

right © 1997 University of Pennsylvania Press  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published by  
University of Pennsylvania Press  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-6097

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Coon, Lynda L.

Sacred fictions : holy women and hagiography in late antiquity /

Lynda L. Coon.

p. cm.—(The Middle Ages series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8122-3371-9 (alk. paper)

1. Women in Christianity—History—Early church, ca. 30-600.
2. Women in Chistianity—History—Middle Ages, 600-1500.
3. Christian women saints—History. 4. Christian hagiography—History. I. Title II. Series.

BR195.W6C66 1997

270'.082—dc21

97-3136  
CIP

IN MEMORY OF  
NELSON B. COON AND  
JUDY A. COON

# Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii
1. Hagiography and Sacred Models	1
2. Gender, Hagiography, and the Bible	28
3. The Rhetorical Uses of Clothing in the Lives of Sacred Males	52
4. God's Holy Harlots: The Redemptive Lives of Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt	71
5. "Through the Eye of a Needle": Wealth and Poverty in the Lives of Helena, Paula, and Melania the Younger	95
6. Civilizing Merovingian Gaul: The Lives of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild	120
Conclusion: Sacred Fictions	143
Notes	153
Bibliography	203
Index	221

## Illustrations

1. Woman of Samaria at the well. 47
2. Francesco Traini (P. Lorenzetti?), "St. Mary of Egypt receiving the Sacrament." 90
3. Francesco Traini (P. Lorenzetti?), "Saints Paul and Anthony." 92
4. Saint Radegund at the table with the king, praying in her oratory, and prostrate on the floor. 130
5. Dominique Papety, "Abba Zosimas delivers his cloak to Saint Mary the Egyptian." 150

# Acknowledgments

I AM GRATEFUL TO ALL the individuals who aided me in the completion of this book. My deepest thanks go to Thomas Noble for introducing me to the critical study of hagiography, for his great skill in communicating the vital importance of these texts to the study of late antiquity, and for his steadfast support. I greatly appreciate the mentoring of Duane Osheim, who guided me through my early study of gender and Christian spirituality. I should also like to thank Jerome Singerman of the University of Pennsylvania Press as well as the Press' two anonymous readers of the manuscript, whose thoughtful suggestions helped me to clarify certain sections of the book.

This book could not have been completed without institutional support. The year I spent at Bates College in Maine was crucial to the initial phases of this project, and I should like to express my gratitude to my colleagues in history there, particularly Michael Jones and Margaret Creighton. A 1991 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend allowed me to devote three uninterrupted months to research. The Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas awarded me a one-year fellowship at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, and the history department made it possible to accept the award.

I appreciate the support I received from many new friends and colleagues in Cambridge while I was writing the book. I am grateful to the gracious faculty and remarkable students of Lucy Cavendish College for their intellectual stimulation, especially Lorna McNeur, Jane Renfrew, Anja Matwijkiw, and Adelheid Voskuhl. I am deeply indebted to Betty Wood, who shared her home (with its whimsical garden) across from Jesus Green and her cats, Miss Ruthie and Mr. Gibson. I also thank Michael O'Brien for his great dexterity as an editor and Tricia O'Brien for her wit, erudition, and companionship.

There are a number of individuals who have had a direct influence on this undertaking. Jena Gaines, Kathy Haldane, Ellen Litwicki, Peter Potter, and Elisabeth Sommer offered unflagging encouragement, both in graduate school and beyond. I thank David and Marilyn Appleby for their hospitality and willingness to help me with final details.

At the University of Arkansas, my friend and colleague, Lynn Jacobs, has been extremely helpful both in terms of referring me to the works of art historians and in reading early versions of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Jeremy Hyman for his willingness to discuss with me the hermeneutics of Leviticus and Exodus. And, to my humanities teaching team, Charles Adams, Ethel Goodstein, and David Fredrick, I extend special thanks for introducing me to scholarly theories in the fields of literary criticism, classics, gender, sexuality, and architectural history. My students in medieval history at the University of Arkansas have contributed to this book in more ways than can be recounted here, particularly John Arnold, Jennifer Howard, and Mary Thurlkill, all of whom are extraordinary hagiologers.

I would like to thank those special friends in Fayetteville whose guidance and tireless labors saw this book to its completion. I cherish my neighbors, Mary Gussman, Karin Herrmann, and Martha Middleton, and thank them for enduring my ups and downs while working on this book. I remain grateful to my colleague and friend, Elizabeth Payne, for her insightful comments on the role of gender in historical narrative. I extend immeasurable thanks to my dear friends, Robert Finlay and Suzanne Maberry, who read countless drafts of chapters, edited compulsively, and greatly improved the overall structure of the book. Thanks go to my brother, Eric, for inspiring my interest in history when we were children. My most profound appreciation is for my parents, Nelson B. Coon and Judy A. Coon, who encouraged and sustained me, and in whose memory this book is dedicated.

## Introduction

At first Zosimas was troubled, thinking that he saw the appearance of the devil and he trembled. But he protected himself with the sign of the cross, and he saw that there really was some kind of being walking along at mid-day. It was a woman and she was naked . . . her body black as if scorched by the fierce heat of the sun, her hair was white as wool and short, coming only to the neck.<sup>1</sup>

IN THE EARLY SEVENTH-CENTURY LIFE of the harlot-saint Mary of Egypt, the holy woman first appears to a virginal priest, Zosimas, as a demonized apparition floating along the banks of the Jordan River. At the same time, her extraordinary physical appearance resembles that of the Son of Man from Revelation (1.14), “his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow.”<sup>2</sup> She is also the bride from the Song of Songs (1.5–6): “I am swarthy but beautiful, . . . Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has blackened me.”<sup>3</sup> This hagiographical text illustrates the paradoxical nature of late antique biographies of Christian holy women. The Egyptian Mary, in her sacred biography, is a hideous wraith and, at the same time, the eschatological Messiah; her body is repulsive yet she is the bride of Christ; she is a vessel of sin as well as a vessel of repentance; she describes herself as the disciple of the devil, but she subsequently becomes the spiritual mentor of a male altar servant. She is the physical embodiment of feminine self-indulgence and, conversely, the personification of Christian self-mortification.

Mary’s holy life (*vita*) is entirely fabricated from paradox and inversion; although she becomes an exemplary holy woman, the first half of her symbolic life replicates Eve’s expulsion from paