended from a sister of the same queen of France to whom the counts of Anjou were also related. As Pétigny notes (220 n. 1), this connection might have been the basis of Ermengarde's attempts to prove a consanguineous link between herself and her husband Alan. If so, the fact that Hedwig's marriage was annulled and Ermengarde's was not is an indication of the somewhat arbitrary way the Church's prohibitions were applied.

some momentous, clear choice to do evil, but by the slow accumulation of compromises that make up the human experience. She is not guilty of sibling incest or marrying her son, but she does believe that she needs to do penance in order to obtain God's forgiveness.

How they are saved: recognition

There are three steps to being freed from sin in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*: recognizing one's fault, asking God for forgiveness, and performing the necessary penance. This more or less matches Church teaching on the matter (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 155-156), although the question of whether it is necessary to confess ones sins to a priest and not just to God is not dealt with explicitly in the *Vie*. Gregory and his mother recognize their sin and ask God for forgiveness during a confrontation that marks the turning point between the first part of the story, which is animated by the influence of the devil, and the second part, which is directed by the grace of God. The third step – performing the necessary penance – occupies almost all of the rest of the *Vie*, and in Gregory's mother's case, is never completed in the B_1 version. An analysis of how these three steps are depicted is essential to understanding the scope and the effectiveness of the lesson that the *Vie* purports to teach.

Gregory and his mother recognize their sin by means of the ivory tablets that the mother had placed in Gregory's cradle when she put him out to sea. After his wedding, Gregory goes back to the house where he has been lodging and takes back the coffer containing the ivory tablets (A_1 1633-1640, cf. B_1 1279-1286). Once again, the tablets stand both as a symbol and concrete reminder of Gregory's incestuous origins. As long as they remained hidden in the burgher's house, Gregory acted without any reference to his shame or his quest to find his parents. But now he takes the tablets and hides them in a "lue secrei", as A_1 describes (1656), or a "trou en la meisire" (1306) as we read in B_1, and takes them out again and reads them every night after supper, weeping and lamenting

"Por le peché e por la rage / Que nez esteit de tiel lignage" (A_1 1667-1668, cf. B_1 1313-1314). Once he has married the Countess, Gregory's quest to find his parents is over. From an extradiegetic perspective, it is obvious that he cannot continue looking for his mother because he has already found her; from Gregory's intradiegetic point of view, the responsibilities of rule and marriage prevent him from leaving. In any case, Gregory's relationship to his family and his understanding of his sin is blocked. Rather than discovering the identity of his parents, which at this point would reveal the true extent of his sin, and apparently unable or unwilling to ask God for forgiveness and do penance, Gregory is forced to sadly repeat the same futile gestures, regretting a past that he did not cause and cannot change. At this point he is the model of someone who has given in to despair and has no hope of being saved, that is, one of the people evoked in the prologue "Que veirement, par negligence, / Perdent le fruit de penitence" (A_1 23-24, cf. B_1 23-24). It is important to note that Gregory's problem is not that he believes his sin is too great to be forgiven, but rather that he sees his situation in terms of shame that can only be regretted in secret instead of as the result of a moral transgression that can be confessed and absolved. As a married man, he is not actively seeking to resolve the past, he is hiding it so that it does not upset his present life. Gregory has to recognize that he has sinned before he can ask for forgiveness.

It is probably not a coincidence that the very thing that finally breaks through Gregory's impasse is his inability to move past his feelings of shame and regret. Gregory continues to weep over the tablets every evening until finally one of his wife's servants decides to investigate her lord's nightly disappearances, follows him to the secret room,

and sees him crying. She then asks her mistress "se entre lui e son seignor / Aveit maltalant ne iror" (A_1 1681-1682, cf. B_1 1323-1324). The Countess responds that no one could ever recount the joy, delight, and the love that she and her husband feel towards one another. The distance between Gregory and his mother's experience of their marriage and its incestuous reality could not be greater. When the Countess hears that her husband is weeping every evening, she follows her servant into the secret room and finds the tablets. As soon as she sees them, she realizes what has happened, as the narrator describes, "Quant les trova, bien les conut: / A poi de duel que ne morut, / Quar doncs sot bien, tot a fiance / E tot sens nule demorance, / Qu'encheüe est vers son enfant" (A_1 1713-1717, cf. B_1 1355-1360).

The Countess's response to this incredible discovery is complex. Her initial reaction is shock and despair, but once she sees her husband, whom she now recognizes as her long lost son, her most powerful emotion is the joy of a mother who has found the child she had abandoned and feared dead. Her next reaction is to confirm her fears by asking her husband where he is from and who his mother and father are. From an extradiegetic perspective, it is remarkable that this is the first time she has ever asked Gregory about his family, especially since considerations of consanguinity were such an important issue in medieval marriage. In fact, the shocking discovery that the Countess and her husband are actually mother and son could almost be read as a parody of real life cases in which a husband and wife "discovered" they were third or fourth cousins and "unfortunately" had to be separated, as in the well-known example of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII. Gregory's response to this line of questioning is to tell his wife

to never ask him about it again and to swear that he would never tell anyone about his family "por tot l'aver qui est a Rome!" (A_1 1802, cf. B_1 1448). He is still operating according to the rules of shame and believes that his incestuous past can do no harm if it remains a secret. When the countess confronts him with the ivory tablets, however, Gregory is forced to admit that he is indeed the sinner whose life is described therein. At first his only fear is that his shame has finally been uncovered, but once he hears his mother's response to this confirmation, he finally understands the true nature of his sin.

The Countess's reaction to this final confirmation that her husband is also her son reveals the complexity and the limitations of the prologue's promise of a story that would prove all sins could be forgiven. In both versions, the Countess recounts the series of sins that have led them to this moment, including her incestuous relationship with her brother and her abandonment of Gregory. She also describes her grief and despair by declaring that it would have been better for her to have died immediately after being baptized instead of having lived to commit all of these sins (A_1 1873-1880, cf. B_1 1499-1506), and affirms that she is such a horrible sinner that it is a marvel the earth has not already opened up beneath her feet and dropped her directly into hell (A_1 1867-1869, cf. B_1 1507-1512). Furthermore, in A_1 she makes a clear statement of despair that is lacking in B_1, "Se je cent anz deüsse vivre, / Ne quit que je en fusse delivre / Por penitence ne por aumosne, / Ne par negune bone chose" (A_1 1881-1884). She can certainly be counted among those Christians mentioned in the prologue who believe their sins can never be forgiven, but it is important to note that by tracing the source of this impossibility to her limited ability to do penance and not to any limitation in God's mercy, she is asking the

question from a different perspective. Undoubtedly, God will forgive every sin, but is everyone capable of doing the required penance?

In A_1, this line of reasoning is not given the last word. In another passage with no correspondence in B_1, Gregory takes on the clerical role for which he was trained at the abbey and seeks to calm his mother's fears. He declares that God will demand no more from them than what they are capable of doing. "Vers Deu somes nos molt culpable," he admits, "Mais il nos sera merciable / S'il veit que aions repentance / E cuer de faire penitence / Selunc la colpe e le peché / Dunt nos avons le col chargé" (A_1 1901- 1906). Gregory seems to be saying that the problem is not just being able to do penance for a certain length of time, but having repentant hearts. The difference is subtle but important. Gregory is advocating a model of forgiveness and penance based on the interior disposition of the sinner as well as on the fulfillment of exterior obligations. This passage of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* represents a transition between what Jean-Charles Payen describes as the primitive model of repentance, which required external works of charity and mortification, and the later confessional and "contritionist" model in which the emphasis was instead placed on the effusion of tears as a concrete sign of the internal recognition of the evil one has committed (104-107). Penance is still required in this latter model, but more as a sign of sincere contrition and less as a "payment" for the wrong committed.

But this transition has not been completed, and the *Vie* definitely focuses more on expiation than contrition. After this brief passage, both versions of the *Vie* concentrate on the exterior works the saint and his mother need to perform to expiate their sins.

Gregory will give his mother a list of instructions on how to live a moral life as a lay person, and he himself will flee to do seventeen years of hard penance on a rock in the middle of the sea. Before they part ways, however, Gregory gives a long speech about their sin and their need for penance. The outline of this speech is the same in both versions, but its emphasis is significantly different. First Gregory apostrophizes the devil and denounces his treachery. This is an important turning point in the *Vie*. Until this moment, the unfolding of the plot had been directed by the devil; now however, Gregory recognizes the devil's hand in all that he has done and declares that he will serve God instead. In B_1, the saint speaks about how "iriez" the devil will be when he sees the "abstinences / E les doles penitences" that he will perform (1526-1528); in A_1 he affirms that if he served the devil he did not do it "a esciënt," and instead of talking about "doles penitences", he speaks of the "bien" that he will do, "se Deus m'otroie / Que un sol petit de tens aie" (1920-1922). Already B_1 is underlining the difficulty of the penance Gregory will have to perform while A_1 simply mentions the importance of recognizing one's sin and doing good.

Gregory also declares that his quest to find his parents is completed. This is stated without any positive or negative connotation in A_1, whereas in B_1 highlights the paradoxical nature of this newfound knowledge. In B_1, Gregory speaks of his discovery of his mother in a very negative way, exclaiming, "Mais – las dolent ! – or t'ai trove, / Et par la male destinee!" (B_1 1545-1546), but only after having given thanks to God, "Ki en mei, chaitif pecheur, / As descorvert e acointié / La mortel plaie et le pechié / Dunt li diables me volt damner / E nunsachant a mort liverer" (B_1 1534-1538). It was indeed

"male destinee" that made Gregory marry his mother, but the discovery of this fact was due to the grace of God. In the Christian context of the *Vie*, knowledge of how far one has fallen brings the possibility of redemption, not the final and total despair of classical tragedy. When Oedipus realizes he has married his mother he blinds himself; when Gregory realizes the same thing, he asks for God's forgiveness.

This is the heart of the example proposed by the narrator as the lesson to be taken from the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, and in the rest of his speech Gregory drives the point home. God will judge all people, and Gregory and his mother will have to do good to balance the evil they have already done. Again B_1 emphasizes the enormity of the penance required, which will be, "grant, forte, parfite…e bien eslite" (1555-1556), whereas A_1 focuses instead on the balance between good and evil. In both versions, Gregory also makes the fascinating comment that if he and his mother had married each other knowingly, than no cleric would have been able to assign them a penance great enough to expiate such a horrible sin.[159] This remark is noted by Jean-Charles Payen and taken as a counter example that disproves the narrator's promise that all sins can be forgiven. The poem, "exprime un certain embarras," Payen writes, "devant la question de savoir si tous les péchés peuvent être pardonnés" (107). In an attempt to emphasize the characters' dismay at discovering their sin, the author of the poem has Gregory imagine a hypothetical sin that would actually be beyond forgiveness. Once again, the

[159] Despite this contention, it is interesting to note that medieval penitential handbooks actually do give penances for mother-son incest. Archibald cites the seventh-century Irish *Penitential of Cummean*, which prescribes "three years of penance and perpetual pilgrimage" and the sixth-century Anglo-Saxon *Penitential of Theodore*, which "demands fifteen years of penance or seven years of penance and perpetual pilgrimage" for mother-son incest (33).

Vie reveals the tension between presenting an example that is shocking and memorable and one that is consistent and comforting.

More generally, the focus on penance in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* also reveals another tension, one that exists at the heart of the medieval Christian understanding of sin and redemption. According to one prevailing view of salvation, articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in his work *Cur Deus Homo*, no human being could ever do the penance necessary to expiate his or her sins, especially the original sin committed by Adam. Only through the incarnation – in which God became man, suffered, and died on the cross as the just punishment for human sin – could the debt of humanity be paid. Human beings could then be freed from the guilt of original sin by baptism into Christ's death and resurrection (Grandjean 233). The issue of personal sins committed after baptism was more complicated, however. Was God's grace, freely given, sufficient to erase them? Or did human beings have to provide some form of satisfaction by suffering a just punishment? This question continued to challenge theologians throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, and the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* expresses the ambiguity that surrounded it.

From Gregory's perspective, the question of whether he or his mother would have been able to do the penance necessary had they sinned knowingly is a moot point. They did not know their true relationship when they married, and so there is no reason to despair. God will forgive them, and Gregory himself, now fully assuming the clerical role for which he was trained in the abbey, will be able to tell them what to do to merit that forgiveness. The young man's confidence may be misplaced, however. He certainly

has been trained as a cleric; he knows how to read and sing, and he has studied Christian doctrine. He can explain to his mother how to live a good and moral life. But as far as the reader knows, he has never been ordained a priest and therefore does not have the sacerdotal power to hear confessions, absolve sins, and impose penances. The *Vie* does not specifically mention this lack, and its author may not even have been aware of it, but it was an important issue in the religious context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Despite the fact that the narrator and the characters seem totally oblivious to the need for a priestly confession, it is important to note that neither Gregory nor his mother will be fully redeemed without being reconciled with the sacerdotal order of the Church.

The Moral Life

Regardless of whether Gregory has the sacramental power to forgive sins, he takes it upon himself to recommend a penance for his mother. It is nothing more than a list of good works and prayers fitting for a laywoman of her rank and station; he does not suggest that his mother should renounce her position as Countess and abandon the secular world. The actions he prescribes are remarkably similar to the recommendations given by Robert of Arbrissel to Ermengarde in the letter we examined above, but there are also significant differences between Gregory's speech and Robert's letter.

The lists of good works Gregory offers to his mother differ slightly in order, emphasis, and content between the two versions A_1 and B_1. In A_1, Gregory begins by ordering his mother to practice self-mortification, fasting, prayer, and perpetual chastity and instructs her to wear a hair-shirt inside her clothing and fine silk on the outside. He

concludes with an appeal to the corporal works of mercy – feeding the hungry, burying the dead, and clothing the naked – and a final command to visit monks and hermits and found churches (1973-1986). The order is reversed in B_1. Feeding the poor is mentioned first and explained in greater detail: the Countess is commanded to fill their stomachs, kiss their feet and hands, and give them good beds to sleep in. She is also told to visit the infirm and comfort them and to respect the good hermits, monks, and abbots, but nothing is said specifically about founding churches. The injunction to wear a hair-shirt under her fine clothing appears almost exactly as in A_1, but here it is connected to the command to clothe the naked. Finally, in B_1 Gregory makes no mention of mortification or fasting, but instructs his mother to go to church to listen to the "Deu servise" in the morning, to keep herself chaste, and to love God perfectly and pray to him very often, "K'il vus face remission / E de vos pechiez veir pardon" (1585-1602). In the version B_1 Gregory then declares that he is leaving the kingdom, changes his clothes, and flees "cum povres e chaitifs," taking only the two ivory tablets (1603-1614). It is the last time Gregory and his mother ever see each other, and indeed the last time the mother is mentioned in the B_1 version of the *Vie*.

Like Gregory's speech to his mother, the letter Robert of Arbrissel wrote to Ermengarde of Brittany after her failed attempt to be separated from her husband is basically a manual on how a laywoman can live a pious and moral life without leaving the secular world and all of its violence and temptations. There is a fundamental difference between how the letter and the speech approach the moral life, however. Gregory's speech is contained in two dozen octosyllabic verses; Robert's letter fills about

five full pages of prose. Obviously, the letter is much more comprehensive and specific than the speech. The good works it recommends are the same as in the speech: discrete asceticism, fasting, prayer, charity towards the poor, and support for the Church, but in the letter each good work is accompanied by a long, scripturally based explanation of how and why it should be adopted. Furthermore, the instructions about external practices only make up a small portion of the overall text; the rest is devoted to advice about what kind of attitude Ermengarde should adopt in her present station.

This balance between interior attitude and exterior action can be seen clearly in the opening paragraph of the letter, where Robert contrasts vices like "a spirit of pride," "a spirit of greed," and "a spirit of indulgence," which are bad, with "the false pretense of humility," "the false pretence of mercy," and the "false pretence of chastity," which are worse. Robert is less concerned with compiling a list of extrinsically good works to perform as he is with teaching Ermengarde to cultivate a balanced and virtuous spirit. As Robert explains, "Virtue is indeed the middle ground between vices" (Pétigny 225). Elsewhere, Robert concedes that Ermengarde is living among uncouth and violent people, that her husband is "infidelis," and that "to you it seems that you can do no good there."[160] Quoting from the psalms, he heaps on hyperbolic condemnations, "the land is stained with blood, and polluted by their works,"[161] until his words become a caricature of the worst of secular life as seen by a cleric. But even in the midst of all this evil, he does not tell Ermengarde to flee, but instead quotes the Beatitudes and reminds her that if

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[160] "Inter barbaros homines et incultos moraris, et ut tibi videretur, nullum bonum potes ibi facere" (Pétigny 228).

[161] "Infecta est terra in sanginibus, et contaminate est in operibus eorum" (Pétigny 228, cf. Psalm 106 (Vulgate 105)).

she is persecuted, then she is blessed, and paraphrasing John's Gospel, he tells her that the world hates her because she is not of the world. And later, "True patience is that which is not conquered by any rage or overcome by any tribulation."[162] He also specifically warns her against fasting, giving alms, and praying to gain "human glory" instead of to please God, because "God does not pay attention to the words, but to the heart of the one who prays."[163] In the midst of the violence, sexuality, wealth, and irreligion of secular life, Ermengarde of Brittany is not just given a list of good works she must perform to expiate her sins, she is given a guide on how to maintain a balanced, serene, and virtuous heart.

As Robert's letter to Ermengarde implies, it is not a simple matter to perform good works in the midst of the difficulties and temptations of everyday life. Robert of Arbrissel, the charismatic preacher and spiritual director, recognized that a woman like Ermengarde needed more than a list of practices; she needed advice on how to maintain a balanced and serene heart in the midst of adversity. The earlier experience of Gregory's mother, the fictional Countess of Aquitaine, also demonstrates how the simple determination to do good is not sufficient, even when strengthened by the belief that good deeds are needed to make amends for one's sins. The Countess had already tried to live a moral life well before she realized she had married her son. Gregory's speech is more detailed than the three-sentence description of the Countess's resolve to put "son cuer en Deu servir" (A1 732) after her brother's death, but overall it is not radically different from her simple plan to fast, take care of the "povres Deu," provide for the Church, and

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[162] "Patientia vera est quae nullo furore vincitur, nulla tribulatione superatur" (Pétigny 229).
[163] "Non attendit Deus ad verba, sed ad cor deprecantis" (Pétigny 232).

remain chaste. As we have seen, this attempt to live a moral life was immediately and literally besieged by the Roman duke who wanted to marry the Countess, and after the duke was defeated, she acquiesced to her people's desire for peace and security, renounced her chastity, and married Gregory.

The way of life recommended by Gregory to his mother as a penance for her sins is never shown to be effective in any version of the *Vie*. In B_1 the mother vanishes from the story right after hearing her son's lesson. Gregory's mother is saved in A_1, but only after abandoning her position as Countess, leaving the secular world, and becoming a nun. When she reenters the story after Gregory's election to the papacy, she is still a "pécheresse démesurée" (A_1 2593) and she is still looking for a way to be freed from the weight of her sins. Either she was unable to put Gregory's instructions into practice, or else performing them was not enough to convince her she had earned God's forgiveness. Perhaps things would have turned out differently if Gregory was an ordained priest when his mother first confessed to him the sin they had committed, but this possibility is never raised explicitly in the *Vie*.

Gregory's speech to his mother can be seen as a miniature sermon intended by the hagiographer-poet to be lesson to his audience about how to live a moral life. Taken on its own, it is indeed a fair summary of the Church's teachings for the laity,[164] and, in principle, it is not unlike Robert of Arbrissel's instructions for Ermengarde. The two sets of instructions both point to the paradox of lay spirituality. Lay people had a simple model of holiness that they could apply to their lives. They could practice moderate

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[164] Leclercq comments that, "Dans les rares textes doctrinaux où il soit parlé des laics, on leur prêche la morale plus que la spiritualité" (*Spiritualité* 124).

asceticism, be generous to the poor and to the Church, pray, and attend Mass and the Divine Office. But evidently, this life was not sufficient for some. It did not provide the sense of clarity and peace of mind that religion promises in the present life, and it did not assure them of salvation in the presumed eternal life to come. The two attitudes are connected. Doubt about the fate of one's soul leads to anxiety, and a sense of dissatisfaction and unease about one's path in life can lead to doubt about one's ultimate relationship with God. The medieval Christian religion could both alleviate and worsen this situation. It offered rituals and practices that could give men and women a sense of purpose and hope for eternal happiness, but it could also exacerbate their feelings of guilt and increase their fear of damnation. The prologue to the *Vie* promises that God will forgive any sin, as long as the sinner confesses and does penance, but that conversely means that God will punish those who do not confess and do penance. Practically speaking, women like Gregory's mother and Ermengarde of Brittany, along with the vast majority of men, who were not priests, were dependent on others for their salvation. They needed the advice and support of spiritual counselors like Robert of Abrissel and the intercessory power of ordained priests.

The Impossible Penance: Seventeen Years Chained to a Rock

The insufficiency of Gregory's mother's penance is highlighted by the severity of the penance he imposes on himself: total isolation from all human contact and total deprivation from food and water. The story of Gregory's penance and his miraculous election to the papacy is told in lively detail and emphasizes the sheer impossibility of

what Gregory accomplishes. The *Vie* leaves no doubt about Gregory's exceptional status: he confesses his sin directly to God and does penance until God miraculously reveals that he has been forgiven. There is no need for the usual intermediary of a priestly confession and absolution.

The penitent saint does not simply flee into the desert and live as a hermit in a cave for seventeen years. He wanders about, looking for a suitable place to do penance, until he comes upon the house of a mean-spirited fisherman who verbally abuses him and refuses to believe that he is a genuine penitent and not a charlatan trying to take advantage of his generosity (A_1 2023-2244, cf. B_1 1617-1766). The fisherman's cruelty serves to accentuate the difficulty of Gregory's penance and the depths of his humility. Hearing that Gregory is looking for a place where no one can find him so that he can expiate his sins in peace (A_1 2196-2204, cf. B_1 1729-1736), the fisherman declares that he knows of a rock in the sea that no man would ever go and visit, and the next day he obligingly takes Gregory to that rock in a boat. Once there, the fisherman chains Gregory to the ground with leg irons, locks them, and throws the key into the sea. In A_1 this process is narrated in relatively neutral terms, but in B_1 it is clearly due to the fisherman's cruelty. He is described as "enragiez" (1793) and after he throws away the key, "Si le comença a gaber," mockingly saying that Gregory will have to stay there "Desi qu'al Deu comandement / Ke caste clef sera trovee / ke ci est ore en mer getee" (1798-1800). The key thrown into the sea becomes a symbol of whether God is satisfied with Gregory's penance.

After the fisherman leaves, Gregory is forgotten on the rock. He lives there for seventeen years without any human contact or sustenance other than the rain and dew with which he had to satisfy both his thirst and his hunger. In A_1 this remarkable feat of survival is described without any comment, but in B_1 it is directly attributed to God's miraculous intervention, "Issi l'ad Jesus sustenu, / Dis e set anz, par sa vertu; / Ke il ne fud periz ne mort" (1825-1827). Gregory has undertaken the most extreme form of penance, and A_1 and B_1 each give their own interpretation of why this penance is performed. In A_1 the emphasis is not on Gregory's suffering, but on his desire to live a life in accordance with God's wishes, "Coment que il menast sa vie, / De Deu prier pas ne s'oblie / Que une vie li doinst mener / Que a lui se puisse accorder" (2297-2300). This attitude is compatible with Gregory's explanation to his mother that they had to live good lives to balance out the evil they had already committed so that they would be judged favorably by God. The narrator in B_1 instead draws attention to the difficulty of Gregory's penance, "Ore poüm bien creire e dire / Ke grant peine suffri li sire / Enz en la mer sur le perun, / Ainz qu'il eust remissiun" (1833-1836). In the worldview presented by B_1, only pain and suffering can bring the remission of sins.

In either case, no normal person could ever expect to imitate Gregory's journey through penance to forgiveness and sanctity. Gregory is only rescued from the rock after an angel appears in the conclave assembled to elect a new pope and instructs the legates to go and find, "Un peneant…qui gist en un rocher de mer, / E cil apele om Gregoire. / Deus volt que cil seit apostoile" (A_1 2387-2390, cf. B_1 1859-1862). Furthermore, it is only by the accumulation of increasingly unlikely coincidences that the messengers sent

to find Gregory are able to rescue him from the rock and bring him back to Rome. First, they happen upon the house of the very same fisherman who had chained the saint to the rock. This is not an accident, the narrators of B_1 and A_1 assure their readers, but the will of divine providence: the messengers came to the fisherman's house, "Si cum Deu plot, / Qui dreite veie les menot" (A_1 2397-2398, cf. B_1 1866). Second, and even more astounding, when the fisherman slices open a fish he is preparing for the messengers' supper, he finds in its entrails the very key he had used to lock Gregory's chains! This key serves both as the physical instrument necessary to free Gregory from the rock and as the tangible sign that God is satisfied with the saint's penance. Indeed, when the messengers arrive on Gregory's rock and tell him that God has sent them to rescue him and make him pope, at first he refuses to believe them. The messengers press their case, saying in B_1 that they refuse to leave unless he comes with him and in A_1 that it would be a sin for him to refuse such a clear divine command. In both versions, Gregory makes a final appeal to the key as the reason why he cannot leave the rock. The wording of Gregory's appeal in A1 stresses the physical impossibility of being freed from the chains without the key, "Ja ne me moverai, / Quar la clef de celz ferges n'ai / Qui fu en cele mer getee" (2531-2533). In B_1, he seems instead to be saying that he refuses to move until the key is found. "Jamais certes, pur nule rien," he declares, "Ceste roche ne guerpirai / Ne d'ici mais ne m'esmuverai / Desque la clef sera trouee / Que cil aveit en mer getee" (1984-1988).

When combined with the saint's miraculous ability to live seventeen years without any food, the totally improbable discovery of the key moves Gregory's penance

well outside of the realm of normal human experience. In the prologue, the narrator promises a story that will prove God's willingness to forgive all sins and accordingly can serve as an example for those who believe they are so "mesfait" they can never be forgiven and therefore "n'ont cure d'amender" (A_1 29, 32, cf. B_1 29, 32). On one level, this promise is born out by the *Vie*. Gregory, the great sinner introduced in the prologue, is effectively forgiven for all of his sins, and indeed his forgiveness is so complete that he is elected pope. But the penance required is so great that it requires superhuman fortitude and the direct, miraculous intervention of providence. There is no doubt that Gregory follows each of the three steps necessary for forgiveness as outlined in the prologue: he confesses his sin to God, does incredible penance, and so is totally and clearly forgiven. Though his experience is extraordinary, it can be scaled down to human terms and applied to ordinary life. An ordinary sinner can confess his sins to a priest, rather than directly to God, and he can then expiate his guilt by practicing moderate asceticism, charity, and prayer, not by being chained to a rock. The measure of this penance is assigned by the priest in proportion to the sin; it does not have to last until God miraculously intervenes with keys found in the belly of a fish. The fantastic elements of Gregory's sin, penance, and redemption make the lesson more impressive and memorable; they do not have to be taken as a direct model to be imitated. Nonetheless, they are an integral part of the story and they do distance it from normal human experience. The very things that make Gregory's example so striking also make it harder for an ordinary person to relate to.

The narrator of B_1 highlights this tension by offering a very precise and somewhat surprising moral at the end of the *Vie*. After describing Gregory's penance and his miraculous election to the papacy, the narrator of B_1 addresses the audience and proclaims that it is better never to commit incest than hope for God's forgiveness, because no one could do the necessary penance. "Jol sai mult bien, trestut de fi," he declares, "Ke nul de cels ki sunt ici / Ne peust en mer tant ester / Pur les suens pechiez amender / Cum Gregorie fist, li bons hom: / Dis et set ans sur le perun!" (B_1 2043-2056). This is an almost ridiculously literalistic reading of the *Vie*. Rather than scaling the lesson down to the audience's ordinary guilt and need for ordinary penance, the narrator warns against committing incest. This is not a misreading of the *Vie*, but it does limit its interpretation as a lesson for sinners. It is all well and good to warn people about the negative consequences of sin before they commit it, but what about those who already consider themselves guilty and despair of ever finding mercy? This is precisely the "maniere…de gent" that the narrator had invited to stay and listen to his story in order to learn about the "fruit de penitence" (A_1 17-24, cf. B_1 17-24). What good would it to do for them to hear about the fruit of Gregory's "penitence" if they are told how impossible it is rather than encouraged to imitate it to the best of their ability? The other versions of the *Vie*, which lack B_1's stern warning and include Gregory's final reconciliation with his mother, offer another way of resolving this tension.

The Monastery

In every one of the octosyllabic Old French versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* other than B_1, the saint's mother is reunited with her son in Rome, enters a monastery, and is explicitly forgiven for her sins and welcomed into paradise (A_1 2693-2698).[165] The details of her withdrawal into religious life offer important points of comparison and contrast with Ermengarde's various monastic experiences as well as with the more general religious climate of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Interestingly enough, the account of Gregory's triumphant entry into Rome, his coronation as pope, and the miracles he performs are missing in A_1. In A_1, Gregory arrives at the outskirts of Rome, gets off his horse, and humbly thanks God for having done so much for him. At this point, the bottom of folio 180^v, the story breaks off and continues on 181^r with the words, "Talant ot que a Rome ireit, / A l'apostoile parlereit" (A_1 2593-2594). It soon becomes clear that the subject of this sentence is none other than the Countess of Aquitaine, "icele dame" the narrator assures his audience, "Dont vous avez oï la fame" (2599-2600), but this extremely brusque transition indicates that A_1 is missing part of the original story. Fortunately, this missing section can be found in the two other manuscripts of the A family as well as in B_2 and B_3, and in his critical edition of the *Vie*, Hendrik Sol uses the A_2 version to fill in the lacuna in A_1. Immediately following Gregory's ordination as pope, the narrators of A_2, A_3, and B_3 offer a summary and analysis of the moral lesson taught by the *Vie*. Unlike the warning against incest that appears in the parallel passage in B_1, this moral repeats the promise of God's forgiveness first made in the prologue. The example of Gregory's salvation should be proof, the

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[165] Cf. B_2 2457-2464, B_3 2354-2360, A_2 2645-2652, A_3 2674-2681.

narrators declare, “Que Deus est de misericorde / A celui qui a lui s’corde…N’aime de peceor la morte / Mais que il vive et s’acort” (A_2 2525-2526, 2531-2532). And if Gregory’s supernatural penance is too daunting a model for readers to imitate, all of these versions of the *Vie* follow this moral with the example of Gregory’s mother.

When she returns to the story, the Countess of Aquitaine does not feel that her sins have been forgiven. She is still a “pecheresse…a desmesure” who wants to speak to the pope “Que des pechez se descharjast / E par son conseil s’amendast” (A_1 2595-2598). This is the clearest reference in the *Vie* to the practice of sacerdotal confession and absolution. The pope is the priest *par excellence*, the direct successor of Peter who was given the keys to bind and loose sins.[166] This passage is also the clearest reference to the need for the kind of spiritual counsel Robert of Arbrissel gave Ermengarde of Brittany. The Countess of Aquitaine is finally seeking forgiveness according to the practices proscribed by the Church.

In addition to these echoes of Church doctrine, this episode also bears the features of a classical comedy, a narrative structure often employed in medieval romance. The Countess has no idea that the pope is actually her son, just as she had no idea that the knight who had saved her from the Roman duke was her son. This time, however, her ignorance is not a source of sin. Gregory’s mother humbly kneels before her unrecognized son, “Conois sa colpe et son peché,” and asks for “tiel penitence / Que sauve seit sa conscience” (A_1 2619-2620). It is important to note the reference to the

[166] Delaruelle discusses the importance of confession and the sacrament of penance in the clericalization of Christian society between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. Since the priests, and ultimately the bishops and the pope from whom their authority derived, were the only ones who could forgive sins, they were indispensable for salvation (200).

Countess's conscience. She is specifically asking for a penance that will ease her mind and assure her she has been forgiven, something that her previous attempts a moral life evidentially had been unable to do. The question therefore, is clear. Gregory has already unsuccessfully suggested a penance for his mother. How will what he says now be different?

The first difference is found in Gregory himself. When he first discovered that he had married his mother he was a layperson; indeed, he had specifically rejected the clerical life in his single-minded devotion to chivalry. He was well read and knowledgeable of doctrine, as his mother observed at the time (A_1 1967-1968, cf. B_1 1577-1578), but he had no official sacerdotal power to absolve sins. Now, of course, Gregory is pope and he sits at the summit of the sacerdotal hierarchy that mediates between humanity and God. He has both the knowledge and the authority to forgive any transgression, as long as the guilty person makes a full and sincere confession and performs the penance he gives him or her.

The second difference between this mother-son reunion and the previous one also derives from a change in Gregory's character. Seventeen years of fasting and isolation on the rock have earned the saint forgiveness for his own sins and purged him of any latent, disordered affection. The first time Gregory recognized that the Countess of Aquitaine, his wife, was actually his long-lost mother, he felt compelled to flee and break off all contact with her. Their relationship had been twisted into a tangle of kinship and sexuality and could not be maintained. Furthermore, the shame of the Count and Countess of Aquitaine staying together after it was revealed they were mother and son,

aunt and nephew, and husband and wife would have been unbearable. Now, however, Gregory is pope and his saintliness has been confirmed by his miraculous election and the wonders and marvels that accompanied his triumphal entrance into Rome.[167] His relationship with his mother has been cleansed of its iniquity and can be maintained until her death.

When the Countess confesses her sins to the pope she still does not recognize him as her son, but he recognizes her, and declares that her reappearance in his life is the work of God. "Dés vos a mise en bone rote, / Dés vos a mise en bone veie," he insists, "Qui ici endroit vos enveit" (A_1 2628-2630). The tangle of aunt, nephew, husband, and wife has been replaced by a simple, natural relationship under God's benevolent protection, "Vostre fiz sui, e vos me mere. / Bien sai que Des li nostre pere, / Nos volst a bone fin mener, / Que nos a fait entretrover" (A_1 2631-2634). Upon hearing these words, the Countess is so overjoyed that "a poi ne vole" (A_1 2636), and wonders whether she should continue kneeling and kissing his feet, considering the dignity of the pope, or stand up and embrace him, since he is her son. She remains kneeling and entrusts her soul and body to him, the servant of the true God, and declares, "Ja mais d'ici ne partirai / Ne de tei ne m'eslognerai" (A_1 2667-2668).

Pope Gregory obliges this wish, and puts his mother "en une maison / O dames de religion," (A_1 2673-2674) where she can finally expiate her sins and earn a place in heaven. There are two reasons why life as a nun in Rome offers the Countess the effective penance she could not find in Aquitaine. First, she is no longer subject to the

[167] These miracles include healings and the ringing of bells "Que onques nus hom main n'i mist" (A_2 2489).

demands and responsibilities of rule or the need to find a means to support herself, as the narrator states plainly, “Onc ne tint conte de requerre / Rente de païs ne de terre: / De servir deu a bon corage” (A_1 2675-2679). Second, although the narrator does not mention this fact explicitly, the Countess is also free from the unwanted attention of bellicose suitors with an eye on her lands. Religious life offers the Countess the freedom to serve God, “en tote guise” and “faire le bien quant ele pot” (A_1 2682-2683) that she never had as a lay aristocrat. Moreover, in Rome the Countess is never again bereft of the spiritual direction and support of her dear son, the pope. As the narrator recounts, “Tuit li portent grant enor / Por la crieme e por l’amor / De l’apostoile qui l’amot / E qui sovent la revisot” (A_1 2687-2690). We have already seen how decisive having Robert of Arbrissel as a spiritual counselor was for Ermengarde of Brittany, and how Gregory’s mother was completely lacking in spiritual direction after her son’s departure. Now she has the protection and guidance of the most powerful person in the Church, a man who loves and visits her with a filial affection that has been refined and purified by long separation, shared suffering, and God’s grace and forgiveness.

With all of these advantages, it is no surprise that the Countess of Aquitaine is finally cleansed of her double incest and “deservi aprés sa mort / Aveir el ciel verai confort, E la corone pardurable / Ensemble o vie esperitable” (A_1 2695-2698). The A_1 version of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, along with the other four members of the A and B families, keeps the promise made by the narrator in the prologue, who can confidently proclaim in the conclusion, “Seignors, a itiel fin parviennent / Cil qui a Damedeu se tiennent” (A_1 2699-2700). Even Gregory’s father, the originator of all their

sin and anguish, is saved "por l'amor" of his son, the pope (A_1 2734). This forgiveness does not come freely, however. Gregory is only saved after seventeen years of miraculous penance on a rock. His mother, whose salvation is left in suspense in B_1, is redeemed in A_1, but only after leaving her position as Countess and becoming a nun in Rome, where she is freed from all mundane responsibility and supported by the Church's most powerful cleric. Finally Gregory's father is saved too, but not by his own merit.[168] Like Alexis's family in the *Chanson de saint Alexis*, he is redeemed by his close relationship with the saint, not by any of his own good works.

Nonetheless, the readers of the *Vie*, at least in some of its versions, are called to seek forgiveness for their sins through good works. The version A_1 ends in the middle of the prayer that in typical hagiographic style concludes the *Vie*, but Hendrik Sol rounds out his critical edition with four verses taken from A_3 in which God's forgiveness is explicitly tied to one's ability to do good works. "Or prions Deu, nostre Seignor," the narrator prays, "Que il nos doinst tels euvres faire / Que a bon chief en poissons traire / E de nos pechez nos deliver / E face en gloire avec sei vivre (A_3 2713, 2721-2724). Works are required for salvation, but the readers are not told to rely on their own strength to do good, they are invited to ask God to help them do what He requires. Rather than focusing on the impossibility of imitating Gregory's penance, here the narrator declares that God will help those who trust in his mercy perform the penance necessary to expiate their sins.

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[168] Unless his salvation can be attributed to his death while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as the baron suggested when he imposed this "penance" on the young count (A_1 395-396, cf. B_1 333-334). The narrator, however, attributes Gregory's parents' salvation to the love God had for the saint, "E por l'amor de lui sauva / Son pere e sa mere ensement" (A_1 2735-2736).

The fictional Countess of Aquitaine needed to make a radical break with the secular world before she could find redemption and relief from her guilt, and a "maison de religion" under her son's protection in Rome gave her the space and the support required to do so. She did not live for seventeen years without food and water, but in some ways, her penance is almost as fantastic – if not as difficult – as her son's. She is reunited with her long-lost son, who happens to be pope, and lives out the rest of her days without any lack of spiritual and material support and comfort. Few people in the audience could hope for that level of comfort and certainty in life. Even Ermengade of Brittany, who was remarkably privileged compared to her contemporaries, kept having to renegotiate her religious path as one source of inspiration and stability after another vanished.

As the tenth- and eleventh-century examples of Saints Matilda of Saxony and Margaret of Scotland[169] show, it was not impossible for an aristocratic lay person to achieve sanctity in the earlier Middle Ages, but after the Gregorian reform, the equation of holiness with asceticism meant that while salvation might be "attainable by pious laymen who observed the laws of the church and were generous toward religious orders and the poor" (Vauchez, "Lay People's Sanctity" 23), true holiness and Christian perfection could only be attained by monks who lived in "isolation and contempt of the world" (ibid. 24). In a religious horizon of expectations in which lay piety was strongly undervalued, it was natural for a passionate, searching woman like Ermengarde to be

[169] Saint Matilda (d. 968) was the mother of the German emperor Otto I and Saint Margaret was the Queen of Scotland (d. 1093). Both were saints despite their "restraint in the practice of pious acts, consistent with the restriction on the social life of an aristocratic lady" and they were praised for their roles as wife, mother, and widow (Vauchez, "Lay People's Sanctity" 22).

drawn to the tranquility and perfection of the cloister. But for various reasons, she did not stay there permanently.

The Countess of Aquitaine's happy experience in the "maison de religion" in Rome was due in large part to the support and presence of her son, the pope. Likewise, Ermengarde's attraction to Fontevraud was based on her admiration for Robert of Arbrissel, its illustrious founder, the "directeur qu'elle chérissait" (Pétigny 220). But this relationship was not as stable as the one that bound Gregory to his mother. After Robert died in 1117, Ermengarde left the monastery and returned to the secular world of the Breton court (ibid.), even though this decision attracted the ire of at least one cleric, Geoffrey, the abbot of Trinity Abbey in Vendôme. Geoffrey had been a friend and erstwhile critic of Robert during his life (Carrer 115-117) and after Robert's death considered himself the protector of Fontevraud (Pétigny 221). When word reached him that Ermengarde had left the monastery, he wrote her a scathing letter in which he warned her not to let "the tongues of flatterers" separate her from her Creator and bring her back into the world, in which "there is nothing that is not mournful and deadly." The present world is so corrupted by true misery and false blessing, Geoffrey writes, that almost no one who embraces it can expect to "have God".[170] Here is the clear opposition between the secular world and monastic ideals expressed by Peter Damian in terms of floods and shipwrecks. According to this model, the secular world offers no chance for salvation, and anyone who leaves the safety of the monastery and returns to it is both foolish and

[170] "…adulantium linguae non te a Creatore tuo separassent, nec unde semel recesseras, iterum sociassent mundo, in quo nihil praeter id quod est funestum reperies. Praesentem namque mundum sic vera miseria, et falsa beatitudo comitatur ut vix aut nunquam Deum habere valeat, quicunque illum amplectitur" (Geoffrey of Vendôme, "Ermengardi Comitissae epistolae duae" *Patrologia Latina.* vol. 157 col. 206A).

prideful. Geoffrey's letter is a clear example of how a cleric can use Christian doctrine to exacerbate the guilt felt by a lay person. He offers her no hope for forgiveness and peace of mind unless she returns to the cloister.

But the laity did not always submit to the demands of the clerical order, and despite the priests' self-proclaimed monopoly on salvation, there were multiple sources of power in medieval society. Ermengarde was evidently not cowed by this threatening letter; instead she responded by refusing to make any donations to Geoffrey's monastery, even though her father was buried there. It was Geoffrey who was forced to back down. He composed a second letter in a much more humble and conciliatory tone, writing that he was happy to have heard that in administering her lands, Ermengarde ruled justly, maintained the peace, and devoted herself to feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and clothing the naked to such an extent that she seemed "to be fighting for God rather than caught up in worldly affairs."[171] These flattering words are only a preamble to the real subject of the letter, which is to remind Ermengarde of her filial obligation to provide for the church in which her father's body rests, but they offer a glimpse of the complicated relationship between the clergy and the aristocratic laity. An abbot like Geoffrey may believe wholeheartedly in the ascetic, monastic model of holiness and declare that the world offers little chance for salvation, but he also depends on men and women living in the world for material support, and he cannot alienate them entirely. It is fascinating that when appealing to Ermengarde for the various sorts of ornaments and

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[171] "In terreno regimine, ut audivi, exercens jura justitiae, et patriae faciens pacem, multis proficis, pauperes pascis esurientes, sitientibus porrigis potum, nudos vestis, et nobilitatem generis morum nobilitate superans, Deo potius militare quam saecularibus negotiis implicari videris" (ibid. col. 206B).

possessions with which princes habitually decorated and enriched their ancestors' burial places, Geoffrey refers to the same good works recommended by Robert and the fictional Pope Saint Gregory as the keys to salvation for a lay woman. Even a man like Geoffrey of Vendôme was willing to see the positive side of secular life when it came time to solicit donations.

Indeed, the life of a pious aristocrat apparently satisfied Ermengarde for the next dozen years or so as she ruled Brittany alongside her son, Conan III. When she returned to Fontevraud in 1129, it was not as a postulant seeking the refuge of the cloister, but as a wealthy patron making a large donation to her ex-sisters (Pétigny 221-222). Evidently chaste since her husband's death, just, and generous to the poor, Ermengarde could be taken as a model of lay aristocratic piety. Nevertheless, when the Countess of Brittany heard the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux preach at an ecclesiastic conference, she was captivated once again by the charisma of an eloquent speaker and wise spiritual master. [172] She left the secular world a second time and took the veil from Bernard's own hands at the Cistercian priory of Larrey near Dijon (Pétigny 222).[173]

Once again, an intense, personal relationship with her director was a fundamental part of Ermengarde's monastic spirituality, as can be seen in two letters that Bernard wrote to Ermengarde. The first letter is a strong affirmation of Bernard's affection for the

[172] Probably at a council called at Étampes in April of 1130 to resolve the a disputed papal election (Pétigny 222).
[173] Régine Pernoud argues that the departure of Ermengarde's brother, Fulk V of Anjou, for the Holy Land in 1131 might have moved Ermengarde to reexamine her religious vocation (126-127).

"former countess, now a humble handmaiden of Christ,"[174] in which he declares "Your modesty is so great that you are likely to believe that He who has moved you to esteem me and choose me as your spiritual counselor has also moved me with a like feeling of affectionate concern."[175] The exuberant style with which Bernard expresses himself may surprise those whose image of Bernard is colored by attitudes like Augustin Fliche's statement that "to [Bernard] women had always seemed the incarnation of the devil" (Pernoud 127). But the expression of spiritual affection in the concrete terms of human love was not unusual at the time, as Bruno Scott James observes in the introduction to his translation of this letter (181). But even this bond of affection was not enough to keep Ermengarde in the priory for long. As Pétigny observes, the former countess was now almost sixty years old and perhaps ready for the sort of monastic retirement her husband had taken – everything seemed to point to a permanent move to Burgundy (223). But in actuality, her stay in Larrey was even shorter than her stay at Fontevraud. Bernard's extensive travels kept him from visiting Ermengarde as often as she would have liked, as his second letter indicates, and by 1132 he was summoned to Rome to serve as a diplomat for the new pope, Innocent II, whose election Bernard had helped secure (ibid.). Despite Bernard's assurances that his inability to visit was as much a source of irritation for him as it was for Ermengarde, writing, "absent from you in body, I am always present

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[174] The letter is addressed from Bernard to "Dilectae in Christo filiae suae ERMENGARDI, quondam eximiae comitissae, nunc humili Christi ancillae" (Bernard of Clairvaux, "Epistolae ad Ermengardam duae." *Patrologia Latina.* vol. 189 col. 263A).

[175] "Caeterum tuae modestiae est id potius sentire de nobis, ut qui te affecit ita me diligere et eligere ad consilium tuae salutis, aeque affecerit et me in obsequium tuae dilectionis" (ibid. col 263B). The translation is from *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, Bruno Scott James, Trans. 181.

to you in spirit"[176] the former countess apparently felt cut-off from her spiritual director. The break was not as definitive as what she experienced after Robert of Arbrissel's death, but the effect was the same. Soon after Bernard's departure for Italy, Ermengarde herself left the convent to visit her brother in the Holy Land. Was she dissatisfied with monastic life, or did she see this pilgrimage as a more holy endeavor? There were those who said that it was a sin for a monk or nun to leave the cloister, even in order to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but for the laity a pilgrimage was a chance for redemption even without a formal confession.[177]

In either case, this move was not permanent. By June of 1135, Ermengarde was back in France, not as a nun in a priory, but once more as a pious and generous aristocratic laywoman, presiding over the foundation of the Cistercian monastery of Buzay near Nantes alongside her son Conan (Pétigny 224, Carrer 254). Ermengarde played an active part in the government of Brittany at least until 1146, the last time her name appears in a charter, when she was seventy-seven years old. The precise details of Ermengarde's last days and death are uncertain. Pétigny maintains that once Ermengarde returned to the court of Brittany after her pilgrimage to the Holy Land she never left (224). However, according to the necrologies of Fontevraud and St-Maurice of Angers, she died on June 1st, 1147 at the Saint-Sauveur abbey at Redon, the same place where her husband had taken his monastic retirement over thirty years earlier. A third alternative is

[176] "Et nunc quidem praesens sum spiritu, licet corpore absens" (ibid. col 263A).
[177] A pilgrimage to Jerusalem was obviously a spiritually meritorious thing to do, but many monastic writers, including Yves of Chartres and Anselm of Canterbury, believed that it was not a sufficient cause to leave the cloister once one had entered it (Grandjean 214, 277). Bernard himself, who had preached the Second Crusade and sung the praises of the Knights Templar (Leclercq *Histoire de la Spiritualité* 165, 169), wrote a letter ordering excommunication "for any monk or lay brother who leaves the monastery to join the expedition," i.e. the Crusade (James xi).

offered by *Chronicle of the Counts of Anjou*, which states that Ermengarde died as a nun in the church of Saint Anne in Jerusalem (Carrer 268-270). As with the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, there are multiple endings to Ermengarde's life. Of course, only one of them can actually be true, in a historical sense, and the version in which she died in Redon has the most evidence in its favor. Nonetheless, it is significant that a medieval chronicler thought it reasonable that the Countess of Brittany ended her life as a nun in the Holy Land. Her brother had died as the king of Jerusalem, and Ermengarde certainly could have died there as well. Such an ending to the life of a pious aristocrat was well within the horizon of expectations of twelfth-century France.

In either case, it is all but certain that Ermengarde finally left her position as Countess of Brittany before she died. The old Countess was probably ready to leave behind the responsibilities of rule, and like the fictional Countess of Aquitaine, not have to concern herself about collecting "Rente de païs ne de terre" (A_1 2677-2678). Philippe Carrer describes Ermengarde's life outside of the monastery as an innovation, a "Béguinage avant la lettre" in which the Countess and a few female companions lived quiet lives of prayer and service to poor outside of the framework of an official religious rule (259). This is almost certainly not true. The fact that Ermengarde's final conversion occurred only months before her death is much more in keeping with the semi-monastic retirement typical of the aristocracy of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Vauchez, *Les Laïcs* 80, *Spiritualité* 55-56) than the predecessor of a new model of holiness outside of

the "cadres conventuels."[178] Her withdrawal to Redon may have been the fruit of a final, deep conversion to monastic life, or it might have been just one more stage in the religious itinerary of a remarkable woman who negotiated a unique path between the secular and monastic worlds.

Daughter of the Count of Anjou and wife of the Count of Brittany, Ermengarde had access to all of the secular and religious ways of life of her time. After her husband's death, she ruled in her own name over one of the major second-tier political entities of Western Europe and moved within the highest circles of the aristocracy. She conversed and corresponded with some of the greatest and most innovative religious figures of her time, and the most prestigious monasteries and orders were eager to welcome her into their doors. Even the most spectacular act of lay piety, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Delaruelle 85-87, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 59-60), was well within the reach of a woman whose brother was the king of Jerusalem. Ermengarde could easily give alms to the poor and make generous donations to churches and monasteries. What she lacked was a challenging and fervent model of spirituality that allowed her to remain active in a world that, despite her protestations to Robert while still married, was not just a place of temptation and violence as Geoffrey of Vendôme described it, but a place where an aristocratic woman could do and experience grand and exciting things.

Like the fictional Pope Gregory's mother, Ermengarde experienced the difficulty of trying to reconcile a fervent piety and a desire for holiness with the attraction,

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[178] Leclercq dates the beginning of the beguine movement to "vers la fin du XIIe siècle" and places it "dans les villes des Pays-Bas et des regions voisines," a half-century after Ermengarde's death and on the other side of France (*Spiritualité* 425-426).

responsibilities, and compromises of a secular life in which she acted on the highest political, cultural, and religious planes. Their situations are quite different, of course, but even these differences contribute to a better understanding of the questions asked of and by the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* in the religious horizon of expectations of the twelfth century.

If Ermengarde's experience was characterized by options and opportunity, the fictional Countess's choices are constantly limited and constrained from the very beginning of the *Vie*. First, she was not given away in marriage as her father had wished. Being the wife of a powerful aristocrat was not without its risks and limitations, as can be seen in Ermengarde's fear that she had handed her daughter over to death by allowing her to be married to the violent Baldwin of Flanders, but it could also provide numerous opportunities as Ermengarde's own experience demonstrates. Instead of having the chance to make the best of marriage, Gregory's mother was forced to choose between two evils when her brother attempted to rape her. The young countess could either cry out and shame her brother and herself or she could assent to the mortal sin of incest. Both choices entailed negative consequences and a limiting of future possibilities. The young woman tried to choose sin over shame, but her ensuing pregnancy only presented her with another impossible choice: either kill the child to protect her and her brother's honor, or admit their guilt and raise him. The wise baron tried to offer a way out of this dilemma by sending the young count on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and offering to raise the child as his own, but the risk of discovery was too great for Gregory's mother to bear.

Instead she sent the child away unbaptized, risking his death and damnation, but safeguarding her honor.

After the child had been sent off to sea and news arrived that her brother had died, the young Countess of Aquitaine found herself in a position ostensibly not unlike the one enjoyed by Ermengarde after Count Alan's death – they were both unmarried women vested with personal suzerainty over a major territory, and both had strong religious feelings and considered themselves guilty of incest. A closer examination of the two women's situations reveals important discrepancies, however. Ermengarde was worried about being related to her husband in the fourth or fifth degree and having acquiesced to a bad marriage for her daughter. The fictional Countess of Aquitaine bore her own brother's child and then put him out to sea in a barrel. Ermengarde aspired to greater holiness, but without any overwhelming sense of urgency; the Countess of Aquitaine believed that only by totally dedicating herself to God could she save herself and her brother from damnation. Ermengarde was a forty-year-old widow with her son Conan at her side as her husband's legitimate heir. No count or duke could hope to gain any territory by invading Brittany and forcing Ermengarde to marry him. Gregory's young mother was in the eyes of the world an unmarried maiden with no offspring or siblings, and the fictional County of Aquitaine was ripe for a hostile takeover. All of these factors combine to make it reasonable for Ermengarde to move between the religious and secular worlds almost at will, whereas the Countess of Aquitaine was forced to defend her territory against invasion, constrained to marry her liberator, and finally left with neither worldly protection nor spiritual counsel. When she made her final pilgrimage to Rome, it

was not to visit her brother and then return to the court as Ermengarde did when she journeyed to the Holy Land; it was to free herself once and for all of the sins that weighed down her conscience.

Both Ermengarde and the Countess of Aquitaine ended their lives in monasteries. In the Countess's case, it was the joyful fulfillment of a hope for redemption that had endured through long years of hardship. In Ermengarde's case, it was merely the last step in the full and diverse life available to a powerful and pious aristocratic woman of the twelfth century. Ermengarde faded away from the world, disappearing from the charters that mark the administration of Brittany and lingering in the Saint-Sauveur monastery in Redon long enough to be listed there as a nun when her final passing from the world was duly noted by the religious men and women who kept the necrologies at Fontevraud and St-Maurice of Angers. Her life was not spectacularly holy or heroically virtuous enough for anyone to venerate her remains or write a *Vita Ermengardae*. Just as the Countess of Aquitaine vanishes from the B_1 version of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, Ermengarde disappeared from the human story without any confident proclamation that she had earned "verai confort" and "vie esperitable" in paradise. Ermengarde was an exceptional woman by the standards of her time and her life seems remarkable even today, but in terms of sin and salvation, she was neither a great sinner nor a saint. She was an ordinary woman looking for meaning and a calm and confident heart in a Christian religious horizon of expectations that both exacerbated her sense of guilt and offered multiple, sometimes-contradictory ways of assuaging it.

Conclusion

The *exemplum* of Pope Saint Gregory and his mother is given deeper significance when read in light of Ermengarde's experiences. Like the protagonists of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, Ermengarde was concerned about the salvation of her soul, one of the central questions of medieval Christianity. The obstacle to salvation was sin, both the original sin that affected even newborn infants and the more and less serious personal sins that everyone inevitably committed. Returning to the definition given by Etienne Delaruelle in *La Piété populaire au Moyen Age*, Christian salvation in the Middle Age meant "essentiellement d'être racheté de l'Enfer et donc d'être relevé d'un péché d'autant plus mortel qu'il est plus inéluctable" (88). At the very beginning of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, the narrator promises an answer to one of the most important questions about sin and salvation: can every sin be forgiven? The narrator promises that the *Vie* will prove that even the worst sins can be forgiven if the sinner recognizes his or her fault, turns to God, and begs for mercy. Gregory's example of salvation is so complete that he is not only given a place in paradise after his death, he is also elevated to the highest position in the Church. The *Vie* bears out the promise made by the narrator in the prologue. But as the narrative unfolds from the old Count of Aquitaine's death to Gregory's triumph, it becomes clear that the answer given by Gregory's extraordinary example raises many questions in turn, questions that are also relevant to the experience of a real medieval woman like Ermengarde of Brittany.

The first of these is asked by Brigitte Herlem-Prey in an article whose title itself asks the question: "Schuld oder Nichtschuld, das ist oft die Frage." Is Gregory truly the

horrible sinner the narrator declares him to be? From the intradiegetic perspective of the *Vie*, he certainly is, as the narrator's repeated statements and the characters' own reactions and references make abundantly clear. Yet from an extradiegetic perspective, the question is not so clear. In both the Middle Ages and today, it is generally accepted that a person cannot be held responsible for another person's fault, and so Gregory should not be blamed for his parent's incest. Furthermore, insofar as will and volition are essential to sin, it is impossible to be guilty of something one does unknowingly, as when Gregory and his mother marry each other without knowing their true relationship.

How can Gregory's lack of extrinsic personal guilt be reconciled with the absolute necessity and clarity of his guilt within the story? Harlem-Prey offers several solutions to this question, and an investigation of the *Vie* reveals a surprisingly complex and subtle model of sin and guilt. Being a sinner is not just a question of having broken a divine commandment; it is a reflection of a pessimistic attitude about the human ability to choose good for oneself. Furthermore, guilt is not just a religious matter centered on one's relationship with God, it is also a social issue based on the way one acts towards and is viewed by other people. In the *Vie*, the human propensity to err is personified by a very active devil, who entices Gregory's father to rape his sister, brings Gregory to his mother's county, and uses popular opinion to push the unrecognized mother and son to marry. Guilt is also found in the inability to distinguish between responsibility to one's family and religious duty. Gregory's mother did "del pis que faire pot" when she decided to protect her brother's honor rather than her own body, and Gregory himself stubbornly

insisted on becoming a knight and searching for his parents rather than staying in the monastery and expiating his and their sins.

Given such a model of sin and guilt, it soon becomes clear that everyone is a sinner, and everyone is in need of God's forgiveness. This was certainly the model taught by the Church in Ermengarde's world. Even if baptism washed away the guilt of original sin, the propensity to evil remained, and no one could consider him or herself righteous before God. A woman like Ermengarde not only could worry about lying, taking too much pleasure in sex, not being attentive and diligent in prayer, or lacking in generosity towards the poor and religious, she could also fear the "incest" of being married to a distant cousin within the forbidden degrees of consanguinity or the sin of having agreed to let her daughter be married to a cruel and dangerous man. As the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* reveals, sin was a complex and pervasive concern in the world of medieval Christianity, as deadly as it was unavoidable, to paraphrase Delaruelle. The question of whether sin can be forgiven and what must be done to earn that forgiveness was not an academic or literary matter; it was a deep psychological anxiety and a practical problem with social ramifications.

At the end of B_1 the narrator makes a surprising departure from the promise that all sins can be forgiven, and in doing so draws attention to another question raised by the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*. Even if all sins can be forgiven, can all people do what is necessary to merit that forgiveness? Rather than commenting on how Gregory's salvation proves God's willingness to forgive, the narrator tells his audience to avoid the sin of incest entirely, because none of them could ever repeat Gregory's penance of

seventeen years chained to a rock. The B_1 version of the *Vie* offers a view of sin and forgiveness that corresponds to the analysis offered by André Vauchez in *La Spiritualité du moyen âge occidental*. "L'homme médiéval," Vauchez contends, "est profondément convaincu que seule une douloureuse expiation peut lui obtenir la rémission de ses péchés" (62). In the end, salvation depends on a person's ability to do meritorious works, and in the case of a serious sin, those works had to be demanding and painful. Vauchez argues that in the war between the spirit and the flesh waged within every human being, the medieval person found it simpler and perhaps more effective to punish the flesh than nurture the spirit.[179] All sins can be forgiven, but forgiveness is not automatic. Something must be done to earn God's mercy, and a large part of the medieval imagination included painful self-denial and mortification.

The *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* is remarkably attentive to the psychological ramifications of guilt and forgiveness. Salvation is not just a question of the eternal state of one's soul after death, it is also a matter of overcoming guilt and finding a place of tranquility and psychological balance. The intensity of Gregory's own penance, combined with his miraculous election to the papacy and the incredible discovery of the key to his chains in the belly of a fish prove to the saint that God has accepted his atonement and bestowed his grace on him. But his penance is so far outside the realm of normal human experience that the members of the audience may have difficulty applying it to their own situation, as the narrator of B_1 observes.

[179] Vauchez applies to "les siècles précédents" an observation made by J. Toussaert about the religious context of Flanders from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, "L'effort physique et concret remplaçait dans une forme de piété plus extériorisée et très différente de la nôtre, le difficile effort de l'élévation de l'esprit vers Dieu" (Toussaert 247, as cited in Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 62).

Gregory's mother complicates and deepens any attempt to reduce the *Vie* to a simple lesson. She is an obstacle to the protagonist's progression to sainthood, but she is also the impetus that drives him to perform his extraordinary penance. She represents the entanglement of marriage and the dangers of sexuality in a much more serious and negative way than Alexis's virginal wife, but, like Lesigne in the *Roumans de saint Alexis*, she is afforded a good deal of subjectivity in order to heighten the drama of the story and make the lesson more engaging and meaningful. This subjectivity, however, brings her fate and salvation into focus. Some of the scribes who read and rewrote the Gregory legend felt the need to bring the story full circle by reuniting the pope with the woman who had been his mother, aunt, and wife and so transform the oedipal tragedy into a Christian comedy. In effect, the mother's salvation offers another example of God's forgiveness and broadens the applicability of the *Vie* as an *exemplum*, but it also raises more questions about what, precisely, is required for forgiveness. Twice, once after her brother's death and once after Gregory's departure, the Countess of Aquitaine recognizes that she has sinned and attempts to expiate her guilt by performing a moderate, subtle penance. Neither of these attempts gives her the peace of mind that comes with the assurance of forgiveness. That only comes when she confesses her sins to the greatest priest of all, the pope, and lives under his protection as a nun. The *Vie du pape Grégoire* does deliver the example of forgiveness promised in its prologue, but not without nuance and conditions. Forgiveness was not free in medieval Christianity – a normal person needed to make his or her confession to a priest, a member of the sacerdotal order that jealously guarded the right to dispense God's grace. But this power

is not exclusive. As the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* and other saints' lives demonstrate, there was always a place in medieval Christianity for the exceptional and heroic figure who can expiate his sins through intense suffering and devotion, without any need for an intermediary. Sin, guilt, and forgiveness were key elements of the medieval religious horizon of expectations, and the similarities and differences between Gregory, his mother, and Ermengarde of Brittany demonstrate how there was no simple definition of or response to the questions they raised.

Medieval Christianity responded to the problem of sin a variety of ways, and it remained a very important issue into the time of the Protestant Reform and beyond. In the early Christian church, penance was only offered for spectacular, public sins, and it required equally spectacular and public actions. It could only be performed once and entailed a complete change in lifestyle. The penitent was permanently excluded from normal social interactions and he or she was basically expected to dedicate his or her life to prayer and asceticism (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 21-22). Dom Leclercq describes the communities of "fidèles fervents qui décidaient de faire pénitence dans l'état de 'conversion'" (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 69-70), who lived around the monasteries of seventh- and eighth-century Europe. Eventually the practice of private confession came to continental Europe from Ireland and Scotland. Instead of a public admission of guilt and complete change of life, the faithful could confess their sins to a simple priest and perform the penance, construed as a kind of "tariff" established for each type of sin (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* ibid.). This system offered more immediate relief for those who lived in a constant state of culpability, but as the penalties imposed grew lighter, focused

on works of charity rather than mortification, and eventually degenerated in the *quid pro quo* system of monetary indulgences, it also lessened the penances' ability to assuage a guilty conscience. Besides, without a radical change in life, the normal believer is bound to continue sinning, often repeating the same offense he or she might have confessed in the past. The way in which the Countess of Aquitaine married her son after committing incest with her brother is a fantastic, exaggerated example of a rather mundane problem. How can someone keep from repeating her past mistakes without making a radical change in the way she lives her life?

The formal religious life of the monastery, with its vows and restrictions of movement and social interaction, offered one way to make a decisive break, but it was not satisfying to everyone, especially the men and women of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who relished the active life and even saw it as an important aspect of the Christian faith. The question of how best to live out the *vita vere apostolica* was not just confined to the debate between monks and canons. Lay men and women were also eager to find a more meaningful and radical way of life that allowed them to continue operating in the lay spheres of public life, whether political, artisanal, or conjugal. Various arrangements were made. Men and women lived in communities outside of monasteries; others, like the beguines, lived according to a strict *propositum*, in their own homes or in small groups, taking on many of the monastic practices, but remaining fiercely independent of institutional control (Vauchez, *Les Laïcs au Moyen Age* 99-103). Other men and women left their homes and followed preachers like Robert of Arbrissel, Bernard of Tiron, and Stephen of Muet into the wilderness. But the spontaneous, fervent

communities they formed were quickly organized into monastic houses and submitted to the traditional rules of Benedict and Augustine (Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 92-95). By the beginning of the thirteenth century, Western Christianity was ready for a new form of religious life, one that combined an active engagement with the world with the traditional values of prayer and asceticism. However, as these new movements emerged, a new question arose. How could the Church oversee and supervise zealous and enthusiastic groups of religious men and women operating outside of the traditional organizational structures? Just as the A_1 and B_1 versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* sheds light on the struggle between guilt and forgiveness within the traditional framework of the laity versus the religious life, such as experienced by Ermengarde of Brittany, the reinterpretations of other saints' lives can help us understand the Church's reactions to unsupervised religious experiences. The encounter in the Palestinian desert between a monk named Zosimas and a repentant prostitute named Mary questions and is questioned by the medieval Church's often troubled relationship with religious phenomena it could not control.

Chapter III

La Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne, Valdesius of Lyon, and Francis of Assisi

The example of forgiveness found in the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* is not an uncommon theme in medieval hagiography. In fact, the prologue to another verse saint's life, the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*, promises a very similar lesson. Like the narrator of *Pape saint Grégoire*, the narrator of this *Vie* also assures his audience that the story he is about to tell will demonstrate that "nus pekiés n'est si pesant / Ne si horrible ne si grans / Don Dex ne fache vrai pardon…A ciax qui prendent penitance."[180] While the details of this story are quite different from the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, the overall structure is very similar. The protagonist of this saint's life is a beautiful young girl from Egypt who runs away from home and throws herself whole-heartedly into the pleasures of food, drink, and sex. She eventually realizes the mortal danger this way of life poses to her soul and begs the Virgin Mary to intercede for her. The Virgin tells her that in order to expiate her sins, the young woman must go into the desert and live as a hermit for the rest of her life. She obeys and dwells alone for thirty years without any food other than what angels bring her (*T* 684). This process of conversion and penance is unambiguously effective. The narrator declares that the penitent sinner went directly to paradise after dying, and she is invoked as a saint in the epilogue to the poem. Like the Pope Saint Gregory, this saint offers an example of the power of conversion. Her wasted youth is debauched to the point of parody, and the penance she performs is equally exaggerated, but the message her life communicates is clear: leave behind your sinful

[180] *T* 15-18. All references are from Dembowski, *La Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* and are referenced by version and verse number, or, in the case of prose texts, by section.

ways, confess your faults, and live in holiness in order to do penance for your past wrongdoing and to keep from sinning again in the future. The difficulty and complexity of putting this message into practice can be glimpsed in the places where the experience of Ermengarde of Brittany emerges into recorded history, but there is no doubt that despite this difficulty, the message resonated with the lay and religious men and women who read and listened to saints' lives in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Of course, conversion stories were by no means the only kinds of saints' lives recounted in Old French. Other protagonists have different experiences that offer different lessons. Saint Alexis, for example, is not guilty of any horrible sin, but his single-minded dedication to God at the expense of any pleasure and all other relationships does teach something. His *Vie* can be taken as an example of how personal salvation, understood as always and literally choosing the spirit over the flesh, should be pursued at all costs. Different versions of this story, however, call this absolute primacy into question, as do other saints' lives. The *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* is also the story of a monk named Zosimas, who, like Alexis, has also totally devoted his life to God and "souzmist sa char a l'esperit" (*O*§2). But monastic perfection does not lead to sainthood; it leads to pride. Zosimas has lived in a monastery since childhood and has achieved such a mastery of asceticism and doctrine that he believes he is perfect in all things. In response to Zosimas's spiritual pride, a mysterious "holy father" comes to Zosimas, reminds him that no one is perfect, and leads him to another monastery with an even more rigorous and holy way of life.

Every Lent, the monks of this second monastery go out into the desert alone and fast for forty days. Zosimas goes out as well, looking for "alcun pere el desert qui edifier le peüst de son bien" (*O*§16). What he finds totally confounds his expectations. One day, at noon, the monk looks to the east and sees something like the shadow of a human being. Is it a dangerous, wild animal or the holy man he has been looking for? Curious, Zosimas pursues the figure and, when he comes closer, realizes that it is an old woman, dressed only in her white hair, and with her body blackened by long exposure to the sun. Even after seeing her, the monk is still uncertain of who or what this person is. A naked woman, even an elderly one, is at best an ambiguous sight. But this woman is indeed a holy woman, and she has achieved greater asceticism and a closer relationship with God through grace and solitary penance than Zosimas ever attained through years of monastic training and practice. Her spectacular holiness is a lesson for the old monk about how far God's ways are from him and from all that is earthly (*O* §64). The lesson here is less about the certainty of God's forgiveness and more about the need for humility, especially among those who might be tempted to believe they have achieved spiritual perfection.

This lesson about humility is also the same story that recounts the miraculous conversion and salvation of the girl from Egypt; the old woman who teaches Zosimas humility is the same person who ran away from home for a life of sinful pleasure and the same one who was saved by the intercession of the Virgin Mary. The path that the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* traces through the centuries clearly demonstrates how the many potential significances of a text can be reemphasized and reinterpreted in different ways through the process of rewriting.

The story of Saint Mary the Egyptian was originally written in Greek in the seventh century and is attributed to Patriarch Sophronios of Jerusalem, Sophronios narrates the *Vie* exclusively from Zosimas's perspective, first recounting Zosimas's experiences until he meets Mary, and then having Mary narrate her own life up until she meets Zosimas, and finally relating the rest of Zosimas's relationship with Mary from the monk's point of view. It was translated into Latin in the late eighth century by Paul the Deacon, an eminent historian who dedicated his *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegyptiacae* to Charlemagne as a part of the emperor's renewal of the Western Church.[181] The Latin *Vita* is in general very faithful to the Greek text, and it preserves the original narrative structure of Sophronios' poem, beginning and ending with the monk and recounting Mary's life from his perspective.

It is a twelfth-century Old French poem that first departs from this convention and begins directly with an account of Mary's sinful youth recounted from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. This version, known by the siglum *T*, begins with Mary's dissolute youth in Egypt, follows her to Jerusalem, the site of her conversion, and describes her solitary life in the desert before leaving her to introduce Zosimas (Dembowski, *Vie* 17). This change in focus is what allows the *T*-narrator to announce that his tale is an example of God's mercy, not a lesson about spiritual pride and humility. The particulars of Mary's scandalous life, her physical beauty, and the pathos of her conversion are described in much greater detail by the comparatively disinterested narrator in *T* than they are by the elderly, self-conscious Mary in the traditional

[181] In *Patrologia Latina*. vol. 73 col. 671.

configuration of the *Life*. The compelling and alluring account of Mary's sin and salvation allowed for by this reordering of the narrative may have resonated more with a secular audience and perhaps persuaded some people to reconsider their lives and strive to be more holy.

Furthermore, the rewriting of the *Vie* did not stop with *T*. One of the most popular medieval versions of the legend is an Old French prose text known as *O*, which returns to the earlier Zosimas-focused narrative structure and gives rise to the fascinating question of how a story about spiritual pride written for monks in the seventh century was understood by lay and religious men and women in the thirteenth. Whether read primarily as a lesson in humility for the monk who discovered her in the desert and those like him or as an example of God's mercy for those living in the sin of the secular world, the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* continued to resonate with the literary and religious expectations of the people of Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

The challenges of conversion and humility were not limited to literature, of course. Two historical figures from the late twelfth and early thirteenth century personally experienced radical conversions and the ensuing tension between pride and humility. Valdesius of Lyon and Francis of Assisi were both merchants who sold everything they had, gave the money to the poor, and began gathering followers and preaching to the men and women of their cities. Each of these men had to come to terms with the Church's reaction to his remarkable way of life, and in the end the two men had very different relationships with the clerical hierarchy, relationships which offer

fascinating parallels and points of contrast with the encounter between Zosimas and Mary in the desert.

Conversion: Successes and Challenges of Saints' Lives

The issues and questions that appear in and are raised by the various rewritings of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* touch on the core of the religious experience of the lay and religious men and women of Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As we have seen in the previous chapters, there was a considerable amount of tension surrounding the notion of salvation. Even though the Church's official teaching was that salvation could be achieved by anyone who followed an established set of precepts, in practice it was very difficult for the average person to be sure that he or she was saved (Manselli, *Religion populaire* 93-97). Whether they understood salvation in terms of earthly suffering or eternal damnation, medieval Christians had to come to terms with the continued experience of disease, violence, and hunger in this life and a lack of certainty about the next which could become a gnawing doubt and burning anxiety (Delaruelle 87-89). As Etienne Delaruelle notes about the twelfth century, "cette époque est caractérisée par l'obsession du salut…il n'y a en effet pas de place pour un autre sentiment religieux" (132).

As seen in Robert of Arbrissel's letter to Ermengarde of Brittany and the Pope Saint Gregory's advice to his mother, there were many things that a lay person could do to achieve the clarity of purpose and peace of mind that presumably came with the assurance of salvation. In addition to moderate asceticism, charity, and simple devotions,

medieval men and women could partake in the sacrament of confession and receive a priestly absolution and penance that would supposedly guarantee the forgiveness of sins. But for many people this was not sufficient. The very religion that promised forgiveness and grace also taught that secular life was permeated with sin and that only complete dedication to God could guarantee salvation (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 149, Vauchez, *Laïcs* 56-57). A more radical way of life offered more rigorous asceticism and more time for prayer in order to expiate ones sins as well the opportunity to cultivate a more profound religious experience through affective or intellectual meditation and contemplation. This experience could be even more effective when it represented a clear break from an old way of life now seen as sinful and dangerous. This kind of break with the past, often referred to as conversion, is an important part of all human religious experience, and it played an important role in medieval Christianity (Delaruelle 133-135, Grandjean 85-87). Converting to a life of more fervent piety and more rigorous asceticism could bring relief from the guilt of past sins and hope of future salvation, as well as a basic sense of motivation and purpose.

The most common way of experiencing this kind of conversion in the Middle Ages was by entering a religious order,[182] and being in a religious order by definition meant living under a rule under the supervision of a prior or abbot. A rule like the rule of Saint Benedict or the rule of Saint Augustine served two purposes. From the perspective of the monk or nun, it offered a straightforward if rigorous path to holiness, that is, to

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[182] André Vauchez writes that the conversion of entering the cloister was considered by some medieval thinkers to be more decisive than baptism (*Spiritualité* 45), cf. Peter Damian's remark: "monasticae uitae propositum secundum esse baptismum" (Grandjean 89).

forgiveness and ultimately salvation. From the perspective of the bishops, abbots, and popes who oversaw the Church, a rule provided a framework to channel and contain the intense religious experiences that if unchecked could lead to heresy and schism. The organization of the Church was based on a strict hierarchy of authority and obedience in which everything and everyone had its place and role.

In practice, however, the world in general and human religious experience specifically are not so easy to organize, and the monastic life did not fit all of those who felt called to conversion. One of the sources of inspiration for this kind of conversion outside of traditional frameworks can be found among the saints' lives being translated into the vernacular at this time, including the *Vie de saint Alexis*, the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, and even the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*. Despite all of the resonances between certain versions of Alexis's flight from his family and Peter Damian's understanding of the religious life as a radical separation from the world undertaken to save oneself at all costs, Alexis did not actually enter a monastery, but lived alone as a kind of hermit in the city. In the same way, after realizing the extent of his sin, Gregory did not return to the abbey where he was raised, but rather fled to a rock in the middle of the sea and lived there alone for seventeen years.

This preference for solitude over monastic life often depicted in saints' lives is not a coincidence. According to the model of holiness shared by the *Vies* of Alexis and Pope Gregory, the saint, striving for the highest degree of asceticism, must obtain complete freedom from human relationships in order to concentrate exclusively on God, and this includes relationships with brother monks or even a superior. The pre-eminence of the

solitary life of a hermit over the monastic life in a community was accepted and even lauded by writers such as Peter Damian,[183] but eremitism was also considered more dangerous and therefore only appropriate for proven monks, because the hermit did not have the support of the community to keep him or her from falling into temptation.[184] Saints like Alexis and Gregory are by definition exceptional, and their ability to reach the summit of Christian perfection without long preparation is a sign of their supernatural connection to God. Most monks and nuns, along with virtually all lay people, were actively discouraged from striking out on their own to find their salvation in the solitude of the desert. The risk of succumbing to temptation or falling into doctrinal error was too great to justify leaving the support of the community and the supervision of the proper authorities.

Despite these risks, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries many men and women, both lay people and priests, did try to live out the powerful religious experience of conversion without entering into the framework of traditional religious life. Some literally went out into the wilderness and lived as hermits while others lived piously in their own homes (Vandenbroucke, *Spiritualité* 425-430, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 127-128). Robert of Arbrissel, Ermengarde of Brittany's spiritual counselor and the founder of the monastery of Fontevraud, was a priest who left his ecclesial position to spend time as a wandering preacher and who attracted masses of men and women with his powerful

[183] Grandjean dedicates an entire chapter of *Laics dans l'Église* to Damian's exaltation of the eremitic life over the cenobotic (115-152).
[184] In the first chapter of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, hermits are defined explicitly as those who, "no longer in the first fervor of their conversion, but taught by long monastic practice and the help of many brethren, have already learned to fight against the devil" and "are able, with the help of God, to cope single-handed without the help of others, against the vices of the flesh and evil thoughts" (*The Rule of Saint Benedict* 1.1).

oratory and austere, compelling way of life (Dalarun 31-37). His experience was hardly unique; there were numerous other wandering preachers like Robert, and many of them attracted followers who found living in the wilderness in their company to be a profound religious experience (Delaruelle 128-131, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 91-95).

In saints' lives, the saints' exceptional, intensely-personal religious experience is always integrated into the Church. In Gregory's case this integration is very explicit and occurs while the saint is still alive. He is rescued from the rock by the clerics from Rome and set at the summit of the Christian hierarchy. In a few dozen verses, Gregory goes from having no relationship to the institutional Church to being its master. In other cases, the saint's integration into the Church occurs after his or her death. The *Life of Saint Alexis* gives an example of this kind of post-mortem integration into the institutional Church. The saint dies alone in his father's house, having fled from all worldly honor, including ecclesiastic honor, but after his death it is the pope who takes the letter from the saint's hand and recounts his life to the people of Rome, including the saint's own family. Reading the letter containing Alexis's own account of his conversion, penance, and death, the pope enacts within the story the real-world process by which the Church, through relics, feast days, and hagiography, offers the saint as an example and an intercessor to the faithful. In both cases, the saint's extraordinary holiness and ascetic zeal, made all the more remarkable by his independence and isolation, is eventually "institutionalized," that is, brought into the service of the institutional Church. This "institutionalization" is both symbolically and concretely enacted in the translation of the saint's body into a church, both within saints' lives and in history. On a symbolic level,

the enclosure of a saint's remains within a particular church building represents the saint's continued belonging, even after death, to the universal Church, the body of the faithful both living and deceased. Concretely, the enclosure of a saint's remains within the physical space of a building means that the clergymen in charge of that space can control access to the saint and draw profit from him or her, both in wealth and esteem.

Many of the religious experiences of the twelfth century were also integrated into the institutional framework of the Church. Robert and many of the other wandering preachers who gathered followers were supporters of the papacy's reform, not radicals seeking to break away from the Church, and they eventually founded monasteries and submitted their followers to a religious rule. These foundations retained some unique characteristics, such as the submission of monks to a female abbess at Robert's Fontevraud and the special emphasis given to pastoral outreach at the monastery of Prémontré founded by Saint Norbert (Dalarun 120-126, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 183-185), but they also provided a place within the institutional framework of the Church for masses of men and women who had experienced spontaneous and exhilarating conversion.

Some of those who sought a religious experience outside of the traditional frameworks of the Church could not be integrated, however. Along with orthodox preachers like Robert, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also saw the rise of heretical groups on a scale not seen since the early days of Christianity. The most widespread heretical movement of the era was the Cathars, a dualist sect which almost constituted a rival religion in Southern France and Northern Italy, and which was eventually

suppressed in the thirteenth century by the wholesale conquest of Provence and Languedoc by the Northern French during the Albigensian Crusade (Delaruelle 207-225, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 328-334). And there were many others besides the Cathars whose desire to rediscover the spirit and purity of what they considered the essential message of Christianity took them outside of the Church (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 320). One example was Henry the Monk, an ex-monk who began preaching in Le Mans in the 1130's. He was initially given authorization to preach by the bishop Hildebert of Lavardin, but his vehement attacks on the canons of the city and his unorthodox views on baptism and purgatory eventually earned him the condemnation of the ecclesiastic authorities and forced incarceration in a monastery (Manselli, *Religion populaire* 142-146). Henry's contemporary, Peter of Bruys, denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, the validity of infant baptism, and the efficacy of prayers for the dead, and he suffered an even worse fate for his heretical views. Despite Peter's initial popularity, eventually the crowds turned against the charismatic preacher and he was burned at the stake by an angry mob at the abbey of Saint Gilles in 1132 or 1133 (Skudlarek 88).

There seemed to be two options for the institutional Church when it responded to those who experienced an intense religious conversion outside of the traditional framework of monastic life. When they could be integrated these people were settled in monasteries and placed under a religious rule; when integration was impossible they were violently suppressed. The deciding factor between these two outcomes was the willingness to submit to ecclesial authority; in many cases of heresy in the twelfth century, unorthodox doctrinal positions only came after the heresiarchs were condemned

for their anti-clericalism and disobedience (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 320). A religious movement could submit to the Church and continue to exist, but at the risk of losing the spontaneity and fervor that had attracted so many people and led them to conversion, as well as many of its unique characteristics. Conversely, if it resisted, it could preserve its zeal and character, but at the price of setting itself up in opposition to the Church, an act, which, in the Middle Ages, was met with violence and oppression.

The *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* resonates strongly with these issues and questions, as do the experiences of Valdesius and Francis. Tracing the evolution of Mary and Zosimas's relationship through the Latin *Vita*, the verse *T*, and the prose *O* sheds light on the tension between fervor, spontaneity, obedience, and structure in the medieval Church, just as an understanding of this tension sheds light on the variations and constants of the different versions of the *Vie*. In order to understand how this happens, I first examine the innovations of the Old French verse *T* with respect to Paul the Deacon's Latin *Vita* and the tradition that it represents. By moving the narrative focus from Zosimas to Mary, the anonymous *T*-poet changes the dynamic of the *Life* from a warning to monks about spiritual pride to a story of sin and conversion aimed squarely at a lay audience. How does this happen, and what are the implications? I then examine the prose *O* version of the *Life* and explore how a story originally intended for monks in the Christian Near East might have been interpreted in thirteenth century France. Would lay people and the female religious who could not read Latin interpret Zosimas's encounter with Mary as a lesson in humility, an example of conversion, or something else entirely?

How far I am from the measure of true perfection

In order to appreciate the specificity of the twelfth and thirteenth century versions of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian*, it is important to understand how they are related to the Latin and Greek texts from which they descend and how these earlier texts might have been interpreted both in the contexts in which they were first written down and in later centuries. As I mentioned, the oldest surviving written version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* is the Greek *Life* written in the seventh century by Patriarch Sophronios. One of the most obvious lessons taught by this old story is the need for humility, as Zosimas himself declares towards the end of the *Life*, "Glory be to you, Christ our God," the old monk exclaims, "who showed me through this servant of yours how far I am from perfection."[185] Even though Zosimas is a monk who has devoted his entire life to study and asceticism, he is less holy than a converted sinner. The man who has achieved perfection in all other things must conquer one last sin – pride – in order to become truly holy.

When the bishop Sophronios composed or reworked the story of Mary the Egyptian in the first half of the seventh century, the Christian world was very different from the way it would be in the early ninth century when Paul the Deacon translated the *Life* into Latin or when an anonymous poet cast it into Old French rhyming octosyllabic couplets in the twelfth. In the beginning of the seventh century, the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean were still Christian and there were still monks living in the

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[185] "Gloria sit tibi, Christe Deus noster, qui ostendisti mihi per hanc famulam tuam, quanto intervallo distem a perfectione" (§35 *Acta Sanctorum*, Aprilis I, col. 82C). The *Acta Sanctorum* gives a good, seventeenth-century translation of a Greek version of the *Life* found in two manuscripts (Dembowski, *Vie* 14-15).

deserts of Palestine and Egypt. During the Carolingian era, Zosimas and Saint Mary the Egyptian would be associated with these monks when their *Vita* was included in the collections of the *Vitae Patrum*, the *Lives of the Fathers*, that is, stories about the first men and women to leave behind the ordinary world of the cities and seek a more perfect form of religious life in the desert. As the fathers and mothers of Christian monasticism, these men's and women's experiences and sayings were a valuable source of inspiration for the monks and nuns of later centuries, and Zosimas and Mary were no exception.

In the introduction to her translation of the *Verba Seniorum*, Benedicta Ward describes the way of life of these early monks and this brief overview provides useful context for the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*. The first important thing to note is that the desert fathers and mothers were much less organized than the monks of later centuries. Often uneducated, they lived alone or in small groups and practiced intense asceticism and meditated on the words of Scripture that they had memorized, especially the psalms. The outside world may have seen them as holy, almost otherworldly men and women, but they saw themselves "as sinners in need of mercy, as those who were not strong enough to endure the friction of worldly life" (xi). The most important virtue for them was humility. At the heart of these men and women's religious experience was a union with God that required the negation of the self and the submission of one's will to God's will. Pride was not just the original sin that led the devil to believe he could rival God, it was also an affirmation of the ego that created an obstacle between the believer and the divine. The *Verba* and the *Vitae* of the desert fathers and mothers are

consequently full of stories and sayings about the importance of humility and the dangers of pride (xvi-xvii).

The more developed monasticism described by Sophronios in *Mary the Egyptian* belongs to a later time period than the one described by Benedicta Ward, but it shares the original desert fathers' overriding concern for humility. In fact, Zosimas and Mary can respectively be seen as representatives of organized and primitive monasticism, and the contrast between their ways of life would have become even more significant in the Carolingian society in which Paul the Deacon lived. During the Carolingian period, monasticism became even more organized than ever with the almost universal adoption of the Rule of Saint Benedict, and reformers like Benedict of Aniane, Hildemar, and Paul the Deacon himself strove to regularize and improve the quality of monastic spirituality (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 102). In fact, the translation and compilation of the *Vitae Patrum* was part of a concerted effort to take the best from the experiences of the earliest monks in order to improve the contemporary monasticism of the Carolingian period. Like Zosimas, the monks of the Carolingian era could benefit from a reminder that the man who has achieved perfection in everything still needs to learn humility, lest he succumb to pride. This is not the only interpretation of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* possible in the Carolingian context,[186] but it is strongly supported both by the text's form and its content. There is very strong evidence that the *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegyptiacae* was read by its Carolingian, monastic audience as a lesson in humility.

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[186] Benedicta Ward comments that the story of Mary the Egyptian "showed the possibilities open to anyone willing to respond to the call of God," (xiv) and in the prologue to Sophronios's and Paul the Deacon's versions, the narrator claims that the story will prove that God still works miracles in the present day.

One of the aspects of Paul the Deacon's *Vita* that most strongly favors its interpretation as a lesson in humility is its exclusive narrative focus on the monk Zosimas.[187] Everything the reader learns about Mary the Egyptian is filtered through the monk's eyes, ears, and thoughts, and his interpretation of the holy woman as God's answer to his pride therefore remains unchallenged by any other perspective. Sophie Marnette gives an excellent explanation of narrative focalization and how it relates to Old French literature in her book *Narrateur et point de vue dans la littérature française médiévale*. Building on the work of Gerard Genette and Shlomith Rimmon-Kena (18), Marnette describes several types of narrative focalization, categorized by whether events are recounted from the perspective of a character within the story, an external narrator, or some combination of the two. The Greek and Latin versions of *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* correspond to this last type, in which "le narrateur est agent focalisateur mais présente un fait x par le seul intermédiaire d'un personnage 'percepteur'" (140). In the case of the *Vita* this "personnage 'percepteur'" is of course Zosimas, who is introduced in the opening sentence of Paul's version of the story: "In a monastery in Palestine there was a man distinguished in character and speech…named Zosimas."[188]

The narrative focus on Zosimas provides the key to understanding how Paul the Deacon's *Vita* lends itself to being read as a lesson in humility. Before Mary ever appears in the text, it is Zosimas's pride that acts as the narrative's motivating conflict.

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[187] The technique of narrating a saint's life from the perspective of someone who encounters the saint in the desert is derived from Saint Jerome's archetypal *Vita sancti Pauli eremitae*. In that text it is Saint Anthony, the father of Christian monasticism, who travels into the desert and encounters a holy man, and it is exclusively through Anthony's eyes that the reader comes to know Paul, the first Christian hermit (Dembowski, *Vie* 13).

[188] "In monasterio Palaestinorum fuit vir vitae moribus et verbo ornatus…nomine Zosimas" (Paul the Deacon, *Vita S. Mariae Aegyptiacae* (*P)* §1).

When the story begins, Zosimas considers himself "so perfect in all monastic behavior" that he begins to think that no one can teach him anything about spiritual achievement (*P* §1, 2). But in response to this pride, a mysterious old man comes to Zosimas, tells him that no man can rightly consider himself perfect, and leads him to another monastery by the Jordan River. This is the first action in the narrative, and it sets into motion everything that follows.

At this new monastery Zosimas encounters an ascetic discipline stricter than any he has previously known and is "greatly edified and strives for perfection" (*P* §5). Nonetheless, even this new level of monastic perfection does not satisfy Zosimas's desire to find someone who can teach him something about holiness. Zosimas's pride is not described in overly negative terms: it is not a source of self-satisfaction and complacency but actually a stimulus pushing him to look outside of the monastic framework for greater holiness. Once the mysterious old man has led him out of the monastery where he was raised, Zosimas no longer believes that he knows all there is to know, but now he is convinced that no ordinary monk can teach him anything about holiness. Therefore, when Zosimas goes out alone into the desert to pass the forty days of Lent in prayer, fasting, and solitude according to the tradition of the monastery, he is "hoping to find some father living in there who might teach him something."[189] If no monk can teach him about holiness, then perhaps a hermit can.

Therefore it is not surprising that Zosimas's encounter with Mary half-way through Lent is portrayed as God's response to the monk's desire for a teacher. Indeed,

[189] "…sperans invenire aliquem patrem in ea habitantem, qui eum posset aliquid aedificare" (*P* §7).

the way the encounter is narrated from Zosimas's perspective portrays Mary as the object of Zosimas's searching and not necessarily a protagonist in her own right. The first appearance of Mary in her *Vita* is as the direct object of the verb "vidit", that is, as the object of Zosimas's seeing, and her appearance and person are described according to the deepening of Zosimas's perception. The old monk first saw "a shadow almost like a human body," which he feared was "the apparition of some spirit."[190] Only after Zosimas "fortified" himself with the sign of the cross does the narrator say plainly that "it was a woman, as it appeared, with a very black body, darkened by the heat of the sun, and short hair as white as wool, descending no further than her neck."[191] Through narrative focus, the reader participates in Zosimas's growing understanding of who and what Mary is and so can better understand the monk's perception of the old woman as a response to his desire for a teacher.

The reader also learns about Mary's life the same way the monk does, that is, by listening to or reading Mary's own words. Consequently, the entire account of her youth and conversion is strongly colored by the shame that Mary herself feels at what she has done and the humility that her shame induces. When asked to relate how she came into the desert, Mary responds, "Forgive me, father, I am ashamed to tell you about the indecency of my actions…It is not in boasting, as you yourself thought, that I want to narrate the things concerning me. How could I boast, I who was made a chosen vessel

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[190] "[Zosimas] vidit…umbram quasi humani corporis apparentem; et primo quidem conturbatus est, ac contremuit, phantasiam alicujus spiritus existimans se vidisse" (*P* §7).

[191] "Mulier autem erat, quod videbatur, corpore nigerrimo, prae solis ardore denigrata, et capillos capitis habens ut lana albos, modicos et ipsos, non amplius quam usque ad cervicem descendentes" (*P* §7).

for the devil?"[192] Even when Mary does relent and tell her story, each step of her descent into sin is framed by expressions of shame and humiliation. When telling of her early life in Alexandria, Mary says, "I am ashamed to think about how I first violated my virginity and how unceasingly and insatiably I lay subjected to the vice of lust."[193] Rather than assuming she is Zosimas's superior, Mary constantly refers to herself as a sinner and flatly denies that she has anything to teach him (*P* §9).

Nonetheless, Zosimas is convinced that Mary is indeed a holy woman. This conviction is based on the clear miracles that God performs through her in Zosimas's presence. During their first meeting, Zosimas begs Mary to bless him, and when she does "he swore, with God as his witness, that, as she persevered in continuous prayer…he saw her lifted up almost a cubit from the ground, and pray suspended in the air."[194] So marvelous is the sight of this that for a moment Zosimas once again fears that Mary is not a woman, but a spirit pretending to pray. Later in the same meeting, after Mary illustrates a point with a quotation from the book of Job, Zosimas asks her whether she has learned the psalms or read the other books of Scripture. She replies that she has never learned her letters nor heard anyone singing the psalms or reading, but that paradoxically, "the word of God, living and efficacious, teaches inner human understanding," which itself is a loosely paraphrased excerpt from the fourth chapter of

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[192] "Vere erubesco, ignosce, abba meus, dicere tibi turpitudinem meorum actuum...Non enim, ut tu ipse considerasti, propter aliquam gloriam, quae circa me sunt, volo narrare. Quid enim potero gloriari, quae diabolo vas fui electionis effecta?" (*P* §12).

[193] "…quomodo quidem virginitatem meam in primis violaverim, et qualiter indesinenter et insatiabiliter vitio libidinis subjugata jacuerim, erubesco considerare" (*P* §13).

[194] "Jurabat autem, Deum testem verbi proponens, quoniam ut vidit eam perseverantem in orationis constantia...vidit eam elevatam quasi cubitum unum a terra, et in aere pendentem orare" (*P* §10).

the Letter to the Hebrews.[195] These two miracles touch the heart of Zosimas's monastic pride, because they prove that without any training or preparation Mary surpasses the monk both in the intensity and devotion of her prayer and in her knowledge of Scripture.

The enormity of Mary's sin, emphasized by her shame, and the marvelous signs and miracles she performs, emphasized by Zosimas's astonishment at seeing them, work together to favor the interpretation of her life as a lesson in humility, and this tendency is confirmed in Zosimas and Mary's last encounter. Having come back to meet Mary a year later, Zosimas is waiting at the banks of the river Jordan where the saint told him he would find her. But she is late in arriving, and the old monk begins to worry that his sin is keeping her away and then realizes that even if she were to come, there would be no way for her to cross the river. With a dramatic flourish, the narrator writes, "Just as the old man was thinking this, behold, the holy woman arrived and stood on the opposite bank of the Jordan." By the light of the full moon, Zosimas sees Mary make the sign of the cross over the water and, "walking on the liquid surface of the waves, she came as if on a solid road."[196]

The sight of this glorious miracle is clear proof to Zosimas that God is trying to teach him a lesson through Mary. He declares, "Glory to you, Christ our God, you who have shown me, through this handmaiden of yours, how much, in my thoughts, I am

[195] "Sermo autem Dei vivus et efficax intellectum intrinsecus docet humanum" (*P* §20). Cf. NRSV Hebrews 4:12: "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

[196] "Haec sene cogitante, ecce sancta illa advenit, et in parte alia fluminis stetit... ambulans super liquidum aequoris fluctum, veniebat quasi per solidum iter" (*P* §22).

below the measure of true perfection."[197] This is the lesson Zosimas takes from his relationship with Mary: God has elevated a humble and uneducated repentant prostitute to a greater level of holiness than what a monk could achieve after a lifetime of study and prayer. And this lesson is not just for Zosimas. After Mary's death, Zosimas shares the story of her life with his brother monks, and year after year they celebrate the memorial of her death "with fear and love." All the monks in his monastery and all those who hear of Mary's life can learn to be humble, regardless of their spiritual accomplishments.

This lesson in humility is reinforced by the gender dynamics of Zosimas and Mary's encounter. Zosimas's sin of pride is paradigmatic of the clerical model of masculinity that values intellectual achievement, self-control, and spiritual introspection. Mary's sexual sin represents the worst aspects of the feminine, as seen from a male clerical perspective (Gaunt 196). Her insatiable lust not only led her to sin personally, it also drew the men around her into sin. As a prostitute Mary is the lowest of women, almost a caricature of what men feared all women to be. Conversely, as an accomplished monk, Zosimas has achieved the highest state of male, clerical perfection. His pride is not vainglory; there truly is no monk that can teach him. In light of this characterization, the *Vie*'s elevation of Mary over Zosimas is a powerful example of the Christian exaltation of weakness in order to confound strength. This does not mean that the weakness is valorized, however. The *Vie* unequivocally condemns the aspects of Mary's personality that it considers the most feminine: lust, thoughtlessness, and self-indulgence. The lesson in humility taught by the *Vie* is not that Mary is superior to Zosimas because

[197] "Gloria tibi, Christe Deus noster, qui ostendisti mihi per ancillam tuam hanc, quantum mea consideratione inferior sum mensura verae perfectionis" (*P* §22).

she is a woman; it is that she is superior to him despite being a woman.[198] The inversion of weakness and strength depends on the continued definition of one element as weak and the other as strong, but it is still an inversion, and it is meant to confound the pride of the strong and offer consolation to the weak.

This is not an exhaustive interpretation of Paul's *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegypticae*, but it is strongly supported by the structure and the details of the story, especially the narrative focus on Zosimas.[199] With everything described through Zosimas's eyes, it is natural for the reader to agree with the old monk and see Mary as a response to his search for someone who can teach him something about holiness. A monk with decades of training, practice, and priestly orders is less holy than a repentant prostitute who has been living alone in the desert. Anyone tempted to take pride in his or her spiritual accomplishments should be chastised by this example.

To Please and to Edify – The T *version*

This close relationship between interpretation and narrative focus is only reinforced by the completely different use of narrative focus in the twelfth-century verse *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* known as *T*. Instead of presenting the entire story from Zosimas's perspective and having Mary recount her own life, the narrator of *T* begins with Mary's birth in Egypt, recounts her sinful youth and conversion himself, and then

[198] Similarly, Robert of Arbrissel's policy of having the monks at Fontevraud submit to the authority of an abbess was not based on any notion that women were superior administrators; it was intended to serve as a spiritual discipline of humiliation for the monks (Dalarun 126-127).
[199] It is not even Sophronios's interpretation of the story. In the "Prologus" which precedes the Greek text and which is included in Paul the Deacon's translation, the author interprets the story as a refutation of all those who believe that God no longer works miracles in the present day (§ 1).

changes focus and introduces Zosimas after the saint has begun her time of penance in the desert. There are four other Old French versions of the *Vie* that present the same narrative structure as *T*, two of which are rewritings of *T* and two of which are independent translations, including *W*, a short Anglo-Norman poem belonging to Adgar's *Miracles of the Virgin*, but *T* is the oldest known version of the *Vie* in any language to focus on Mary rather than Zosimas (Dembowski 16-18). While it is unclear if the *T*-poet made this important narrative transformation him or herself or whether it was already present in his or her lost Latin or Old French source, it is certainly a key feature of this text and an important step in the evolution of the legend of Saint Mary the Egyptian.

In addition to and in part because of this change in narrative focus and structure, the *T* version of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* also expands certain sections of the story and reduces or eliminates others. A greater proportion of the narrative is devoted to Mary's sin and conversion in *T* than in Paul the Deacon's *Vita*, in part because *T* recounts nothing of Zosimas's life before the Lenten journey into the desert where he met Mary, and in part because the *T*-narrator describes Mary's shameful youth in greater detail than Mary does herself in the *Vita*.[200] The *T*-narrator also adds a number of commentaries to the *Vie*, a feature which, as Sophie Marnette observes, is common to Old French hagiography (87-89).

This change in narrative structure is one of the most compelling reasons to read *T* as a conversion story and not a lesson in humility. Rather than the story of a monk whose

[200] The account of Mary's sinful life and conversion is 42% of the whole of *T* (645 of 1532 verses). In *P* it is 30% of the whole (2100 words out of 7100) and 35% of the whole less the account of Zosimas's earlier life (2100 words out of 6300).

spiritual pride is confounded by a repentant sinner, *T* is the tale of a young woman who falls into sin, converts, and, near the end of her life, encounters a monk who tells her story to the rest of society and so reintegrates her into the Church. The commentaries and the direct focus on Mary's youth that characterize this version offer an excellent example of what Françoise Laurent describes as the dual goals of twelfth and thirteenth-century vernacular hagiography: to please and to edify, that is, to attract the attention of a lay audience through beautiful and compelling description and rhetoric and then edify them with the example of the saint's life itself and whatever moral or doctrinal comments the narrator or a character might make within the text (33-36).

The notion of pleasing and edifying is especially relevant in the context of a conversion story like Mary's, in which the audience can be drawn in by the alluring or even titillating details of a future saint's descent into sin before learning about the sin's consequences. This is made possible in *T* by the change in narrative focus from Zosimas to a more omniscient narrator. Whereas in the *Vita* it is the old hermit herself who begrudgingly speaks of her past and plays down her present virtue, in *T* the narrator is free to plumb the depths of Mary's sin, savor her astonishing beauty, highlight her desperation, and extol the marvels of her conversion and the virtuous life that followed it. These changes alter the story not just in quantity but in quality, and the portrait of Mary's youth that emerges from *T* is much different from what is found in the *Vita*.

In the Latin *Vita*, Mary describes her childhood in Egypt in one sentence, and although she declares that the seventeen years she spent in Alexandria[201] "subjected to the vice of lust…cannot be recounted briefly," she still manages to summarize it all in less than a hundred words. She only alludes to it briefly – "citius," as she says – so that Zosimas might at least understand "the insatiable burning" of her love of sex.[202] She insists that she traded her virginity for no gift and that she took no money in exchange for her sexual favors, to the point that she eventually became so poor that she often had to beg or spin flax to survive. Her only desire, the repentant Mary says, was to "ceaselessly wallow in the dung-heap of lust."[203] In her own estimation, she was so driven by sexual desire that she was willing to endure an otherwise miserable existence to sate it. There is nothing attractive about Mary's description of her own debauched youth, which seems more like the experience of a drug-addict than the pleasure-filled life of a courtesan. The account of Mary's early life in Paul the Deacon's *Vita* is marked by the bitterness of someone who has endured great suffering and privation on account of her sins.

The account of Mary's youth found in *T* is greatly expanded and presents a very different image of her sinful life. The *T*-narrator spends fifty verses describing Mary's childhood in Egypt and another hundred and ten on her life in Alexandria. He depicts her as a rebellious, disobedient child who "tout fesoit le sien plaisir" and hints that her first sexual experience occurred even before she ran away from home (*T* 67-70). Furthermore, once she has fled to Alexandria, the *T*-Mary does not live the poverty

[201] It is important to note that Egypt and Alexandria are considered two different places in the *Vie*. Mary was born in Egypt, but then runs away to Alexandria at the age of twelve.
[202] "Hoc enim non breve est dicere: illud autem citius dicam, ut possis cognoscere insatiabilem vitii mei ardorem, quem habui in amorem stupri" (*P* §13).
[203] "...ita ut indesinenter me in sterquilinio luxuriae volutarem" (*P* §13).

stricken life of an addict. According to the *T*-narrator, she is beautiful enough to attract young men without having to offer her services for free, and her desire for sex certainly does not keep her from accepting money and gifts from her clients.

In fact, unlike the brief, vehement condemnation found in the *Vita*, the *T*-narrator's portrait of the young Mary is a beautifully-written contrast between the beauty and charm of her outward appearance and the depravity of her character and actions. The very beginning of the description offers a good example of this contrast. The narrator begins, "El chief de le plus maistre rue, / Ciés les meretrix prist ostel / Illuecques fist son cors venel," and then continues, "Ele estoit blance conme flour / Des jovenciax avoit l'amor" (*T* 110-114). As Simon Gaunt and Duncan Robertson have noted, the narrator's description of Mary's physical appearance is very similar to the descriptions of heroines in verse romances (Robertson, *Poem and Spirit* 313-315, *Medieval Saints Lives* 115-118, Gaunt 218). The description of Mary's physical beauty could almost be considered a parody of a romance *descriptio*, something with which the audience would have probably been very familiar.[204] When compared to her scandalous behavior, this description sets up the contrast between outward appearance and inner character that plays an important role in structuring this version of the *Vie*. The narrator, speaking in the first person, refers to how Mary's beauty and figure are found "en escriture" and that "a cel tens, en icel regne / Ne vit nus hom plus bele feme" (*T* 158, 161-162). In classic romance style, his focus moves from her blond hair to her well-proportioned hips. But even this

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[204] The fact that the Manuscript *L*, Additional to British Museum 36614, contains the *T* version of the *Life* and only one other piece, Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*, strongly indicates that the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* belonged to the same literary horizon as romance.

hyperbolic description cannot do Mary's beauty justice. "Ja se faichon n'en iert escrite," the narrator concedes, evoking the topos of ineffable beauty, "Ja le biauté de ceste / Nen iert escrite par nul home" (*T* 186-188)

As is common in depictions of romance heroines, everything in the description of Mary's physical appearance evokes purity and balance. Her hair is blonde, her ears "blanches…a merveilles," and her eyes "cler et sosrians." Her mouth is "petite par mesure," her face "tenre et coloree, / Com le rose qui sempre est nee" and she is neither "trop grant ne trop petite" (*T* 166-167, 169,171-172, 185). Even Mary's breast is "blanche conme flor d'espine" (*T* 180). All of this whiteness, proportion, and floral imagery contrasts so strongly with Mary's behavior that it is hard to believe that the *T*-poet is not being ironic. This sense of irony emerges even more clearly in the narrator's description of Mary's face from the audience's point of view: "Ja el nés ne el menton / N'aperceüssiés mesfaichon" (*T* 173-174). The use of the second person plural and the contrary-to-fact past subjunctive draw the reader or listener into the contrast between the impossibility of finding a flaw in Mary's outward appearance and the abundance of flaws in her inner character. A final use of irony comes at the end of the portrait, where the narrator declares, "Tant iert cortoise de parler, / Riens n'i avoit que amender. / A plaindre fait tel criaature / Quant del Creator n'avoit cure" (*T* 189-192). There is nothing to be corrected in Mary's speech, but her behavior is totally reprehensible, because she gives no thought to her Creator.

Despite the claim to have found this portrait "en escriture," it is impossible to know whether the *T*-poet invented it or whether it is from a lost source; it certainly is not

found in Sophronios's original or Paul the Deacon's *Vita*. In either case, it is an important element of the *T*-poet's attempt to please and edify his audience. The detailed and alluring portrayal of Mary's beauty draws the reader into the dramatic tension of the life on several levels. At the most basic level, the imagined beauty of Mary and the poetic and rhetorical beauty of the language itself attract the attention of the reader or listener, who, the poet might hope, will remain engaged long enough to be edified by other, more didactic portions of the poem.

At another level, the portrait itself can be read as both pleasing and edifying. The repeated, explicit contrasts drawn between Mary's outward beauty and her inner character seem to indicate that the entire passage, both on its own and in the larger context of the *Life*, can be read as a lesson on how looks can be deceiving. This lesson is made all the more effective by the way the reader is drawn in to experience this contrast first hand. The pleasure readers might take in reading the portrait and imagining the attractive and charming young woman it describes conflicts with the disapproval they are made to feel at her licentious behavior. Simon Gaunt claims that this contradiction is actually the fulfillment of a male fantasy that allows the presumably male reader to enjoy the sensual image of Mary's beauty and even the salacious account of her sins while at the same time self-righteously condemning her for them (218-219), but it can also be read as an attempt to cause male or female readers to question the enjoyment taken from this and similar images of beauty and pleasure. If Mary the Egyptian's beauty conceals a sinful interior, could the same thing not be true for the beautiful women the reader might find in romances or even the real world?

The didactic dimension of this portrait emerges even more clearly when compared to the narrator's description of Mary after her conversion. This later portrait is almost a mirror image of the first. After years in the desert without food or shelter, the once beautiful young lady has become an ugly old woman. All of her fine clothes have worn away, and she is now naked. Her hair is as white as ermine, and her flesh, which was once "blance conme flor," is now black, as are her mouth, nose, chin, and ears. Her body, once soft and well-proportioned, is scrawny and as rough as bark, and her feet are constantly pierced by thorns (*T* 621-650). Simon Gaunt interprets this transformation as a punishment to be sadistically enjoyed by the same male audience that took pleasure in the description of her beauty, similar to accounts of the dismemberment of beautiful virgin martyrs (218-219), but I would argue that it could also be read as a confirmation of the distance between outward appearances and inner character. When Mary was beautiful she was sinful; now that she is virtuous, she is ugly. This lesson, perhaps banal in content but engaging in form, was not uncommon in the Middle Ages when people were constantly invited to reject the deceiving beauty of outer appearances and look to the true beauty of inner virtue.[205]

The *T*-version of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* also contains edifying elements that are less explicitly pleasing. Some of these take the form of didactic commentaries spoken either by one of the characters or by the narrator himself, as

[205] In his twenty-fifth sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux declares that the Church, like the Ethiopian bride, is "nigra sed formosa." "And if she is black," he comments, "it is on the outside. But it is of no concern to her to be judged by you, or by any who judge according to appearances. Men see the face; God, however, looks into the heart. Therefore she is black on the outside, but beautiful on the inside, so that she might appeal to the one she is seeking to please. Not you; if she were trying to please you, she would not be a servant of Christ. O happy blackness, that reveals the whiteness of the mind, the light of knowledge, and the purity of conscience!" (In *Patrologia Latina*. vol. 183 col. 901)

mentioned above. The first such commentary comes in the prologue, where, as noted, the narrator speaks at length about the inevitability of sin and the certainty of God's forgiveness for those who confess and do penance (*T* 13-54). The second major didactic commentary is placed on the lips of the repentant Mary herself when she realizes that her sins are keeping her from entering the Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem with the rest of the pilgrims. This commentary is a 125-verse prayer that Mary the Egyptian makes to the Virgin Mary, and it takes the form of a lyrical description of the Virgin's relationship with her son and a brief summary of the history of salvation, from Jesus' birth through his death and resurrection to the final judgment.[206]

When Mary realizes the extent of her sin, which has filled her with filthy "ordure" (404), she understands her need for forgiveness but does not dare address God directly. Providentially, she sees an image of the Virgin Mary on the wall and begs her for mercy. The Egyptian's salutation of the Virgin is a poetic expansion of the Ave Maria (Robertson, *Poem and Spirit* 318). While totally in keeping with the tone of the rest of the *Life*, the prayer seems a little out of place on the lips of a sinner like Mary. Even if its lyrical subtlety can be ascribed to the fact the young woman was "tant…courtoise a parler," the prayer's theological content seems discordant with the narrator's earlier description of Mary as someone who "del Creator n'avoit cure." This objection can be made even more strongly with respect to the summary of salvation history that concludes the passage.

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[206] In contrast, in Paul the Deacon's version, the Egyptian mentions briefly that the Virgin Mary gave birth to God according to the flesh and that, as she had heard, God became man to call sinners to penance (§ 16).

Where did the penitent sinner obtain all of this religious knowledge, and why is she recounting it to the Virgin Mary? What function does it have at this point in the story? From within the story-world, Mary's sudden mastery of Christian doctrine could be taken as a precursor of the supernatural knowledge of Scripture that Zosimas himself notes. Likewise, Mary's new-found ability to retell the Christian story contrasts with her earlier ignorance of God, and therefore is a clear sign of her conversion. From an extradiegetic perspective, however, it is easy to read the passage not as Mary the Egyptian speaking to the Virgin Mary, but the narrator addressing the audience. In a sense, this is a very explicit example of a narrator trying to delight and teach its audience at the same time. The *T*-poet has inserted a lyrical exposition of Christian doctrine into his poem to edify the audience he has attracted with his alluring portrayal of Mary's beauty and scandalous behavior. He will do the same thing during his account of Mary's last communion, when Mary and Zosimas exchange commentaries on the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine and its redemptive power (*T* 1189-1219, cf. *P* §22).

Commentaries of this sort are the norm in vernacular verse hagiography (Laurent 223-266), and they do not have to be read as obnoxious intrusions of catechesis into literature, especially in the case of the *T*-version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*. From a poetic standpoint, the lyricism of these didactic passages is arguably just as compelling as the narrative or descriptive parts of the *Vie*, and, as Duncan Robertson argues, they contribute to the overall effect – and success – of the text (*Poem and Spirit* 318-320, 326). The balanced portraits of Mary's beauty and ugliness, the descriptions of her sin and punishment, and her romanticized relationship with Zosimas (ibid. 324) create

a poetic framework in which effusive accounts of Christian doctrine do not seem jarringly out of place. Just as the *T*-poet's flowery language draws the reader in to experience how Mary threw herself whole-heartedly and almost supernaturally into sin before her conversion, so it portrays how she exuberantly immerses herself in the faith and discipline to which she converts. And all of this makes the lesson of her conversion that much more successful, just as the narrative focus on Zosimas made the *Vita* that much more effective as a lesson in humility.

Valdesius: the risks and rewards of imitating the saints

The *T*-version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* is an excellent example of a vernacular hagiographer's attempt to attract and instruct an audience perhaps uninterested in hagiography. The *Vie's* intertextual connections to romance are abundant and extensive, and its place in a manuscript alongside Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* almost conclusively proves that it was read by the same people who enjoyed romances. What lesson would *T* teach such an audience? At the end of the *Vie*, the narrator explains that when Zosimas related the story of Mary's life and death to the monks of his monastery, "N'i ot nul, n'amendast sa vie / Por les miracles de Marie" (1521-1522). These monks are then taken as model readers of the *Vie*, and the audience is invited to imitate them: "Nos meïsmes nos amendon / Qui plus grant mestier en avon" (*T* 1523-1524). Specifically, however, the audience is invited to venerate Mary, not follow her example. "Et deprions ceste Marie" the narrator suggests, "dont nos avons oï le vie / Qu'ele deprit Nostre Seignor…Que il nos pardoinst nos pechiés" (*T* 1525-1539). As Brigitte Cazelles

argues, Mary the Egyptian is presented as a "mirage…et surtout talisman," not a model to emulate. The distance that separates her spectacular sin and miraculous holiness from the experience of ordinary people places the saint outside of this world. "Le saint," Cazelles writes, " …participe à la vie quotidienne des fidèles, non pas qu'il la reflète, mais parce qu'il l'exorcise" (*Modèle ou mirage* 22).

As the examples of Saint Alexis and the Pope Saint Gregory have demonstrated, however, veneration and imitation are not mutually exclusive. Readers and listeners most likely experienced a continuum of responses to the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* and similar works of vernacular hagiography. Some people probably ignored the narrator's invitation to "amend" their lives and did nothing, others might have simply prayed to Mary the Egyptian to intercede for them, while still others might have confessed a particularly nagging sin and done the penance the priest imposed. A certain segment of the audience, however, might have felt the need for a radical break with their past and longed for a deeper conversion. What effect might the lyrical and compelling combination of pleasure and edification found in *T* have had on such a person?

Valdesius, the merchant from Lyon, is one of the best historical examples of a person whose life was dramatically changed by listening to a saint's life. According to the *Anonymous Chronicle of Laon*, Valdesius had amassed a great fortune through usury. One Sunday in 1173, however, he heard a jongleur singing about Saint Alexis in front of a crowd and, struck by his words, brought the man back to his house. This saint's life made such an impression on Valdesius that the next day he went to a teacher of theology and asked what the most perfect way to reach God was. The teacher replied by repeating

Jesus' words to the rich young man in the Gospel, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21).[207] According to the *Chronicle*, Valdesius took these words literally. He gave his land to his wife, put his daughters in the convent at Fontevraud, reimbursed those whom he had defrauded, and gave the rest of his money to the poor. He then began preaching to his fellow-citizens and exhorting them to imitate his renunciation of wealth by citing Gospel passages such as, "No one can serve two masters…God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24).[208] Valdesius's story is quite exceptional and may not be entirely accurate, but it does point to the vital role vernacular saints' lives played in forming the religious horizon of expectations of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One reason for doubting the story's authenticity is its similarity to the literary accounts of conversion in circulation at the time. Euan Cameron argues that the author of the *Chronicle of Laon* might have based his account of Valdesius's conversion on the *topoi* of medieval saint's lives rather than reality, and he mentions in particular the life of Saint Aybertus, who himself was converted after listening to a minstrel perform a saint's life.

But writers were not the only people influenced by religious and literary models. It is just as reasonable to imagine that Valdesius was moved to imitate the story Saint Alexis as it is to assume that the chronicler invented the story of Valdesisus's conversion in imitation of the life of Saint Aybertus (cf. Skudlarek 121-124). Unfortunately, there is

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[207] Not coincidentally, this is the same passage of Scripture that inspired Saint Anthony the Great to go into the desert and begin living as a monk in Egypt (*Vita S. Antonii* §2, as cited in Ward 4).
[208] This account of Valdesius's conversion is summarized in Cameron 11-15. The original can be found in *Chronicon universale anonymi Laudunensis* 447-448.

no way to know for sure which of the two scenarios is historically true. There are no other sources that corroborate the story found in the *Chronicle of Laon*, and indeed, as Cameron notes, the later *Anonymous Chronicle of Passau* gives a different version of Valdesius's conversion. According to this source, Valdesius decided to sell everything and leave his wife and daughters after he witnessed the sudden death of one of the "greater citizens" of Lyon, not after hearing a saint's life (Cameron 13).

Whatever might have really happened, the very existence of the *Chronicle of Laon*'s account indicates that at least the monk who composed the chronicle believed it was reasonable for a person to be converted by a saint's life (*Chronicon Laudunensis* 442-443). A number of lay people did sell everything and leave their homes and families in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and considering the importance of saints' lives in forming these people's religious horizon of expectations, it is very likely that the models of behavior they found in hagiography contributed to their feeling a need to convert and influenced how that conversion unfolded. In psychological terms, the saints' lives provided a framework in which people could understand the source of their unhappiness and find a way to overcome it.

Indeed, it is not because Valdesius's conversion by a saint's life was in itself newsworthy that it was included in the *Chronicle of Laon*, but because of the impact Valdesisus' followers would have in the coming decades. According to the *Chronicle of Laon*, Valdesius began attracting followers in 1177, four years after his own conversion. "Valdesius, the citizen of Lyon mentioned above," the chronicler writes, "having made an oath to God in heaven that he would never again possess gold or silver in his life nor

think about tomorrow, began to gather companions in his way of life."[209] Valdesius and his companions, who would later be known as Waldenses, did not follow any established rule or dwell within the shelter and surveillance of a monastery. They continued to live in their own homes, dedicating themselves to voluntary poverty and preaching a simple message of conversion (Cameron 15-16).

Although the *Chronicle* says that it was the *Vie* of Saint Alexis, and not Saint Mary the Egyptian, that prompted Valdesius's conversion, there are important similarities and significant differences between the spontaneous, fervent religious life embraced by Valdesius and his companions and the life of penance adopted by Saint Mary the Egyptian. These similarities are probably not the result of any direct imitation, but rather the product of the common religious horizon of expectations shared by Valdesius and the men and women who wrote and rewrote the different versions of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*. As Duncan Robertson describes, the primary characteristic of Saint Mary the Egyptian is *sancta simplicitas*, or holy simplicity. She simply renounces all material possessions and goes into the desert and prays. Until her encounter with Zosimas, Mary exists outside of the structures of the Church and is free from its "institutional clerical framework" (*Poem and Spirit* 311). She has a direct and personal relationship with the divine, which, as her relationship with Zosimas makes clear, is more powerful and efficacious than the devotion of a man with a life-time of monastic training and experience. Valdesius and his followers, who preferred a simple life of poverty and

[209] "Waldesius civis Lugdunensis, de quo superius dictum est, facto voto Deo celi se de cetero in vita sua nec aurum nec argentum possessurum nec de crastina cogitaturum, cepit habere sui propositi consortes" (449).

prayer to the rituals and organization of the monastery, sought a similarly powerful experience of *sancta simplicitas* and an analogous personal, direct, and fervent relationship with the divine.

For both Mary and Valdesius, an important element of this direct connection to God is knowledge of Scripture, and both acquire this knowledge in an unconventional way. Mary's preternatural knowledge of Scripture is not explicitly mentioned in *T*, although Zosimas is astonished to hear the saint explain the redemptive power of Christ's death (1200-1214), but as noted above, it is an important element of the lesson in humility that Zosimas learns in Paul the Deacon's *Vita*. Valdesius also learned the Scriptures in a somewhat unusual, although entirely natural, way. Richard of Poitiers, who wrote an account of Valdesius's conversion in his *Vita* of Pope Alexander III, claims that the merchant, who apparently could not read Latin, had "the Gospels, some books of the Bible" and "many writings of the holy Fathers" translated into the vernacular for him.[210] He then memorized these passages and repeated them in public, and this practice formed the basis of the preaching to which Valdesius felt called (Cameron 14-15).

Like Mary the Egyptian, Valdesius and his followers experienced a profound religious conversion and then lived in poverty outside of the traditional framework of the Church in order to cultivate a direct, personal relationship with God. There were many differences between their experiences and Mary's however, and these differences are even more important than the similarities. First, Mary is a hermit. When she encounters Zosimas, she has been living in the desert practicing the most extreme form of asceticism

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[210] "Valdensis…[fecit] sibi conscribi Evangelia, et aliquos libros Bibliae in vulgari et nonnullas auctoritates Sanctorum" (Richard of Poitiers, *Vita Alexandrae* 165).

and has not spoken to another human being in 30 years (*T* 683). For her, Zosimas represents a necessary link with the outside world, in particular with the Church and the sacramental power that it holds. Valdesius and his followers, known as the Waldenses, constantly interacted with the clergy and lay people of the cities they lived in. They felt that they were called to practice the *vita vere apostolica*, the true apostolic life described in the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In the early Middle Ages, the *vita apostolica* was identified with the monastic community. Like the community of apostles described in the fourth chapter of Acts, monks lived together and held their possessions in common (Chenu 227, Skudlarek 102). During the Gregorian reform of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the notion of the *vita apostolica* was expanded to include preaching and gave rise to a new form of religious life, the canon, that is, the priest who lived in community like a monk but who went out into the world to preach and administer to the pastoral needs of lay people (Skudlarek 102-103, Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 173-179, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 82-84, 96-100). According to this model of life, the Waldenses lived together in community and poverty and preached to their fellow-citizens; they believed that preaching was both a duty and a privilege that derived from their asceticism and poverty, and it was preaching that brought them into contact with the world around them. Mary's spiritual experience was intensely personal and could not disturb anyone; the Waldenses tried to share their spiritual experience with their contemporaries, and in doing so they came into conflict with the clerical authorities.

The Waldenses preached without the theological and doctrinal training of monks or priests and, perhaps more importantly, without clearly recognized superiors who could

monitor them. How could the bishops and pastors of the Church be sure that what these uneducated laymen and women were preaching was edifying and orthodox (Skudlarek 10-11)? The question of lay preaching led to a major conflict between the Waldenses and the bishops and popes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and beyond. Saints' lives such as the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* and the *Vie de saint Alexis* could inspire profound conversions in people's lives, but if these people imitated the saints in remaining outside of the traditional frameworks of the Church, they risked the condemnation of those who considered themselves the ultimate judges of Christian experience. Another version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*, the *O* version, sheds further light on this issue and points the way to additional questions and possible solutions.

The O Version: Prosa Oratio

The *O* version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* represents an important stage or movement in the rewriting of vernacular hagiography. It is a marked departure from the aesthetic of embellishment typical of saints' lives like *T*. Unlike all of the other vernacular saints' lives I have examined thus far, *O* is not a poem. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, some vernacular writers had abandoned the constraints of rhyme and syllable-count and began composing texts in prose instead of verse. This was not a simple change in form. In Latin, prose was the preferred medium for writing theological, philosophical, and historical texts, and, perhaps most importantly, the Vulgate translation of the Bible was written in prose. Consequently, writing in prose acquired an aura of

truthfulness, especially when compared to verse, which was considered inherently mendacious because of the need to add words to make a rhyme or fill out a syllable count.[211] Moreover, this distrust for added words led to a more general rejection of the embellishment characteristic of verse texts, whether this embellishment took the form of lengthy descriptions of beautiful people and their emotional states, marvelous natural and supernatural phenomena, or the "bele conjointure" of material into an artful narrative (Kelly, *Medieval French Romance* 18). A new aesthetic of "straight talking" – the meaning of "*prosa oratio*" –appeared alongside the poetic aesthetic of embellishment (Monfrin 161-190).

The effects of this attitude are abundantly clear in *O*. Gone are the alluring descriptions of Mary's beauty and the detailed account of her sinful youth, and gone is the mirror-image portrait of her ugliness and the suffering she endured after her conversion. Gone, too, are the lyrical, didactic commentaries made by Mary during her conversion and her final communion. Most significantly, the prose *O* also abandons the Mary-focused narrative structure of *T* and returns to Sophronios's original Zosimas-centered focalization. In fact, *O* is not a rewriting of *T* but a new, independent translation of a Latin text similar to Paul the Deacon's *Vita* (Dembowski 171-173).[212] The *O* version is indeed very close to its Latin sources, but in the particular literary and religious context

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[211] The references to prose and rhyme in the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicles* are well known. One example from the 1208 version by Johannes, reads, "Por ce que rime se velt afeitier de moz conqueilliz hors de l'estoire, voust li cuens [Renauz de Bologne], que cist livres fust sanz rime selonc le latin" (Walpole, *The Old French Johannes Translation of the Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* 130; c.f. xvi).

[212] There is a prose version of *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* which preserves the Mary-centered narrative, the version *X*, edited by Dembowski 112-140. Ludmilla Evdokimova argues that *X* is based directly on *T* in its first part, and then follows *T* and another prose version in its second. She also observes that despite this close affinity, *X* is more sober than *T*, tempering the aesthetic and emotional extremes found in the poem (433-439).

of the mid-thirteenth century, it must have been read and interpreted in new and different ways (Robertson, *Medieval Saints' Lives* 105).

The emergence of vernacular prose in the thirteenth century corresponded to an expansion of vernacular literature, especially of vernacular hagiography (Dembowski, *Literary Problems* 127-129). Like the lost late-twelfth century original of *T*, the original *O* manuscript is not extant, but it is thought to date from around 1250, placing it much closer in time to its extant copies than the original of *T* is to its copies.[213] The fact that the manuscripts containing the verse life are not significantly older than those containing the prose one shows that relationship between verse and prose hagiography is more complex than the simple evolution of an earlier form into a later one. Verse and prose saints' lives were copied side by side, occasionally in the same manuscript.[214] Nonetheless, the verse *T* and the prose *O* are very different texts and they represent very different models of vernacular hagiography.

Furthermore, rather than being found in miscellaneous collections of apparently unrelated texts, all except one of the manuscripts in which *O* appears are legendaries, that is, collections of prose saints' lives arranged according to the saints' relative importance or by the order in which the saints' feasts appear in the liturgical calendar (Gehrke, *Medieval Hagiography* 6-7). Rather than trying to please and edify his audience with edifying commentaries and charming embellishments, the writer who translated and

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[213] Dembowski, agreeing with Faral, points to simple errors in translation common to all of the versions of *O* as proof that none of the copyists of *O* had a Latin text in front of them, i.e. none of the extant manuscripts of *O* are the original translation (*La Vie de sainte Marie* 173). The verse *T* is thought to date from around 1170, about eighty years earlier than the oldest manuscript containing it (Baker, "Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne" 207-267).

[214] This is the case with the B.N. fr 23112, on which Dembowksi based his edition of *T* and which includes several prose lives in addition to verse ones (*La Vie de sainte Marie* 25).

composed *O* sought to present the presumed truth of his Latin model as accurately as possible. To paraphrase Françoise Laurent, the people who read prose saints lives like *O* were already “convertis à l’hagiographie”; they did not have to be attracted or seduced by an alluring description of beauty and debauchery (cf. Laurent 34-35). It can be argued that the *Chronicle of Laon*’s depiction of Valdesius’s conversion represents the ideal audience for a verse saint’s life like *T*. Read or sung publically in church, the great hall, or even the market square, such a poem could attract the attention of indifferent listeners and perhaps move them to alter their lives, whether radically like Valdesius or by making a more modest change. On the contrary, the presumed audience for a prose saint’s life was made up of people who already considered the cultivation of holiness an important part of their lives. Rather than hearing a saint’s life because it was what someone else, whether a priest or a jongleur, was reading or singing, these people opened up legendaries because they wanted to read about saints and learn from their example. They might have been female religious who could not read Latin because they entered the cloister later in life (Laurent 26) or lay people living as *conversi* in the shadows of monasteries or trying to live out an intense piety in their own homes, like the beguines (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 69-71 425-438, Vauchez, *Spiritualité* 137-140, 143-144). They may also have been people like Valdesius, who, after a dramatic conversion, wanted to know more about their faith and so had the Scriptures and other edifying texts translated into the vernacular for them.

The change in audience is not the only thing that distinguishes *O* from *T*; the return to the Zosimas-centered narrative and the absence of the commentaries and

embellishments make the prose saint's life very different from the poem. Rather than presenting Mary as an example of God's willingness to forgive any sin, *O* once again exclusively portrays the saint through Zosimas's eyes, where, as we have seen in Paul the Deacon's *Vita*, it is easy to interpret her life as a lesson in humility. Nonetheless, it is very unlikely that the readers of *O* came to the very same conclusions about Mary as the readers of the *Vita*. Whoever the people who read *O* were, they were not the same as the monks and other clerics who read the Greek and Latin versions of the Mary legend. Even if the Old French *Vie* they read was in form and content very similar to the Latin *Vita*, the nuns, pious bourgeois, and radical preachers who read it must have interpreted it differently, and these interpretations must have been influenced by the issues and questions that made up their religious horizon of expectations.

The O Version: Zosimas sees a ghost

The question of whether lay people could preach without ecclesiastic training or oversight has strong parallels with *O'*s portrayal of Zosimas's first encounter with Mary in the desert. As in Paul the Deacon's *Vita*, when Zosimas first sees Mary in *O* he does not know who or what she is. In both texts, Zosimas is walking through the desert during Lent, searching for a holy man who might teach him something about holiness. Twenty days into his journey, or halfway, Zosimas stops at noon, turns to the east, and says "the usual prayers."[215] After he has finished, he notices the shadow that turns out to be Mary.

[215] "Cum sextae horae tempus advenisset, stetit modicum ab itinere: et conversus ad Orientem, agebat solitam orationem" (*P* §7).

This encounter is portrayed in a much less dramatic fashion here than in *T*. The *T*-narrator presents Zosimas's noon-day prayer as the last act of desperation of a man who has given up all hope of finding the holy man he was seeking. When Zosimas "ot fait vint jornees" the narrator explains, "Et vit que nul n'en peut trover, / N'a coriage d'avant aler. / A droit miedi commence s'eure / De Damediu et si l'aeure" (*T* 815-820). It is just then that he looks to the east and "Un ombre vit son essient / Qui estoit ou d'ome ou de feme, / Mais ele estoit de l'Egyptiene (*T* 823-826). The *T*-narrator is quick to point out the difference between Zosimas's perception, indicated by the phrase "son essient", and reality, set off by "Mais" and affirmed by the imperfect indicative of "estoit." There is no inherent drama here. The audience already knows who Mary is and what sort of life she has led, and the narrator even goes further and explains that it was God who had led Zosimas there because he did not want the Egyptian to be hidden any more (*T* 826-830).

The *T*-poet therefore creates drama by describing Zosimas's discovery of Mary as God's response to the monk's final, desperate prayer to find some saintly hermit. In *O*, the drama comes from the fact that the audience ostensibly knows no more about the shadow seen off to the east than Zosimas does. In reality, of course, many if not most of the people who read *O* were already familiar with the story and already knew that the shadow was Mary, whether because they had already heard or read the *Vie* in another form or because they had already read this version.[216] Nonetheless, the re-evocation of

[216] Dembowksi observes that Jacobus de Voragine's version of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* is only a résumé of the story, meant to remind readers of what they already know (*Literary Problems* 128). Moreover, the verse *W*, found in Adgar's *Miracles of the Virgin,* explicitly assumes that its audience is already familiar with the *Vie*. The narrator introduces his tale by stating, "Ci tuis escrit la sainte vie / De la Egiptiene Marie / Ke hummes e femmes ensement / Unt oï sovenirement" (1-4), and later excuses the

the unidentified "hombre de cors humain" reminds the reader of the ambiguity of what Zosimas sees and the potential danger represented by mysterious, human-like shapes in the wilderness.

In the religious and literary world of the Desert Fathers which Zosimas inhabits, the desert is not just a space of solitude and freedom from the sins and cares of the secular world where a hermit can develop a stronger relationship with God, it is also a treacherous place inhabited by demons and the mirages and illusions they create. From Saint Anthony on, the Deserts Fathers were constantly tempted and tormented by physical apparitions of demons, some of them even taking the form of women (*Vita Antonii* §4, 15-16), and all Christian models of eremitism are shaped by the account of Christ's own experience in the desert, where, after forty days of fasting, the devil came to tempt him (Matthew 4:1-7, Mark 1:12, Luke 4:1-13).

It is in light of this threat that the *Rule of Saint Benedict* demands that hermits be "well trained for single combat in the desert" before they can "go forth from the ranks of their brethren" to live alone as hermits. Even though the combat described in the *Rule* is a struggle against "the vices of the flesh and evil thoughts" and not the demonic apparitions that trouble the Desert Fathers, the concern and the lesson is the same. Without the support of brothers or sisters and without the supervision of an abbot or abbess, the hermit must rely on his or her own judgment to decide what is good and what is evil and on his or her own strength to resist the latter and choose the former. Normally,

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brevity of his account with phrases like, "En sa *Vie* l'avez oï / Iceo e el que ci nen di" and " Pur ceo que tant gent l'unt oï, / Nel faz for atuchier issi" (23-24, 119-120).

only someone with discipline and training can be trusted to take on the weighty responsibility of working towards salvation without supervision.

In this context, the suspicious reaction Zosimas is presented as having in the *Vie* is not at all unreasonable. As the *O*-narrator recounts, Zosimas, “moult esbahis et troublez, cuida que ce fust fantosme qu’il avoit veu” (*O* §17). Zosimas, however, is not a novice in the “first furor of conversion,” but a monk with a lifetime of experience, sent out into the desert for the forty days of Lent by his abbot according to the ancient tradition of his monastery (*O* §10). He knows that there are ways of distinguishing good from evil and, if necessary, ways to drive away unclean spirits. Rather than fleeing from the shadow, Zosimas “se seingna .iij. foiz del signe de la sainte croiz” (*O* §17).[217] This gesture has no adverse effect on the shadow, which is not an evil spirit or apparition. Rather than dispelling the shadow, the sign of the cross assures Zosimas and changes his perception of what he is seeing. Before, the monk “cuida que ce fust fantsome,” but now, “Qant il ot s’oroison acomplie, il vit par devant lui aler une fame toute nue” (ibid.) The removal of the subjunctive “fust” from between the subject and direct object highlights the shift from Zosimas believing that the shadow might be a spirit to his seeing that it was a naked woman.

Even this clear vision, however, could still have inspired fear and doubt in the monk. Nudity was an ambiguous state. On one hand, it could be a sign of immodesty and a temptation to sin, but on the other it could represent a total rejection of the world

[217] In the *Vita Antonii*, the father of Christian monasticism teaches his brothers that two things are necessary to combat demons: the gift of the spirit to see through their frauds and illusions, and the “unum Dominicae crucis vexillum” – the one sign of the Lord’s cross (§15, *Patrologia Latina.* vol. 73, col. 137).

and a commitment to becoming "naked to follow the naked Christ," as a common monastic saying went (Leclercq, *Aux sources* 216-217). Zosimas is immediately able to recognize which of these two kinds of nudity he is seeing when he observes that the woman is not young and attractive but "avoit les membres toz noirs du souleill" (*O* §17) and "Li chevel de son chieft estoient blanc conme lainne et petit seulement li avenoient jusqu'au col" (ibid.). Assured by ugliness that the woman he saw was a hermit and not a temptress, Zosimas "se merveilla moult et ot grant joie et conmença a aler cele part ou il la vit" (*O* §18). The old monk can trust the ability to discern good from evil that he has developed over his years of formation and joyfully recognize a holy woman, even when he finds her in the desert outside of the traditional framework of the Church. Indeed, as an ordained priest, Zosimas shares in the apostolic right to judge between good and evil. He is an agent of the institutional Church chosen by God to communicate Mary's extraordinary story of holiness to the rest of the faithful.

The bishops and pastors of the twelfth and thirteenth century also considered themselves capable of discerning between good and evil even in the "wilderness" outside of the traditional structures of the Church. Although the historical record has been obscured by the shadow of later events, it seems that Valdesius and his followers were originally judged harmless by the ecclesiastic authorities and given permission to pursue their life of voluntary poverty (Cameron 15-17). There are two historical sources that lend credence to this view. The *Anonymous Chronicle of Laon* states plainly that Valdesius was present at the Third Lateran Council celebrated by Pope Alexander III in 1179 and that "the pope embraced [him], approving the vow of voluntary poverty that he

had made but forbidding him and his followers from presuming to undertake the duty of preaching unless asked by priests."[218]

In his collection of anecdotes about twelfth century courtly life entitled *De nugis curialium*, the English writer Walter Map also writes that he saw and spoke to some of Valdesius's followers at the Third Lateran Council, although he makes no mention of Valdesius himself (*Fontium Valdensium* 122). He recalls that these men gave the pope a book written in French containing "the text of and commentaries on the Psalter and many other books from each of the two laws,"[219] and asked for a confirmation of their right to preach. Map never says whether they obtained this right or whether the pope approved of their way of life, but he also never says that they were condemned (Cameron 16). Instead he writes scornfully about their ignorance and narrates how two Waldenses, "who seemed to be leaders in their sect," were brought to him to "debate about the faith."

As Euan Cameron remarks, there is no inherent contradiction between the generally positive account of Valdesius's experience at the Council found in the *Chronicle of Laon* and Walter Map's more negative recollections, because in any case the Waldenses's good relationship with the Church hierarchy did not last long (17). Despite the pope's firm orders, Valdesius and his followers soon began preaching to their fellow citizens. The *Chronicle* notes bitterly that Valdesius and his followers "observed this

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[218] "Waldesium amplexatus est papa, approbans votum quod fecerat voluntarie paupertatis, inhibens eidem, ne vel ipse aut socii sui predicacionis officium presumerent nisi rogantibus sacerdotibus" (*Chronicon Laudunensis* 449).
[219] "[L]ibrum domino pape presentaverunt lingua conscriptum Gallica, in quo textus et glosa Psalterii plurimorumque legis utriusque librorum continebantur" (*Fontium Valdensium* 122).

commandment for a short time, but quickly became disobedient and were a scandal to many and brought about their own ruin."[220]

A third source, Richard of Poitiers's *Vita Papae Alexandrii III*, gives a more detailed account of the Waldenses's condemnation without any mention of the confirmation at the Third Lateran Council. He writes that Valdesius developed a "puffed-up sense of himself" very quickly after reading the holy writings he had had translated and then quickly "usurped the role of the Apostles" and began preaching and sending his disciples to do likewise. They went through the towns and into peoples' homes, "spreading many errors," until they were summoned by the archbishop of Lyons, Jean Bellesmains, and told to stop. In their frenzy, Richard writes, they refused to obey, and "arrogantly claiming for themselves what was said about the Apostles," they repeated Saint Peter's assertion to the Sanhedrin that it was "more important to obey God than men." They were finally excommunicated and expelled from Lyon for being "disobedient with regards to their presumptuous usurpation of the office of preaching" and, according to Richard, condemned as schismatics at the Third Lateran Council (*Fontium Valdensium* 165-166).

In addition to contradicting the *Chronicle of Laon,* the particulars of Richard of Poitier's account cannot be squared with other historical records. Jean Bellesmains did not become archbishop of Lyon until 1181, two years after the Third Lateran Council, and so could not have expelled Valdesius and his followers beforehand. In an attempt to reconcile these disparities the editor of the *Enchiridion Fontium Valdensium*, Giovanni

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[220] "Quod preceptum modico tempore observaverunt; unde extunc facti inobedientes, multis fuerunt in scandalum et sibi in ruinam" (*Chronicon Laudunensis* 449).

Gonnet, concludes that it must have been the previous bishop, Guichard, who expelled the Waldenses, but Euan Cameron disagrees with this assessment. Noting that there is no other evidence that Valdesius was condemned at the Third Lateran Council, Cameron argues instead that it was indeed Bellemains who expelled the Waldenses, but only after the Council was held in 1179.

Another document also indicates that the various members of the Church hierarchy were trying to accommodate Valdesius and his followers at late as 1180 or 1181 (Cameron 17-19). Geoffrey of Auxerre writes in his *Super Apocalypsim* that he himself was present at a council called by Archbishop Guichard of Lyon and presided over by the cardinal-legate Henri de Marcy in which Valdesius, whom he describes as the founder of a sect which had usurped the office of preaching, recognized his faults and abjured his heresy "before a numerous crowd of honorable people, mostly priests, convicted of sacrilegious presumption by clear arguments."[221] As a sign of his commitment to the orthodox faith, Valdesius was made to sign a standard profession of faith containing a summary of medieval Catholic dogma that dated back to the fifth century (Cameron 18-19, Skudlarek 145-149, Gonnet 32). While this catch-all confession reveals little about Valdesius's own particular beliefs, it is a fascinating document that indicates precisely what sort of doctrinal errors the bishops and pastors of the Church were afraid an ignorant preacher like Valdesius might make. Beginning with belief in the Trinity, the document touches on the main points of the orthodox Catholic

[221] "Abiuravit eiusmodi sectam primus inventor…Wandesius…coram numerosa multitudine honorabilium peronsarum, maxime sacerdotum, rationibus manifestis de sacrilega praesumptione convictus" (*Fontium Valdensium* 46).

faith, including the divine inspiration of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, the true, fleshly incarnation of the Son, the authenticity of the Catholic Church, and the validity of the sacraments, even when performed by a sinful priest. In reaction to some common heterodox beliefs, including Cathar dualism, it also explicitly recognizes the legitimacy of marriage and affirms the resurrection of the body and the fact that the devil is evil by choice, not by nature (*Fontium Valdensium* 32-36).

While existence of this document bolsters the argument that the Church made an attempt to accommodate Valdesius and his followers, even after some initial misunderstandings and difficulty, abundant sources make it clear that the Waldenses were in fact excommunicated as heretics before the end of the twelfth century. It was not necessarily the Waldenses's voluntary poverty that posed a threat to the Church, but their insistence that a holy way of life in and of itself qualified a person to preach, regardless of his or her doctrinal formation or place in the hierarchical structure of the Church (Skudlarek 104-112, 129-149, Vauchez, *Les Laïcs* 53). Valdesius and his followers were tolerated and even embraced by the prelates of the Church as long as they submitted to their authority and swore that their faith was orthodox. Only a duly ordained and appointed cleric, whether pope Alexander III, the archbishop of Lyons, the cardinal-legate Henri de Marcy, or even the priest Zosimas, could rightly judge whether something unknown was good or evil and whether it should be condemned or accepted. But the Waldenses, like many others before and after them, did not accept this position. They eventually saw the difference between their own poverty and fervor and the wealth

and complacency of the priests and bishops as proof that they, and not the established Church, were the authentic heirs of the *vita apostolica*.

Despite Richard of Poitier's chronological imprecision, it is very likely that Jean Bellesmains did expel the Waldenses from Lyon, albeit at the beginning of the 1180's and not in 1179. And it is certain that only seven years after Valdesius was embraced by Pope Alexander III at the Third Lateran Council and three or four years after Valdesius made a profession of faith in Lyon, he and his followers, now known as the "Poor men of Lyon," were condemned as heretics at the Council of Verona along with the Cathars, the Patarenes of Milan, the Humiliati of Lombardy, and the followers of several other heterodox preachers (Cameron 20-21). This condemnation did not put an end to the movement, however. The Waldensian preachers continued to preach throughout southern France and Lombardy, drawing the condemnation of bishops and theologians first for their disobedience, and only second for heresy.

Even then, it is unclear how heretical the early Waldenses actually were. A Waldensian preacher named Durand of Osca, who was eventually reintegrated into the Catholic Church, actually wrote a book entitled the *Liber Antiheresis* condemning the Cathar heresy while he himself was under excommunication. In this work, Durand writes that "Lord Valdesius" had been chosen by God to preach against error because the prelates "were dedicated to greed, simony, pride, avarice, feasting…lechery, and other disgraceful acts" and so unable to fulfill their pastoral responsibilities (Cameron 27). Nonetheless, their holy orders and the sacraments they performed were valid, and the Waldenses were bound to obey them, as long as they commanded things that were in

accordance with Scripture. When the prelates commanded something against the word of God, however, such as forbidding the Waldenses to preach, the Waldenses were bound by Scripture to disobey (Cameron 23-28). From the Church's perspective, disobedience was already a form of heresy, and once a person or group was defined as heretical on one account, it was natural and useful, for purposes of propaganda, to declare that they ascribed to a whole range of heretical beliefs. Sometimes, as in the case of Alain of Lille's late twelfth-century treatise against the Waldenses, Catholic writers even imagined specific heretical arguments in order to better refute them (Cameron 26).

Walter Map's account of his conversation with the Waldensian leaders at the Third Lateran Council offers a fascinating snapshot of the tension between enthusiastic lay people pursuing *sancta simplicitas* and an educated, institutionally powerful man who is deeply suspicious of an intense religious experience that exists outside of his and his peers' control. Even though Valdesius and his followers were not condemned at this particular council, they probably had already been branded as heretics by the time Map wrote his memoirs, and the courtly writer's memory may have been colored by later conflicts.

The aristocratic cleric notes dryly that he began the debate with "the easiest things, which everyone should know" by asking the Waldenses whether they believed first in the Father, then in the Son, and then in the Holy Spirit, to which they dutifully responded "we believe" three times. He then asked them if they believed "in the mother of Christ," to which they replied a fourth time, "we believe." Walter reports that upon hearing these "ignorant men" declare that they believed in the Virgin Mary the same way

they believed in the Trinity, all those who were present laughed and derided them until the Waldenses "withdrew ashamed, and rightly so, because they submitted to no rule and sought to be rulers."[222] This exchange shows how a suspicious and intellectually savvy member of the clergy could make a less-educated lay person seem to have heretical beliefs, especially because it is the clergyman who defines the terms. Map admitted that these men followed the example of the apostles, writing, "They certainly do not have houses, and go about barefooted two by two, dressed in wool, having nothing and holding all things in common like the apostles, naked following the naked Christ," but the intellectual Map sees this simple, exterior model of holiness as a threat. The Waldeneses may be humble now, but, he warns, "if we let them continue they will drive us out."[223] Voluntary poverty and a desire to read and preach the Scriptures may seem innocent enough, but if allowed to continue unchecked, they could evolve into a serious challenge to the authority of the institutional Church.

Map's defense of the status quo against these ignorant, presumptive imitators of the apostles was not just motivated by a pure desire to protect the masses of the faithful from the corrupting influence of heresy; it was also a deeply self-interested position. Map was a sophisticated and worldly man whose learning and literary skills had earned him a position at Henry II's court in England (*De Nugis Curialium*, Ed. Wright v-ix). He had a personal stake in valorizing the Latin-speaking, clerical culture over the impassioned but unsophisticated preaching of a converted merchant and his followers.

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[222] "Et ab omnibus multiplici sunt clamore derisi, confusique recesserunt, et merito, quod a nullo regebantur et rectores appetebant fieri" (*Fontium Valdensium* 123).
[223] "Hii certa nusquam habent domicilia, bini et bini circueunt nudipedes, laneis induti, nihil habentes, omnia sibi communia tanquam apostolo, nudi nudum Christum sequentes. Humillimo nunc incipient modo, quod pedem inferre nequeunt, quos si admiserimus expellemur" (*Fontium Valdensium* 123).

This intellectual and institutional pride was shared by many clerics, bishops, and popes. The Gregorian reformers had just succeeded in wresting control of the Church away from powerful lay aristocrats; they were not about to cede power to upstart bourgeois who thought living like paupers qualified them to preach the faith.

The path from mutual acceptance to condemnation traced by the Waldenses and the Church points to a very important issue. Valdesius and his followers experienced a powerful religious conversion outside of the traditional monastic framework, but, whether justified or not, they did not humbly submit to the Church's attempts to reintegrate them into the established order. Interestingly enough, this independence was made possible in part by the Church's attempts to evangelize the laity. Once spiritual, edifying texts were translated into a style and language they could understand, the Waldenses and others like them could read or listen to passages from the Bible and the sayings of the Fathers without the presence of a live, Latin-literate cleric to translate and gloss what they read according to the accepted Catholic interpretation. Spiritually ambitious lay people could seize on clear passages like, "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor" (Matthew 19:21) and, "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44-45) and take them literarily. They could also personally apply Jesus' command to the apostles to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). And finally, they could read saints' lives and see examples of spectacular holiness achieved by men and women who lived out a personal dedication to poverty and asceticism outside of the traditional frameworks of the Church.

All of these resources offered men and women new ways of responding to the need for meaning and purpose in their present lives and assurance about the fate of their souls in the next. By literally and radically following the commands in the Bible and directly imitating the heroic spirituality of the saints, some men and women believed that they could obtain salvation without constant recourse to the sacraments, especially confession and absolution, and hence without needing to submit to the priests and bishops that performed them. This attitude represented a serious threat to the sacerdotal hierarchy of the Church, which claimed for itself the exclusive right to bind and loose sins. The conflict between these two perspectives would eventually come to a head in the Protestant Reformation, but in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that was still hundreds of years away. There was still a good deal of ambiguity surrounding lay spirituality, and the lines were not as clearly drawn as they would be in later centuries. Valdesius and his followers were initially tolerated, and even after their excommunication, some of them were admitted back into the Church as the Poor Catholics (49-60). Other solutions besides violence and opposition were possible; the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* sheds light on some of these possibilities and their limitations.

The O Version: Spiritual grace and priestly office

Zosimas's first encounter with Mary the Egyptian takes on particular significance in light of the religious horizon of expectations described above, where radical conversion and a personal experience of holiness could lead to conflict with the clerical hierarchy of the Church. As we have seen, Zosimas, an ordained priest and an

experienced monk, is capable of discerning between good and evil, even when found in the ambiguous space of the desert. The ensuing dialogue demonstrates why Mary is willing and able to be reintegrated into the framework of the Church even though she has existed for so long outside of it.

After recognizing that the shadow he had feared was a spirit was in fact an old woman, Zosimas begins to run after her and begs her to stop in the name of "celui par cui amor tu habites en cest desert" (*O* §19). Rather than seeing her as a threat, Zosimas appeals to the strange woman's assumed devotion to God as a means of establishing a relationship with her. His conviction that she is a holy person is only confirmed when she stops and addresses him by name. At first "eshabiz et troublez," just as he was when he first saw her, Zosimas quickly realizes "que cele qui onques ne l'avoit veü ne oï nommer ne le seüst, se la devine Providence ne li eüst nonmé" (*O* §21). Indeed, because of his firm belief in Mary's holiness, Zosimas kneels down and asks for her blessing, even though she calls herself a "fame pecherresse" (*O* §22). But the repentant prostitute matches him in humility by stretching out on the ground herself and insisting that he instead bless her. "Et estoient andui ensemble a terre," the narrator describes, "depriant et orant li uns l'autre fere commencement de beneïçon" (ibid.).

What follows is a succinct debate on the relative merits of clerical orders and personal holiness, which offers important insight into the tension between traditional religious life and more radical experiences. As is typical of the Desert Fathers, Mary and Zosimas are both exceedingly humble, and so each, in effect, argues the other's position. Mary knows that Zosimas is a priest and believes that this office gives him the right to

bless her. “Peres Zosimas,” she argues, “a toi est otroiee la beneïçon por ce que tu uses de la sainte office de prestre et par plusors ans as servi aus sainz autiex et bien as emplie ta pensee des saintes oroisions” (*O* §23). For Zosimas, however, the very fact that Mary knows he is a priest is proof that she should be the first to give a blessing. “Certes, mere,” the old monk argues, “ge voi que tu es raempli de toute grace esperitel, pour ce que tu as conneü mon non et office de prestre en moi que tu onques mes ne veïs. Quar grace esperitel n’est donnee ne pour ordre ne pour digneté, ainz est aquise par bones euvres” (*O* §23). Mary bases her appraisal of Zosimas’s dignity on his priestly office and his years of study and devotion. Her conception of Zosimas’s holiness can be described as metonymical. He is holy because he is associated – by ordination, physical proximity, and recitation – with external things that are themselves recognized as holy in the Christian context: the priesthood, the altar, and prayers. Mary does not say anything about Zosimas’s behavior or his prideful thoughts. He is holy despite himself. Zosimas’s conception of Mary’s holiness is instead based on an innate quality which Zosimas believes Mary to have acquired through her actions. He deduces that Mary’s supernatural knowledge is the product of “spiritual grace,” which he in turn attributes to the “good works” which Mary must have performed. In Zosimas’s estimation, Mary’s inherent holiness gives her the right to bless him first.

Paradoxically, Mary’s greater humility and her deference to Zosimas’s priestly office lead her to acquiesce to his request, and so she blesses him first. This corroborates the reading of the *Vie* which interprets Mary’s extraordinary holiness as a lesson for Zosimas. Mary’s willingness to bless Zosimas first is the beginning of a series of proofs

that she is more humble, and hence more holy. But even though this reading would have been very obvious to the clerical audience of the Latin and Greek versions of the legend, it does not exhaust all of the possible ways this exchange might have been understood. The people of the late twelfth and early thirteen centuries, including the lay people, might have been aware of the debate between extrinsic and intrinsic holiness from another perspective. After the Gregorian reform, more and more people began to associate holiness with a particular way of life, specifically sexual continence and voluntary poverty, rather than with holy orders. This move from evaluating holiness on external signs like office and position to the internal standards of behavior could lead, on the one hand, to people criticizing the priests and bishops whose wealth and morals did not meet these criteria or, on the other hand, to crowds flocking to ascetic, apparently holy preachers who had no ecclesial office and who may or may not have been orthodox.

It could even lead to the heretical belief, adopted by some of the Waldenses, that the sacraments performed by unworthy priests are not valid and that conversely a holy lay person could preach and in some cases even perform the sacraments without being ordained. The argument between the Waldenses and the Catholic Church about the right to preach bears a striking resemblance to the debate between Zosimas and Mary about who should bless whom. The Catholic position was similar to Mary's: the right to preach and perform the sacraments come from *officium* and *ordo*; the Waldenses, like Zosimas, instead put more emphasis on the *meritum* of the preacher, or in their case, on their apostolic way of life, traveling about barefoot, two-by-two, and "naked following the naked Christ" (Skudlarek 201-202). If a man or woman acted in a holy way, the

Waldenses thought, he or she was holy. But for the bishops and pastors of the Church, a seemingly holy way of life was not in and of itself proof of holiness, and it certainly does not give someone the authorization to preach. A preacher needed to be trained to interpret Scripture correctly and needed to have a place in the hierarchy where he could be monitored and supervised. The ritual of ordination, which was believed to confer the sacerdotal power to perform sacraments, including the Eucharist and the absolution of sins, was also a practical initiation into a self-regulating institution.

There are some important points of similarity between Zosimas's first encounter with Mary the Egyptian and the prelates' reaction to Valdesius and his followers, but there are even more differences, and the differences are quite significant. Mary and the Waldenses both embrace poverty and asceticism as a means to holiness, and both live outside of the traditional frameworks of religious life offered by the Church. The ambiguity produced by this combination of extraordinary behavior and lack of supervision leads to suspicion in both cases. On the fundamental point of obedience, however, Mary and the Waldenses differ dramatically. Valdesius and his followers reportedly quoted Scripture against those who ordered them to stop preaching, putting in more weight on their personal relationship with God than on the human authority of the institutional Church. Unlike Mary, who fulfilled her penance alone in the desert, Waldenses understood their Christian vocation to include preaching to their fellow-citizens, in part because the clerical order had failed to do so effectively. The *Vie de saint Marie l'Egyptienne* is not concerned with these issues. It recounts Mary's personal conversion, which at its heart is about humility.

Mary obeys Zosimas's order to bless him first, even though she believes that he is more worthy than she because of his priestly office, and, even though her own ascetic practices and the miraculous abilities afforded by her exceptional relationship with God far exceed anything demonstrated by Zosimas, Mary does not criticize the old monk for not living up to her standard. Where does this humility come from? Clearly, Mary does not think highly of herself. Instead of presuming that her holiness gives her special rights, Mary consistently calls herself unworthy and a sinner, from the first time she speaks until after her death. Even after making a sort of confession by recounting the details of her sin, she still calls herself a "pecherresse" when she asks Zosimas to bring her the Eucharist (*O* §58) and the letters she writes on the ground that finally reveal her name refer to her as "la chetive Marie Egyptienne" (*O* §70). Never does she consider herself morally superior to Zosimas and never does she disparage him or any other cleric. Instead, she uses her exceptional relationship with God to intercede for the Church and the secular rulers of Christendom, exercising the primary function of a saint even before her death (O § 24-28). This is quite different from the attitude and behavior of the Waldenses, who by the sixteenth century had come to consider their perceived moral and doctrinal superiority as proof that they, and not the Roman Catholic hierarchy, were the pastors of the one true Church (Cameron 286-287).

A very important component of Mary's humility is her devotion to the Eucharist, a theme which is especially significant in the religious context of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and which is essential to understanding the *O* version of the *Vie de saint Marie l'Egyptienne*. From the very beginning of their relationship, Mary connects

her respect for Zosimas to his role as a priest in the Eucharistic ceremony. Her inclusion of the years of service Zosimas has performed at the "sainz autiex" in her list of reasons why he should be the first to give a blessing is in all likelihood an implicit reference to the Eucharist, but by itself it is not necessarily sufficient proof of any particular devotion. Later in the *Vie*, however, Mary's respect for the Eucharist emerges much more clearly. At the end of their first meeting, Mary asks Zosimas to come back to meet her the next year, but she tells him that he will not be able to go out into the desert with his brothers at the beginning of Lent, "quar ge ne te lerai," curiously claiming responsibility for the sickness that will keep Zosimas confined to the monastery rather than just predicting it, as she does in *T* (1053-1065),[224] or presenting it as a request that Zosimas will have no choice but to obey, as she does in Paul the Deacon's *Vita*.[225] She then orders him to take "le seint cors Nostre Seignor en un tres net vessel" and to bring it to her "le vespre de la Ressurrection" (*O* §57).

Everything occurs just as Mary predicted, or planned, and Zosimas takes "en un petit galice le sacrement del cors et del sanc Jhesucrist" and journeys to the spot by the banks of the Jordan where Mary had told him she would meet him (*O* §60). As we saw in *T*, however, Mary is not there when he first arrives, but comes from the other side of the Jordan and crosses over to him walking on the water. After seeing such a great miracle, Zosimas falls to his feet and "la vost aorer." Mary, of course, will not permit such a display and says, "Ne fere pas, Zosimas, tu es prestres et portes le mistere" (*O*

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[224] "Mais quant venra an en cest tans, / Emferm seras, si com je pens" (1053-1054).
[225] "Illa autem dixit: Sustine ut dixi, abba, in monasterio; neque etsi exire volueris quoquam, valebis" (*P* §20).

§63). Even though Mary the Egyptian is holy enough to walk across water, in her eyes the fact that Zosimas is a priest carrying the Eucharist means that it would be inappropriate for him to bow to her. After Mary arrives on his side of the river, Zosimas gives thanks to God and exclaims the lesson he has learned from Mary's example, "Graciez soies tu, Sire Dex, Jhesucriz…m'as revelé par la teue serjante conbien les voies de salu sont loing de moi et de terrieneté" (*O* §64). This is the climax of the story as told from Zosimas's perspective, the only perspective to which the reader has had access. The interior conflict between the conviction that he has learned all there is to know and the knowledge that pride is a sin has finally been resolved. Zosimas has learned humility, and he can now live out the rest of his days in peace. Only one thing remains for the story to be complete, and that is the communication of Mary's name and the date of her death so that the faithful will know how to call on her and when to celebrate her memory. Zosimas's final trip into the desert serves as an epilogue in which the writing on the ground and the extraordinary burial of the saint's body wrap up all the loose ends and allow the old monk to joyfully recount all he has witnessed to his brothers and so begin the process which leads to the writing of the *Vie de saint Marie l'Egyptienne*.[226]

What about Mary's own perspective? Like the Latin and Greek texts before it, *O* presents the story exclusively from Zosimas's point of view, but it is possible to imagine that a non-clerical reader or listener, especially one who had had a profound religious experience outside of the institutional framework of the Church, might have been

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[226] The Greek text attributed to Sophronios concludes with a comment in which the author describes how the monks preserved this story as an oral tradition and notes that he was the first, to his knowledge, to write it down (*Acta Sanctorum*, Aprilis, I, col. 84). This passage is not included in Paul the Deacon's translation or in either of the vernacular versions *O* or *T*.

interested in Mary's perspective, especially if the reader was familiar with versions of the saint's life that centered on Mary's own conversion. Not surprisingly, the final Eucharist shared by Mary and Zosimas is also the climax of the story from the saint's perspective. It is the definitive confirmation of God's forgiveness and indeed the last thing the saint does before dying. Zosimas has repeatedly affirmed that God led him to Mary so that he could witness the "biauz miracles et les oeuvres" that God worked through her. Mary is "li tresorz reploz dont li mondes n'est dignes del connoistre," but, as Zosimas notes, "sapience reposte et tresorz repolz ne profite a nului" (*O* §29). From Zosimas's point of view, he is the messenger whom God has chosen to reveal this treasure to the world. From Mary's point of view, however, it is also fair to say that Zosimas was brought to her by God so that she could receive the Eucharist one last time before dying.

The differences between how this final scene is described in the verse *T* as opposed to the prose *O* point to important differences in the way each version resonates with the religious horizon of expectations of the French-speaking world of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As I have argued, the Mary-focused narrative of *T* transforms the saint's life into a story of sin and conversion which draws its audience in with the alluring story of a beautiful, wanton sinner and transports them through a lyrical, passionate conversion and a harsh penance that stands as a mirror image of the saint's dissolute youth. Along the way, the narrator and the characters present long, didactic commentaries that explain the Catholic faith, extol the person and the role of the Virgin Mary as an intercessor, and assure the reader of God's willingness to forgive any sin. The *T*-narrator's account of Mary's last meeting with Zosimas continues this trend and

confirms the spiritual love between the elderly man and woman that has been described in increasingly romantic terms throughout the story (Robertson, *Poem and Spirit* 323-325, *Medieval Saints' Lives* 115-118). After seeing Mary walk across the Jordan, Zosimas "le voust aorer" (*T* 1167), exactly as in *O*,[227] and again the saint reproaches him, but her reprimand is much more generic in the verse version. Saying nothing of Zosimas's priestly office or the holy sacrament he carries, the narrator of *T* only comments blandly that "le dame le prent a coser" (*T* 1168). Furthermore, when Mary kneels before him and asks for his blessing, Zosimas does not dare give it, because he has seen God work such a great miracle through her. Instead he lifts her up and "Par vraie amistié l'a baisie" (*T* 1182). The two then say the Credo and the Paternoster responsively and all the while, "Molt s'entregardent ambedui" (*T* 1188). In *T*, the shared sacrament represents the climax of Mary and Zosimas's relationship. Mary's last communion with God is also the highest point of communion between two elderly people who have found in each other unexpected companions on the journey towards holiness.

I have already mentioned how this last communion scene is taken as an occasion for didactic commentaries in *T*. Zosimas affirms the real presence of Christ in the bread by saying, "ce samle pain, / Mais chou est li cors Jhesucrist," and explains the need to take communion at least once in one's life in order to be saved: "Ja hom n'ara sen paradis, / Se il nel rechoit en se vie" (*T* 1194-1195, 1198-1199). Mary confirms that she believes all of this and then expands on it, explaining to Zosimas in turn how Jesus' death redeemed humanity from original sin. Neither of these commentaries appears in the

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[227] Accounting for dialectal differences in the feminine third person singular direct object pronoun, the wording is exactly the same in the two versions, cf. "la vost aorer" (*O* §63).

Latin *Vitae* or in *O* and their intended audience is probably the reader or listener, not the other character in the story.

This sort of commentary is an important part of the process of *mise-en-roman*. Once a story has been translated into the vernacular, lay people can access the text directly, without needing a Latin-literate cleric to translate for them, and, as was most often the case, elucidate the moral significance of the text through commentaries. Consequently, the poets who composed and recomposed saints' lives added commentaries into the text itself, either in the voice of the narrator or the characters. The communion-scene in *T* offers a perfect example of this practice. The commentaries spoken by Mary and Zosimas use simple language to explain the basic theological principles underlying the ritual, and they make it abundantly clear that it is an obligation for all those who wish to be saved. Mary has already received communion at least once, just before crossing the Jordan and entering the desert. Zosimas's comment is not for her, it is to ensure that the audience interprets her *Vie* according to the Catholic faith.

After she has eaten the bread and drunk the wine, Mary prays at length to God, asking him to end her life and grant her final rest and salvation as a reward for the suffering she experienced as penance for her sins. Although she says that she is willing to live as long as God wants, Mary expresses her readiness and her desire to die now that she has taken the Eucharist. She asks God to take her into the company of the Virgin Mary and the "anceles" of God who sing "le cant nouvel o le douç son / Que canta li rois Salemon," that is, the Song of Songs, the ancient love song which Christians interpreted as a celebration of Christ's love for the Church and God's love for the individual soul (*T*

1243-1244).[228] For Mary, salvation means being able to sing a joyful love song to God; it is the polar opposite of this world, where tears dominate and "N'ara ja mais hom vraie joie / Car le joie de ceste vie / Est tote tornee a folie" (*T* 1248-1250).

Mary does not describe this salvation as the perfection or culmination of an affective, spiritual relationship with God begun on earth. Instead she speaks of it as a reward or payment for her years of service. "Biax Sire, or oes me raison," she prays, "Et si m'en ren men guerredon. / Quarante et sis ans t'ai servi, / Dex, aies hui de moi merchi!...Des or volroie je morir / Des or volroie mes soldees" (*T* 1222-1226, 1234-1236). The joy of paradise is recompense for the years of suffering Mary endured to expiate the horrible sins of her youth. This model of salvation corroborates the call to conversion that the narrator makes in the prologue to the *Vie* and reiterates in its conclusion. If the reader or listener follows Mary's examples and serves God by doing penance, which should be less strenuous than the saint's in so far as the reader or listener's sins are less serious, he or she will also be rewarded with salvation. Zosimas himself confirms this interpretation. There is no equivalent in *T* to the remarks about how far "les voies de salu" are from the monk and from "terrieneté" found in *O* and, in a different form, in the Latin *Vita*. Instead, Zosimas summarizes the lesson he has learned from Mary's life after burying her when he exclaims, "Bien voi et croi tot sans dotance / Que fort cose a en penitance" (*T* 1484-1494) and promises to do penance for his sins for the rest of his life. In the verse *T*, Zosimas does not only learn humility; he learns the

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[228] Duncan Robertson connects the lyricism and the attention to beauty and spiritual love characteristic of *T* to Bernard of Clairvaux's famous commentary on the Song of Songs (*Poem and Spirit* 326).

efficacy of penance. The men and women who read and listened to the *Vie* are invited to learn this same lesson, along with explicit instructions on the necessity of communion.

The much simpler version of the Eucharist scene portrayed in *O* leads to a different interpretation, one much more in keeping with the emphasis on humility common to the Zosimas-centered versions of the *Vie*. In *O*, Mary recites the Credo and the Paternoster alone, implicitly reminding the reader of her supernatural knowledge of Scripture, gives the peace to Zosimas, and then receives the "seint mistere" (*O* §65). There are no explicit commentaries on the nature of the Eucharist, nor does Mary ask God for her "guerredon" and her "soldees" after receiving the Eucharist. Instead, Mary echoes the words spoken in Luke's gospel by the elderly Simeon when he saw the infant Jesus in the Temple, "Or lesse, Sire, ta serjante selonc ta misericorde en pés, quar mi oeill ont veü ton salu" (ibid.). This phrase is a word for word translation of the Latin found in Paul the Deacon's *Vita,* which in turn corresponds exactly to the Vulgate Bible, except for the change from "servum tuum" to "ancillam tuam."[229]

This explicit reference to Scripture invites the reader to consider the resonances between Mary's situation and the gospel story in which Simeon appears. According to the evangelist, Simeon was a righteous and devout man to whom the Holy Spirit had revealed "that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:25). When Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the Temple to be purified, Simeon, led there by the Spirit, took the child in his arms and said, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your

[229] "Nunc dimittis, Domine, ancillam tuam [cf. servum tuum] secundum verbum tuum in pace; quia viderunt oculi mei salutare tuum" (*P* §22).

salvation" (Luke 2:29-30). The old man can finally die because he has seen the salvation God had prepared, the Messiah that Christians believe Jesus to be. Likewise, Mary the Egyptian feels that she can die in peace after partaking in the Eucharist, because in it she has seen Jesus, the salvation God has prepared for her and for the world. This is a much more subtle reference to the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine than Zosimas's declaration in *T* that "ce samle pain, / Mais chou est li cors Jhesucrist" (*T* 1194-1195). Nor is the Eucharist described as an obligation here, as in *T*. Mary's last communion in *O* is not the last requirement the saint has to fulfill before she can justly demand her reward, but the apogee of her relationship with God. She has seen Jesus in the flesh, not, like Simeon, as a living, breathing child in the arms of his mother, but as the Eucharist in the hands of a priest.

It may seem implausible to make so much out of such a short passage, but this interpretation fits very well with the rest of the *Vie*. At some point during her miraculous conversion from sinner into saint, Mary the Egyptian developed a profound devotion to the Eucharist as the presence of Christ in the world, and that devotion led to respect for the priests who could preside over the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, and reverence in turn only deepened Mary's humility. Implicit in the Egyptian's refusal to let Zosimas bow before her after she has walked across the Jordan is the belief that the "seint mistere" he is carrying is in fact a greater miracle than walking on water.

The experience of another man who sold everything, gave his money to the poor, and began preaching, shows how the integration of an absolute commitment to poverty

with a devotion to the Eucharist as strong as Mary the Egyptian's can lead to results different from the expulsion and persecution imposed on perceived heretics like the Waldenses. Saint Francis of Assisi is one of the most well-known figures of the Middle Ages, already immensely popular and influential before his death, and still venerated and studied today.[230] Like Valdesius, he was a merchant who left everything for a life of poverty and preaching. He soon attracted followers, and, like the Waldenses, they preached a simple message of conversion taken directly from the Bible (Manselli, *Francesco* 106-138). Unlike the Waldenses, however, Francis's followers were not as a whole condemned as heretics. Instead their dedication to poverty and preaching was recognized by the Church as an entirely new religious way of life, and they were made into an order, the Friars Minor.[231]

The striking parallels between Francis and Valdesius have caught the attention of several scholars, including Jeffrey Russel, who describes the pair as the "archetypes of the Reform heretic and the Reform Saint" (8, as cited in Skudlarek 112). As William Skudlarek affirms, "both were equally and passionately dedicated to proclaiming the Word of God and to living the apostolic life, understood as the abandoning of worldly possessions in order to be a follower of Christ," but they were separated by one fundamental difference: "the way each of them (and their disciples) responded to the

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[230] Manselli analyzes the sources of Francis's life, including the saint's own writings and the accounts written soon after his death, as well as the historiographical tradition from the fourteenth century to the present day (15-71).

[231] Strictly speaking, not all Waldenses were heretics and not all Franciscans were orthodox. Some Waldenses were reintegrated back into the Catholic Church as the "Poor Catholics" (Cameron 49-60), and some of the radical, "Spiritual" Franciscans who refused all possessions were condemned as heretics in the beginning of the fourteenth century (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 327-328, 359-362). The Waldenses movement as a whole, however, became increasingly identified as heretical as time went on and eventually became a Protestant church; conversely, the Franciscan Order and its descendants are still part of the Catholic church today.

church's reaction to their conception of the preaching mission" (114). Valdesius and his followers left the Church; Francis and his remained. Skudlarek explains that there are two ways of explaining this difference, either by claiming that Francis and Valdesius were in reality more different than they seem or by saying that it was the Church's reaction that distinguished the two men's fate, not any inherent difference in their temperament (203-206). Skudlarek affirms the second position, arguing that Francis and Valdesius were indeed similar and that it was the popes and bishops each man dealt with who were different. In effect, Skudlarek argues that Bishop Guido of Assisi and Pope Innocent III were simply more willing to accommodate a lay preacher at the beginning of the thirteenth century than Archbishop Jean Bellesmains of Lyon and Pope Lucius III had been at the end of the twelfth (205).

Skudlarek notes, however, that Francis distinguished himself from Valdesius by his profound humility and respect for the clergy. Whereas Valdesius and his followers said it was more important to obey God than man when the archbishop told them to stop preaching, Francis insisted that he would not preach against the will of even poor parish priests (Manselli, *Francesco* 139-145). Francis's respect for the clergy was reportedly as profound as Mary the Egyptian's. Thomas of Celano, the author of the *Vita Secunda* of Saint Francis, writes that Francis once said if he saw any priest at the same time as a saint, such as Saint Lawrence, who had visibly come down from heaven, he would first kiss the priest's hands, because they "handle the Word of Life" (§152, as cited in Skudlarek 207). This attitude recalls Mary's repeatedly-stated belief that Zosimas, the priest accustomed to serving at the altar, is more worthy than she is, even though she is a

saint who levitates while praying and can walk across water. Furthermore, just as in Mary's case, one very important source of Francis's profound respect for the clergy was his devotion to the Eucharist. Francis himself explains this connection in his *Testament*, one of the few texts written by the saint himself (Manselli, *Francesco* 16-22, 143-145). Right at the beginning of the text, after explaining how he began his life of penance but before describing how he and his brothers lived, Francis confirms his own personal faith in the Church and in priests:

> Then the Lord gave me, and gives me, so much faith in the priests who live according to the form of the holy Roman Church because of their order, that if they were to persecute me, I would run back to them. And if I had as much wisdom as Solomon had, and I found the poor priests of this world in the parishes where they live, I do not want to preach against their will. And I want to fear, love, and honor them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider their sin, because I can see the Son of God in them, and they are my lords. And I do this because I see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this age other than his most holy body and his most holy blood, which they receive and they alone minister to others.[232]

[232] "Postea Dominus dedit mihi et dat tantam fidem in sacerdotibus, qui vivunt secundum formam sanctae ecclesiae Romanae propter ordinem ipsorum, quod si facerent mihi persecutionem, volo recurrere ad ipsos. Et si haberem tantam sapientiam, quantam Solomon habuit, et invenirem pauperculos sacerdotes huius saeculi, in parochiis, quibus morantur, nolo praedicare ultra voluntatem ipsorum. Et ipsos et omnes alios volo timere, amare et honorare, sicut meos dominos. Et nolo in ipsis considerare peccatum, quia Filium Dei discerno in ipsis, et domini mei sunt. Et propter hoc facio, quia nihil video corporaliter in hoc saeculo de

This passage is worded in such a way as to respond to each of the possible reasons for disobeying the clergy cited by the Waldenses and other lay preachers who refused to submit to the clerical hierarchy. Like Saint Mary the Egyptian and other penitent saints, Francis still considers himself a sinner, even as he writes his spiritual testament at the end of his life. Any persecution he might suffer, whether from the clergy or from anyone else, is not cause for indignation or rebellion, but rather a well-deserved test of his patience and humility.

Francis also refuses to judge or scorn the clergy either because of their ignorance or their sin. Lay preachers like Francis, Valdesius, and their followers were not necessarily any better educated than the poor, semi-literate priests who simply paraphrased the Scriptures or repeated a homily memorized from a collection, but they often held themselves to a higher moral and ascetic standard. Consequently, their sermons were usually more inspirational, since they were pronounced with the directness and intensity of someone who was trying to live what he or she preached (Skudlarek 35-37). Indeed, both the Franciscans and the Waldenses felt that a large part of their mission was to correct the failure of the clergy to motivate and evangelize the people of their time effectively. However, they envisioned this mission in different ways. Francis and his followers saw themselves as servants and helpers of the clergy; the Waldenses felt that they had the right and the responsibility to force the clergy to improve or, barring that, to supplant them (Skudlarek 208).

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ipso altissimo Filio Dei, nisi sanctissimum corpus et sanctissimum sanguinem suum, quod ipsi recipiunt et ipsi soli aliis ministrant" (Francis of Assisi, *Testamentum*).

Finally, at least according to the *Testament*, Francis's profound respect for the clergy does come from an abstract, ideological commitment to the hierarchy of the Church, but from his devotion to the Eucharist as the only way to see "anything bodily" of Jesus here on earth. This is the same sort of "realismo eucaristico" (Manselli, *Francesco* 144) that allows Mary the Egyptian to connect her last communion with Simeon's encounter with the infant Jesus in the Temple. By taking the doctrine of transubstantiation to its extreme limit, a person like Francis or Mary could equate seeing the bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ with seeing Christ himself. Taking communion is not just an obligation, as it is presented in *T*, but the climax of a personal relationship with God, as in *O*. Furthermore, the Eucharist is only available through the ministration of duly ordained priests. In a sense, there is no choice. Francis believes that the Eucharist is the only place he can see anything bodily of his Lord, the Son of God, and he believes that only priests can perform the ceremonies that transform bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. He must, therefore, respect and obey the clergy, regardless of how unworthy they may be or how badly they may treat him.

Francis of Assisi was not the first influential figure of the Middle Ages to cultivate such a strong devotion to the Eucharist, but this sort of spirituality became more and more common from the thirteenth century on. Elizabeth of Schönau, who lived in the first half of the twelfth century (†1165), was a contemporary of Hildegarde of Bingen and Bernard of Clairvaux, but because of her mystical experience of the liturgy, and in particular the Eucharist, she is described by Dom Leclercq as "déjà proche de ce que

seront certaines mystiques des temps modernes" (*Spiritualité* 225-226). The Franciscans themselves, whether friars, nuns, or Third-Order laypeople, built their spirituality on the "deux tables" of the Bible and the Eucharist, a theme developed by writers such as David of Augsbourg and Rudulph of Biberach in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (ibid. 367). The Eucharist was also an important part of the spirituality of the beguines and begardes who sought to live according to the Gospel in chastity, poverty, and community prayer in their own homes, outside of the "cadres conventuels traditionnels" (ibid. 425). As time went on, the lack of supervision this way of life implied left the beguines vulnerable to charges of moral degeneracy and heresy. Those who avoided such accusations combined their dedication to poverty, charity, and prayer with a strong devotion to the Eucharist. This was already the case with the early thirteenth century Marie of Oignies, as well as the mid-thirteenth century Julienne of Mont-Cornillon, and it formed an important part of the "nuptial" mysticism of the Dutch poet Hadewijch, who described her relationship with God in terms of a fierce and emotional love that went beyond even Saint Bernard's commentary on the *Song of Songs* (Leclercq, *Spiritualité* 430-438). Finally, frequent communion and the adoration of the Sacrament were a fundamental part of the numerous prayers, meditations, works of charity, donations, and pilgrimages that characterized the deeply personal and intense religious experience of the "devotio moderna" of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Delaruelle 404-412).

This emphasis on the Eucharist was an ideological coup for the Church hierarchy. Devotion to the Eucharist was a counterbalance to the tendency to equate the Christian faith with a simple, if demanding, way of life that could be construed directly from

Scripture. The Church had to offer a religious experience more compelling than the moral precepts and dogmas traditionally proposed to the laity but at the same time dependent on the priest and his sacramental role as an intercessor between humanity and the divine. Devotion to the Eucharist can therefore be seen in the same light as the increasing emphasis on the sacrament of confession and the practice of indulgences, by which the Church reaffirmed its exclusive power to forgive sins and assure salvation (Delaruelle 94-96).

On one hand, the Eucharist was portrayed as an obligation, like penance, and consequently it could be a source of guilt for those worried they were not meeting the obligation. But on the other hand, the Eucharist could also provide a positive, devotional experience, just as confession, absolution, and penance could relieve the guilt of someone who felt burdened by their sins. The Eucharist offered the ordinary man or woman the ability to have direct contact with the divine; it was a continuation of the incarnation of Christ and an extension of the idea that God had come into the world and could be seen and touched (ibid. 71-72). At first the fear of taking communion in a state of sin kept people from receiving the Eucharist more than a few times a year, but even then for many people it was enough to see the consecrated host elevated during the liturgy or exposed in a chapel. By the end of the Middle Ages, however, frequent communion became an important part of the religious experience of the most pious laypeople, preceded by frequent confession (Delaruelle 404-405). Rather than having them submit to a special, morally and legally binding rule to keep their religious experience integrated into the Church, as was the case with monks and nuns, the priests and bishops could rely on

people's devotion to the Eucharist and their need for forgiveness and absolution to tie them to the sacerdotal order.

On one hand, this dependency could be seen as an attempt by the religious elite to maintain their position of authority through the deliberate manipulation of popular piety. This criticism certainly has a degree of validity, but it also relies on an oversimplified dichotomy between the clergy and the laity and between popular and learned religion (Manselli, *Religion populaire* 16-19, 216-218). The emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist was not just an esoteric theological argument or a dogma contrived by the pope and bishops to keep the faithful in line. It was also the product of the desire of laypeople like Francis, Elizabeth of Schönau, and many others to have a tangible, concrete way to experience the humanity of Christ, a God whom they believed lived, worked, suffered, and died as they did. Devotion to the Eucharist and confession was not just imposed from the top down; it was also cultivated by those closer to the bottom of Christian society. While it is true that the popes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cynically multiplied indulgences to fund their extravagant, wealthy lifestyle, it is also true that Saint Francis's devotion to the Eucharist was part of a fervent and concrete religious experience focused on alleviating the suffering of others that continues to inspire people both inside and outside of the Christian tradition today.[233] Like all human experiences, the medieval reactions to the ritual of the Eucharist were complex and contradictory.

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[233] Adrian House's 2001 biography, *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life* advertises itself as a book "written for readers of any faith or none" and promises that, although Francis himself believed in God and "living where he did when he did – in Jesus as God's Son…it is unnecessary to share his faith in order to appreciate his soaring achievements" (*front flap*).

As André Vauchez argues, Francis was able to synthesize many of the contradictory aspirations of the preceding generations. He combined devotion to the humanity of Christ with a sense of God's omnipotence, asceticism with total faith in the Church, and a love of poverty with a spirit of obedience (*Spiritualité* 144-145). He created a new form of religious life, free from the spatial restrictions of monasteries and able to work among people in the cities and towns where they lived, but recognized and supported by the bishops and popes. The Franciscans and the other mendicant orders that developed in the thirteenth century suffered from the same limitations, divisions, and tensions between inspiration and institution that plague all human endeavors, but they represent one of the most successful developments of the rising lay spirituality that we have traced from the beginning of the Gregorian reform. By combining the lived, practical holiness of poverty and asceticism with a fidelity to the Church founded on a profound devotion to the Eucharist similar to Mary the Egyptian's, Francis and his followers were able to live the sort of intense religious conversion sought after by women like Christina of Markyate and Ermengarde of Brittany without leaving the secular world for a monastery.

This solution was not perfect, however, and it did not completely resolve the tension between an intense, personal religious experience and the Church's insistence on obedience and humility. Many of the Waldenses, for example, remained devoted to the Eucharist even after they had been excommunicated by the clerical hierarchy. Whether driven by a belief that communion was necessary for salvation or a desire to experience Christ physically in this world, many Waldensian preachers continued to take

communion from Catholic priests as long as they could keep from being recognized as heretics (Cameron 128-130). In a sense, the Waldenses accepted the sacerdotal role of the priestly order, but they did not accept its authority, especially when it commanded them to stop preaching, something they considered to be the heart of their religious vocation. Francis writes that he would have stopped preaching if a bishop or priest had commanded it, but the fact is that he never did stop, and therefore it can be assumed that no one ever forbade him. The Waldenses were repeatedly ordered to stop preaching, and when they disobeyed they were pushed outside of the Church. There is definitely an element of truth in Skudlarek's claim that it was difference in how the bishops and popes of their time reacted to them that made Valdesius a heretic and Francis a saint.

The relationship between devotion, humility, obedience, and heresy was very complex in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but this complexity is illustrated by the way Mary the Egyptian's final communion is portrayed in *T* and *O*. The *T* version of her *Vie* is self-consciously adapted to the vernacular context. Its authors employed the poetic form and rhetorical devices common to all vernacular texts to engage a lay audience not necessarily interested in hearing about saints. In lieu of a live translator and commentator, it also contains explicit commentary that explains what the audience needs to believe and do in order to obtain salvation, according to the teachings of the Catholic faith. The *O* version is also in the vernacular, but it corresponds to another set of literary expectations. It is a close translation of a Latin original that offers its lay audience direct access to the "truth" of a text of great historical and religious relevance. The original Latin-literate audience of the *Vita* on which *O* is based would themselves have had the

religious formation required to interpret the story in a doctrinally sound manner, or they would have heard it read and commented on by someone with the necessary formation in the monastic chapter. The same cannot necessarily be said for the lay people who read vernacular translations of the Bible or legendaries full of saints' lives. They had access to the same literary and intellectual resources that had nourished monastic devotion for centuries, but without the training and supervision that kept monks within the bounds of orthodoxy and obedient to their superiors. Most pious lay people probably would have drawn the connection between Mary's words at her last communion and the *Nunc Dimittis*, but they may not have understood the connection between the Eucharist and obedience the same way Francis did. Francis and Mary respect the priest because of the sacrament; others, like the Waldenses, might have respected the sacrament despite the priest. Different people could read the same texts and interpret them in different ways. This, too, is an important part of the phenomenon of rewriting.

Conclusion

The three different versions of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egytpienne* studied in this chapter resonate strongly with the religious experience of many men and women in Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including in a particular way that of Valdesius of Lyon and Francis of Assisi. Mary's journey from sinner to saint and her encounter with the monk Zosimas illustrate the significant tension between a powerful, personal experience of conversion and the pressure to remain respectful of and obedient to the sacerdotal hierarchy of the Church. This is certainly not the only legitimate

interpretation of the *Vie*, but it is one of the many different possible interpretations that come into focus when the text is analyzed in light of the religious and literary horizon of expectations of an era in which it continued to be copied and read. Furthermore, as I have argued, this influence is not one-directional. The *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*, like other works of vernacular hagiography, affected how the people who read and heard them made sense of their lived experiences. When the French-speaking people of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries tried to create a narrative to explain the joy and suffering they experienced and to plot a course for their future that would lead to some sort of happiness in this life and, as many of them believed, in the next, it was only natural that they were influenced by the narratives that they heard and read which explained how and why people were saved.

The model of holiness offered by Mary the Egyptian and the other saints who achieved sanctity by doing incredible penance for exaggerated sins is close to the monastic model held up by the reformers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Both models of holiness are based on the rejection of worldly pleasures and concerns in order to subdue the flesh and cultivate the spirit and therefore both models focus on chastity, fasting, and voluntary poverty. As the hagiographical example of Mary the Egyptian and the historical example of Valdesius show, this model of holiness did not require any special training or preparation; anyone who was willing and able to give up their physical comfort could consider him or herself holy. Valdesius did apparently ask a priest what the best way to God was, but once he had learned this and once he had had the Scriptures

translated into the vernacular, he could pursue a life of poverty and preaching without any need for a clerical supervisor or the sacramental support of priests.

When the Latin *Vita Sanctae Mariae Aegyptiacae* was translated into French and cast into octosyllabic rhyming couplets by the unknown poet behind the ancestor of the *T* version, a story that had previously only been directly accessible to clerics and others who knew Latin could now be understood by a whole new population. This translation was not only linguistic; the poetic version of the *Life* differed from its source material in several important ways. The *T*-poet described Mary's beauty and her sinful life with alluring details that strongly recalled the romantic adventures being written in the same poetic form at the same time, and the lyricism of the narrator's descriptions and the protagonists' prayers also takes advantage of the beauty of poetic language itself. These pleasing elements are coupled with a series of explicit didactic messages that appear in comments made by the narrator or the characters' themselves. These comments explain the lesson of the story and other important doctrinal and moral questions in clear, unequivocal terms, performing the function of a live, clerical interpreter. In *T*'s case, this means repenting and doing penance, as well as taking communion at least once in one's life.

The prose *O*-version of the *Vie* represents another model of vernacularization. The prose *O* is much closer to its sources than *T* is; indeed, it is almost a word-for-word translation of a lost Latin text evidently not much different than the *Vita* written by Paul the Deacon in the ninth century. By extension, it is more or less the same as the story written by the patriarch Sophronios in the seventh century and included in the lives of the

Desert Fathers. The entire narrative is told from Zosimas's point of view, and Mary is presented as a model of holiness who teaches the old monk that there are other paths to sanctity than his own and that God can make a penitent prostitute holier than a monk with years of study and exercise.

Mary is able to serve as this model in large part because of her deep humility. Humility was an important virtue for the Desert Fathers, for whom the rejection of worldly possessions and the focus on prayer and fasting were a means to an end: the total submission of the self to the will of God. It is natural, then, for Mary to show the utmost respect for Zosimas and his priestly office, even though Zosimas and the story itself repeatedly confirm her pre-eminence over him. Mary's superiority is based on her conviction that she is inferior. To a clerical audience, this is just another confirmation of the story's explicit lesson. Zosimas learns to be humble when he sees that a repentant sinner exceeds him in humility.

This dynamic is still operative in the Old French *O*, and the part of the audience that identified with Zosimas may still have been humbled by Mary's superior humility. For those who identified with Mary, however, the *Vie* may have taught a different lesson. Some of the people who read or heard *O* may have been familiar with versions of the *Vie*, which, like *T*, began directly with Mary, and moreover, even someone whose experience of conversion was not as drastic as that of Valdesius or Francis may have felt that he or she had more in common with a repentant sinner than with an exceptionally devout monk. In such a case, Mary's humility is not just a lesson insofar as it exceeds Zosimas's, it is also a lesson in and of itself. Mary's humility is not totally unconnected

to the rest of her character, in part because her respect for clerics is based on her devotion to the Eucharist, and this devotion in turn does not depend on a sense of obligation, but on a conviction that the consecrated bread and wine allow a physical, direct experience of God.

This conviction has the potential to support devotion that is both personally compelling and encourages submission to the sacerdotal order, as can be seen in Francis's declaration in his *Testament* that he respects all priests because he sees "nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this age other than his most holy body and his most holy blood, which they receive and they alone minister to others." Many people experienced devotion to the Eucharist as a reason to submit to the sacerdotal order, but the connection was not automatic. Lacking the explicit commentaries of *T*, a text like *O* allows for more profound personal interpretations of the religious experiences it portrays. But these interpretations may not correspond to the message intended by the text's authors. By translating saints' lives and other important religious and cultural texts into the vernacular, Latin-literate clerics developed new and more effective ways to communicate their message to the laity, a message that included the superiority of the monastic way of life and the importance of the sacraments dispensed by the sacerdotal order. At the same time, however, they lost the ability to control when and how those texts were read and interpreted. One solution to this problem was to insert explicit commentaries in the text itself, but eventually the laity demanded direct access to the "true" sources of their faith, which they could then interpret in new ways. The story of a penitent prostitute who encounters a monk in the desert will be understood very differently by a thirteenth-

century merchant in southern France or weaver in Flanders that it was by a ninth-century monk, even if it is told in almost exactly the same way. A text only provides half of the input that determines how a reader or listener will interpret its message; the other half comes from the reader's accumulated previous experiences. Valdesius and Francis read or heard many of the same saints' lives, and they certainly read and heard the same Bible. Francis wrote that it was more important to be humble and obedient – and so save himself – than to preach. In the end, despite some resistance, he was able to fulfill both obligations. Valdesius believed it was more important to preach – and so save his fellow-citizens – than to obey corrupt priests and bishops, even if they did administer the sacraments.

The analysis of the Latin and Old French versions of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* alongside the historical sources for the life of Valdesius of Lyon and the autobiographical writings of Francis of Assisi demonstrate the strong interconnection between literature, history, and lived experience. Human beings construct narratives to make sense of their past and their present and to project what course they want their life to take in the future, and it is only natural that they base these narratives on the written or oral narratives they have read and heard. The notion of rewriting is a compelling way to understand this phenomenon. On one level texts like saints' lives are literally rewritten. They are translated into new languages, recast into new forms, and amplified, abbreviated, and rearranged according to the literary and cultural expectations of different times and places. In form, structure, tone, and content, the *T* version of the *Life of Saint Mary the Egyptian* is a very different text from Paul the Deacon's *Vita*, even though it is

clearly a variation of the same story. But even when the basic content of the narrative itself does not change, as when moving from the *Vita* to the prose *O*, the fact that it is being read by new people with new questions and expectations means that it is also fair to say that the text is “rewritten” each time a new reader interprets it in the context of his or her own lived experience. Lastly, it is not just the reader who interprets the text in a new way. A story can affect how a person understands his or herself, the world, and his or her place in it. The impact may be negligible or it may be life-changing, but it is always a contribution to a person’s horizon of expectations. The different versions of saints’ lives not only reflect the evolution of attitudes about human relationships, salvation, and orthodoxy that characterize the time and place in which they are read and rewritten, but they can also question the practices of their audience and offer solutions to new problems in new contexts.

Conclusion

The object of this dissertation has been to study the evolution of Western European hagiography between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, particularly the way in which it affected and influenced the religious horizon of expectations of its time and place. The different versions of the *Vie de saint Alexis*, the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, and the *Vie de saint Marie l'Egyptienne* studied were created in different literary and cultural contexts, but they do not represent a strict evolution from an earlier perspective to a later one. Certainly, specific texts were written before others, but whether composed in Latin or Old French, verse or prose, they all continued to be copied and read throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. It is very difficult to separate the diachronic from the synchronic in literature. As Jauss observes, works of literature are not just events when they are first written, they are influenced and are interpreted by new audiences every time they are read or heard (33-39). This dynamic is even more pronounced in a literary culture that accepts and encourages the explicit adaption and rewriting of older texts. The relationship between Saint Alexis and his wife found in a tenth-century Latin *vita* was not just read in a new way in the twelfth century, it was expressed in a new way. Rewriting is not about the successive new versions that replace the old; it is about the interaction between multiple interpretations and points of view.

One of the most important issues that has arisen out of this study is the problem of sin and salvation. The question of the fate of one's soul after death had important real world implications, both personal and societal. On a personal level, fear of damnation caused real psychological distress to many men and women, and this fear both fed on and

exacerbated the typical human feelings of guilt experienced after doing something believed to be wrong. Wrongdoing could also lead to the exclusion of the guilty individual from his or her social group, whether through informal rejection and shunning or by the formal processes of legal banishment or execution and the ultimate ecclesiastic censure, excommunication.

On a larger scale, questions of sin and salvation also influenced the relationship between the orders into which medieval society was divided.[234] The monastic order was made up of individuals who dedicated their lives to avoiding sin and achieving salvation through ascetic discipline and intense devotional practices. The sacerdotal order consisted of the priests and bishops whose personal holiness may not have been great as the monks but who alone held the power to administer the sacraments, especially baptism, the Eucharist, and confession and absolution, which were believed to allow people to return to and remain in God's grace after sinning. Despite the important differences between these orders – differences that occasionally led to conflict – there was a great deal of commonality between the two. As time went on, more and more monks were ordained as priests, and, especially after the Gregorian reform, more and more priests were held to the same standards of personal holiness as monks. The third order, the laity, was, totally dependent on the first two from a religious point of view. Because of the near impossibility of avoiding sin, according to the prevailing doctrine,

[234]I am referring to the earlier division of the Christian population into monks, clerics, and lay people proposed by thinkers such as Gregory the Great and articulated by Rabanus Maurus in the eighth century, not the classical model of *oratores, bellatores*, and *laboratores* that would become the three estates of the French *ancien régime* (Leclercq*, Spiritualité* 15, 96, cf. Duby, *Les Trois Ordres*).

the laity constantly had to rely on the sacramental power of the sacerdotal order to obtain the forgiveness of their sins.

The intersection of the intensely personal and broader social implications of medieval models of sin and salvation can be seen in the recorded experiences of the men and women I have compared and contrasted with the three saints' lives. Christina of Markyate, Ermengarde of Anjou, Valdesius of Lyon, and Francis of Assisi all negotiated a creative, individual path through the anxieties and hopes that were shared by their contemporaries. Their stories were not necessarily typical, but they reveal the personal ways that men and women experienced and reacted to the forces that shaped the world they lived in.

The two Latin and two Old French versions of the *Vie de saint Alexis* I analyzed in the first part of the dissertation explore the question of salvation in terms of the relationship between the self and others. Like his literary antecedent, the Syriac Man of God, Saint Alexis obtains salvation and sanctification by pursuing an exclusive relationship with the divine at the expense of all other relationships and maintaining his anonymity even when he can see the pain his family feels because of his presumed absence. This model of personal salvation as a good to be pursued at all costs resonates with Peter Damian's image of the monk or nun as someone who has managed to escape from the shipwreck of the sinful world and who should never swim back out to sea to save those who are drowning or risk being pulled back underwater. Even if somewhat extreme even for its time, this metaphor does highlight the self-referential nature of the monastic model of holiness. Salvation was achieved by overcoming the human

propensity to sin by disciplining the body and the psyche through fasting, prayer, sexual continence, and self-denial. Other people – especially those who were not equally committed to achieving personal holiness – were perceived as an obstacle and a distraction. In a world ravaged by war, famine, and disease, it was not unreasonable for monasteries to close in on themselves and monks to pursue their own personal salvation. The power of original sin was strong, the monastic writers thought, and it could hardly be mastered in the self; it would be foolishness to try to overcome it in another.

The story of Saint Alexis represents this worldview in narrative form, but in doing so, it introduces new questions and complications. Like the Man of God, Alexis flees from his parents and wife because he is afraid they will draw him into sin and cost him his relationship with God. For the Man of God, this is the end of the story. He rejects his family and dies as a beggar in Syria. Alexis, however, returns to Rome and lives as a beggar in his father's house. For Peter Damian, this return is merely an opportunity for greater self-denial and greater ascetic triumph, not a chance to reestablish broken relationships, and in one version, the Roman *Vita Alexii*, Alexis's family remains frozen after his death in an icon of the incompatibility of secular and monastic values. But other readers and other writers interpret the story differently. The opposition between Alexis and his family is not as absolute in the Spanish *Vita* or in either of the two Old French *Vies*. Whether by imitating the saint's renouncement of the secular world or simply by virtue of his intercessory power, at the end of these versions Alexis's father, mother, and bride join him in paradise. Alexis is able to free his family from the shipwreck of the

secular world, not by reaching out to them, but by giving them an example and a powerful relic.

In the Old French *Roumans*, the opposition between Alexis and his family is complicated even further by an increased emphasis on the characters' interior life and subjectivity. Alexis himself is not the impassive, conquering hero praised by Peter Damian, he is a wounded man tortured by doubt and guilt because of his fear that the pain he is causing his family is a sin. His mother and father also have pity on him when they see him as a beggar, and, in his mother's case, assuage his conscience by forgiving him the pain he has caused them. Alexis's wife, who in this version is even given a name, Lesigne, is developed even further. Far from the powerless bride who listens and watches silently as her husband condemns their marriage and abandons her, Lesigne argues with Alexis, makes him reaffirm his love for her, and even offers to accompany him in exile before acquiescing to his request and letting him go. Later, she joins her mother-in-law in forgiving the familiar-looking beggar who seems to believe he has injured them, recognizes Alexis just after he dies, and then is the miraculous recipient of the letter that flies from the saint's hand to her breast and reveals – to the audience at least – that she has adopted an ascetic practice of her own by wearing a hair shirt under her clothes.

With the *Roumans*' portrayal of Lesigne, the Alexis-legend presents a completely different model of salvation than the self-centered, reductionist view of monastic spirituality embodied in the story of the Man of God. Other people or no longer merely obstacles or distractions that interfere with an individual's attempt to master his or her

own tendency to sin, nor are they merely the backdrop against which an ascetic hero's holiness can shine more brightly. The narrator, Alexis, and the structure of the text itself give space to Lesigne's own subjective desire to be saved and the steps she takes to achieve that goal. She learns from Alexis's words and example and in turn she comforts her husband and helps him persevere in his commitment to asceticism. Alexis and Lesigne participate in a spiritual relationship in which the other is not an obstacle to salvation but a source of support and encouragement. Nonetheless, as Neil Cartlidge observes, within the *Vie de saint Alexis* this relationship can only reach its fullest expression after the characters' deaths. The present world is still set in ruin and the best thing Alexis and Lesigne can do is help each other transcend their present lives and achieve happiness in paradise.

The issues raised and the questions asked by these different versions of the *Vie de saint Alexis* are also relevant to the experience of Christina of Markyate. According to the Latin *Vita* written shortly after her death, Christina fled from her spouse and family like Alexis, but unlike the male saint, she faced fierce opposition, including physical imprisonment and violence, and her enemies included a powerful bishop who arranged her marriage as revenge for her rejection of his sexual advances. The dividing line between secular and monastic values is even more sharply defined in Christina's *Vita* than in Alexis's, and it runs through the middle of the clergy, dividing those who had embraced the Gregorian Reform and those who still let themselves be swayed by greed and lust. In this case, it is the supposedly historical record that presents a more simplistic and diametrical vision of good and evil than the work of hagiographic literature.

After successfully fleeing from her family and dissolving her marriage, Christina become the Prioress of Markyate and enters into a significant relationship with Geoffrey of Gorran, the abbot of St. Albans. According to her *Vita*, Christina helped Geoffrey grow spiritually and he in turn supported her materially, and the love between them was as pure as it was strong. Nonetheless, even the author of the *Vita* admits that their relationship was a source of scandal, and there is evidence that Geoffrey himself might have found Christina's love for him restrictive. Each time he was summoned to go to Rome, the *Vita* tells us that Christina prayed that the orders would be rescinded and each time they were. Jane Geddes argues that the inclusion of the *Vie de saint Alexis* in the Saint Albans Psalter is a message from Geoffrey to Christina to assuage her fears of separation and allow him to leave. By pointing to the example of the "beata sponsa semper gemebunda"[235] who watches Alexis leave but is finally reunited with him after death, Geoffrey seems to be encouraging Christina to put her hopes in a reunion with him – or Christ – in paradise and not in their earthly relationship. The legendary *Vie de saint Alexis*, the more historical *Vita Christinae*, and the Saint Albans Psalter which connects them all point to the tension between the desire to save oneself at all costs and the desire to be in relationship with other subjective human beings who can offer support, affection, and comfort. Can a true, fulfilling – indeed salvific – relationship be achieved on earth, or must it be postponed to an imagined future where the self has already obtained its desired salvation and so can finally open itself to the other?

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[235] This is the caption included on the illustration of the weeping bride that precedes the *Vie* in the Saint Albans Psalter (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter/english/translation/trans057.shtml>).

Moving back to the more schematic and institutional level, the same question can be asked of the relationship between the monastic and secular orders. The great monastic houses of Cluny and the new foundations of Saint-Victor, Grandmont, and Fontevraud were faced with the problem of how to engage with the secular world. Because of their material, cultural, and intellectual wealth, these institutions and the men who comprised them could not remain outside of the bounds of human society like the ancient Man of God. Instead, like Saint Alexis, they were brought back into relationship with the secular world, which looked to them for intercessory prayers and moral and intellectual leadership. Would monastic spirituality do nothing for the world, as Alexis does nothing for his family in the Roman *Vita* except reveal the distance between his holiness and their mundanity? Could their mere presence and their constant prayers be enough to obtain salvation for those who could not work for it themselves, as Alexis's body does in the *Chanson*? Or could they imbue the secular world with their values and spirituality, and, as the Gregorian reformers intended, turn the world into a cloister just as Alexis's example changes his wife and parents in the Spanish *Vita* and the *Roumans*? In order to do so, they would have to engage the others as fellow subjects and not merely distractions and obstacles.

The *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* addresses the questions of sin, forgiveness, and salvation that arise when others are seen as subjects. In the prologue to the *Vie*, the narrator tells his audience not to despair, even if they are sinners, because God will forgive any sin, as long as the guilty person repents and does the necessary penance. Although the practice is never mentioned explicitly, this promise closely corresponds to

the sacrament of reconciliation, in which a priest hears a person's confession, imposes a penance, and absolves the sin. It is a simple process that engages the subjectivity of the sinner and can offer relief from the guilt and anxiety that comes from the fear of damnation, but it also has some important limitations. The *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* reveals some of these benefits and limitations as it both bears out and complicates the lesson promised in its prologue. The fantastic story of a man who is born of incest and then marries his own mother before realizing his guilt, doing penance, and being elected pope dramatically and memorably confirms that God will forgive sins, but the nature of Gregory's sin and penance and the fate of his mother raise even more questions about forgiveness and salvation.

First, the question of Gregory's guilt is more complicated than it might seem. The narrator, the characters, and the events of the *Vie* all indicate that Gregory is indeed guilty and in need of penance, but upon reflection this guilt is hard to pin down. Gregory is objectively born of an incestuous relationship, but in medieval Christianity a person was not technically supposed to be held accountable for his parents' sins. The guilt ascribed to Gregory because of his birth corresponds to a more primitive notion of purity than a subjective model of sin as a willful choice to do wrong. Even Gregory's marriage to his mother was not a conscious act of incest, but a political arrangement that offered protection to the war-torn County of Aquitaine. Nonetheless, despite this model of sin as an objective fact, the *Vie* does present a subtle model of subjectivity. Gregory's father's rape of his sister is not an unmotivated act of aggression, but the result of the accumulation of lust, the devil's urging, and "l'achaison del baisement / Que demenoient

trop sovent" (A_1 157-158, cf. B_1 137-138). Gregory's mother in turn balances the threat of damnation against the certainty of shame and social debasement when she decides not to cry out at her brother's advances and to cast her child off to sea rather than raise him. Finally, Gregory himself refuses to listen to the abbot's advice that he become a monk and remain in the monastery where he was raised but instead insists on being dubbed a knight and seeking out his parents. The combination of the "primitive" objective view of sin and guilt that coexists alongside a more "advanced" subjective view within the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* reflects a worldview in which free will is severely restricted by the human propensity to do wrong.

The attention given to Gregory's mother in the *Vie* also complicates the lesson promised in the prologue. On one level, she could be seen simply as a catalyst for Gregory's sin and an obstacle that must be overcome and left behind before the saint can achieve salvation. On another level, however, Gregory's mother is also presented as a sinner in search of forgiveness whose subjective experience of guilt and desire to be saved is expressed with as much detail as Gregory's. It is natural for the audience to wonder about her salvation and whether her contrition and penance merit God's forgiveness. In the A_1 and B_1 versions of the *Vie* this issue is addressed in completely different ways. In B_1, Gregory's mother disappears from the story after he leaves her and the question of her salvation is never addressed. Instead, the narrator sternly warns his audience not to become too familiar with their cousins and sisters because they could never endure the penance Gregory had to perform before being forgiven. She is saved in A_1, but only after confessing her sins to the pope and entering a monastery. It is unclear

whether B_1 is an earlier, more primitive version or an attempt to simplify the longer story presented in A_1. Both perspectives were read and copied in Old French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The salvation of Gregory and his mother confirms the promise made in the prologue that God will forgive sins, but not without placing important conditions on that forgiveness. In Gregory's case, forgiveness is only obtained after he has been chained to a rock in the middle of the sea without food or water for seventeen years, and in his mother's case, forgiveness only comes after reconciliation with the pope, the most powerful member of the sacerdotal order, and the abandonment of the secular world. Salvation seems to require either a superhuman ability to endure pain and privation or at least a willingness to submit to the priests and bishops who claim to have the exclusive power to bind and loose sins. In either case, there is little hope for lay people to achieve salvation on their own.

The *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* can be read as a commentary on the relationship between the monastic, sacerdotal, and lay orders in Western Europe in the twelfth century. The County of Aquitaine, the site of incest and ruinous warfare, is like a caricature of the clergy's vision of the secular world as a place of violence and sexual sin. After he realizes the extent of his sin, Gregory flees the world and lives as a hermit, achieving the highest goals of monastic life: total self-denial and an absolutely exclusive relationship with God. He is then brought back into the world, not as a lay person, but as the pope, the head of the sacerdotal order. This idealized transference of eremitic holiness to the institutional Church brings to mind the Gregorian reformers' attempts to

impose monastic standards of celibacy and personal poverty on the secular clergy. Finally, the image of the Countess of Aquitaine kneeling at the pope's feet and asking for forgiveness reflects the reformers' vision of society in which a Church free from lay interference could preside over a united Christian society aspiring to the monastic model of holiness.

The experience of the twelfth-century Countess Ermengarde of Anjou reveals how a powerful lay woman negotiated her own path between the secular world and the monastic model of holiness. Ermengarde was drawn to monastic life, as the letter addressed to her from Robert of Arbrissel reveals, and she seemed to believe that secular life was dangerous for salvation. Indeed, in all likelihood Ermengarde ended her life in a sort of monastic retirement. But this was only after two previous experiences in the monastery of Fontevraud and the Cistercian priory of Larrey, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and decades as the Countess of Brittany, a position which allowed her to dispense justice, be generous to the poor, and endow churches and monasteries. The relationship between the clergy and the laity was not as simple and one-sided as the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* suggests. Ermengarde was susceptible to the Church's teaching that the demands of marriage and political rule often included dangerous compromises with sin, but she was also aware of the clergy's dependence on secular support. When Geoffrey of Vendôme criticized her for leaving Fontevraud and returning to a secular world he believed offered no chance of salvation, Ermengarde cut off funding for his abbey and forced the sharp-tongued abbot to adopt a more conciliatory tone in a second letter which praised her virtues as a pious lay ruler. Although similar in some respects, Ermengarde's

experience of lay life was much different than the fictional Countess of Aquitaine's. The Countess was literally assaulted and constrained by sin until she abandoned the secular world; Ermengarde seems to have experienced the guilt and doubt that the sacerdotal order both exacerbated and assuaged, but she also managed to travel through life on a unique path at least in part of her own making.

The issue of consanguinity which arose so frequently in Ermengarde's life and which is not unrelated to the incest that animates the legend of Gregory the good sinner, is an excellent example of the complicated interrelation between the laity, the clerical order, and Church doctrine. At first glance, the prohibition on marriage between even distant relatives seems to be a clear attempt by the Church to control secular life by determining whom a lay person could marry. But in practice, the ban on consanguinity was used by the laity themselves to circumvent the Church's prohibition of divorce. The popes and bishops of the Middle Ages only rarely prevented or broke-up consanguineous unions that concentrated power in a single family; more often it was the kings, dukes, and counts who employed genealogists to discover a family relationship and accommodating prelates to declare that it was grounds for annulment. Medieval society was not a monolithic block. There were multiple sources of power and multiple points of view, even on fundamental religious issues of sin and salvation.

The Latin and Old French versions of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* and the historical examples of Valdesius of Lyon and Francis of Assisi studied in chapter four reveal how the Church related to those who had powerful religious experiences outside of its traditional frameworks. The issue of subjectivity in the pursuit of salvation cannot be

separated from questions of supervision, independence, and authority. In many ways, Saint Mary the Egyptian is very similar to Pope Saint Gregory. Both are guilty of a serious sexual sin, and both earn forgiveness through decades of loneliness, hunger, and suffering. Despite these similarities, the two saints have very different relationships with the sacerdotal order of the Church. After expiating his sins, Gregory is assimilated into the sacerdotal order through his miraculous election to the papacy and the holiness he achieved alone on the rock is put at the service of the institutional Church. Mary, on the other hand, remains outside the official framework of the Church until after her death when her memory is celebrated by the monks of Zosimas's abbey. The fact that as a repentant prostitute Mary was given greater holiness by God than Zosimas could achieve after a lifetime of training and dedication is a lesson in humility for the elderly monk. Rather than incorporating Mary's holiness into its structure, as the sacerdotal order does in the case of Saint Gregory, here the eremitic experience is held up as a check to the constant threat of pride, a check made even more effective by the nature of Mary's sin and her supposedly inferior moral status as a woman.

When translated from Latin prose to Old French verse, the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Eyptienne* was changed from a lesson in humility for monks to an example of God's willingness to forgive for lay people. Rather than beginning with an account of Zosimas's prideful belief that no one could teach him anything about holiness, the *T* version of the *Vie* begins with Mary's sinful youth and her conversion. It uses some of the same descriptive and rhetorical devices employed in the non-hagiographic vernacular literature of the time to draw readers into its message about the distance between outer

appearance and inner virtue. The vernacular saint's life also includes a series of explicit commentaries spoken by the narrator or the characters themselves that explain Church doctrine about the power of the Virgin Mary, the history of salvation, and the nature and necessity of the Eucharist. These commentaries are often as rhetorically sophisticated as the narrative and descriptive parts of the poem and serve as an integral part of its overall success.

But this model of vernaculariztion – largely shared by the *Chanson* and the *Roumans de saint Alexis* and the A_1 and B_1 versions of the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire* – was not the only possibility. The *O* version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* represents another approach to vernacularization that began to emerge around the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The use of prose instead of verse in vernacular texts was not just a change in form; it also represented a change in attitude about translation. Rather than embellishing stories with added descriptions and poetic devices, prose writers produced stricter translations that responded to their audience's desire for access to the "truth" of the material they were reading or hearing.

The *O* version of *Marie l'Egyptienne* returns to the Zosimas-centered narrative structure of the Latin *Vita* and it lacks the commentary and flourishes of *T*. It still can be read as a lesson about conversion and God's willingness to forgive, but it also conveys the same message about humility as its Greek and Latin predecessors. Despite the similarities between *O* and the *Vita Mariae Ægyptiacae* included in the Latin lives of the desert fathers, its message must have resonated differently with the pious bourgeois, aristocrats, and non-Latin speaking nuns of thirteenth-century France than it did with the

monks and priests of the Carolingian Empire. The non-clerical and non-monastic audience of *O* might have identified more with Mary than with Zosimas. They might have seen her humility and holiness less as a check to their pride and more as an inspiration and model to emulate.

Saint Mary the Egyptian offers a powerful example to those who have experienced a strong, radical religious conversion outside of the traditional frameworks of the Church. She is clearly more holy and capable of greater miracles than the priest Zosimas, but her superiority is linked to her profound humility. Despite Zosimas's words of praise and her own supernatural knowledge and ability to levitate and walk on water, Mary considers herself a sinner and is ashamed. She also believes that the miracle Zosimas performs at the altar when he changes the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is greater than anything God performs through her. Despite her personal holiness and miraculous abilities, Mary believes that Zosimas is more worthy than she because of his sacerdotal role. This belief in the inherent worth of priests is both symbolized and based on the central place the Eucharist occupies in Mary's spirituality. Pronouncing the words of the *Nunc Dimittis*, Mary equates her final Communion with Simeon's encounter with the baby Jesus. This "realismo eucaristico" provides those who believe an opportunity to experience God in a concrete and physical way, but only through the ministry of the sacerdotal order of the Church.

Mary's devotion to the Eucharist and consequent deference to Zosimas reveals one way in which the sacerdotal order of the Church could channel the aspirations of pious lay people for more radical and meaningful religious experiences into forms that

also included respect for the priests and bishops that constituted the Church's institutional hierarchy. One of the best-known and most successful examples of this phenomenon is Saint Francis of Assisi, the thirteenth century converted merchant who practiced a spirituality based on personal poverty, preaching, and a deep humility based on devotion to the Eucharist and respect for priests and bishops. Together with Dominic's order of preachers, Francis's order of friars represented a new form of religious life that left behind the shelter of the cloister and directly engaged the laity where they lived, including in the new urban centers that were starting to emerge throughout Western Europe. It was probably not a coincidence that deep, personal devotion to the Eucharist and frequent recourse to the sacrament of confession and absolution – two rites that required the participation of an ordained priest – played a large role in the lay spirituality that developed from these movements.

Not all those who experienced a radical conversion outside of the Church's traditional frameworks were integrated as successfully as Francis was, however. Valdesius of Lyon is a fascinating example of a man who experienced the vernacularization of Christian spirituality. According to the *Anonymous Chronicle of Lyon*, Valdesius listened to a saint's life proclaimed in the public square and he had parts of the Bible and other religious texts translated into French so that he could read them himself. Like Francis, Valdesius took the apostolic life of preaching and poverty as a personal vocation and inspired his followers to do likewise. However, unlike the saint from Assisi, Valdesius's mission was met with scorn and hostility by the ecclesiastic authorities. After an initial period of acceptance, Valdesius and his followers were

ordered not to preach and, when they refused to obey, excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Many of the Waldensians remained devoted to the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and some were even reintegrated into the Church, but a large number continued to operate as an institutional alternative to the Catholic hierarchy all the way to the Protestant Reformation. The relationship between the Church and those who had powerful religious experiences outside of its traditional framework was not always as peaceful and serene as the friendship between the elderly Mary and Zosimas.

My analysis of the Latin and Old French versions of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* demonstrates that vernacularization is not just a matter of language. The production and reception of hagiographic texts in the vernacular – whether in verse or prose and whether with embellishments and explicit commentaries or as straight translations – moves religious culture into a space where it can be interpreted by large numbers of people who do not have the doctrinal formation or institutional position of monks and priests. This process can imbue the non-Latin literate population with some of the same devotional beliefs and devotions that characterize the clergy or promote other practices more specifically suited to the laity.

A superb example of this phenomenon can be found in Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, a thirteenth century central-European aristocrat who was in contact with some of the earliest Franciscans and canonized for her intense piety and charity in 1235, only seven years after her death. There are many sources for Elizabeth's life, including a Latin *Vita* based on the depositions made by four of her servants during her canonization (Faral 62-63). This text was translated into French by the renowned Parisian author

Rutebeuf in the second half of the thirteenth century. Rutebeuf, who is also credited with a verse version of the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne*, wrote his *Vie de sainte Elysabel* in rhyming octosyllabic couplets. His work is very different from the anonymous *Vies* of the Pope Saint Gregory and *T* version of *Marie l'Egyptienne*, however. Instead of a preacher or jongleur who promises a lesson in forgiveness, its prologue and epilogue are narrated by the voice of an author who dedicates his work to Isabelle the queen of Navarre and names himself, "Rustebeuf, qui rudiment oevre, / Qui rudiment fet la rude oevre, / Qu'assez en sa rudece ment, / Rima la rime rudement" (2159-2162). Rutebeuf is an agent in a new literary culture, one that is both independent from the Latin, clerical world and in conversation with it. His self-effacing condemnation of his rough work and lies conceals the self-awareness and self-consciousness of a vernacular culture that is capable of both biting, anti-clerical satire and soaring, profound devotional stories and songs.

In the case of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, the distance between history and hagiography narrows until the two become indistinguishable. Like Valdesius, Elizabeth undoubtedly interpreted and modeled her own spiritual experiences on the examples she read and heard in Scripture and hagiography to the point that it could be said that she lived a saint's life. It is also doubtlessly true that the servants who recounted Elizabeth's life to the papal envoys sent to investigate her reputed holiness also presented their mistress and the miracles she supposedly performed according to categories and expectations about holiness they had learned from the countless stories about holy men and women they had heard throughout their lives. This tendency was probably pushed

even further by the clerics who redacted the servants' testimony into a Latin *Vita* and by Rutebeuf himself. Nonetheless, the *Vie de sainte Elysabel* is not a literary invention. Behind and among the hagiographic commonplaces, there is a real woman whose attempts to conform to the models of holiness she found in her horizon of expectations impressed those who knew and heard about her in a way that the lives of millions of her contemporaries did not. Her example then formed the basis of a work of literature that would in turn shape how future generations understood holiness.

The foregoing study of the *Vie de saint Alexis*, the *Vie du pape saint Grégoire*, and the *Vie de sainte Marie l'Egyptienne* demonstrates how works of literature are shaped by and shape the horizon of expectations in which they are written, read, and heard. This work could be expanded to other saints' lives, but it could also be adapted to other types of medieval literature that were rewritten across the centuries, including *chansons de geste*, *fabliaux*, and *romans d'aventure*. All works of literature shape and are shaped by the way people understand themselves and the world they live in, and, as we have seen, this is readily apparent in the case of hagiography. The models of sin and salvation found in medieval stories about ancient saints answered and asked questions concerning some of the most important issues in human existence. What does it mean to live a good life, and how can a person achieve it? Are other people obstacles to self-fulfillment or fellow subjects who need and offer support and consolation? Do religious doctrines provide a framework for making sense of a difficult existence or do they exacerbate natural feelings of guilt and inadequacy to keep people subservient to an existing power structure? In light of the saints' lives read above, the experiences of

Christina of Markyate, Ermengarde of Anjou, Valdesius of Lyon, and Francis of Assisi demonstrate that even in the Middle Ages there were not clear and definitive ways to answer or even ask these questions.

Regardless of the medium or degree of adherence to factual reality, the narratives that people recount to one another both reflect and shape the way they understand themselves and the world. Works of literature can propose solutions and imagine problems that as of yet do not exist in the real world. They can help people successfully navigate the difficulties of life with a clear mind and strong sense of purpose, or they can amplify irrational fears and justify shortsighted and self-serving behavior. Furthermore, the influence that a given work of literature will have is not determined definitively at the moment it is produced or the first time it is read. Every person who reads or hears a story interprets it according to his or her own experiences and beliefs, sometimes in ways that could never have been imagined by the author or earlier audiences. Nevertheless, the interpretation does not come from the reader alone; the story still brings something new to the reader's consciousness: ideas, descriptions, and outcomes that can confirm or challenge previously held beliefs and expectations. Literature is not just a question of life imitating art, but the complex interaction between new and old ways of understanding and giving meaning to human experience.

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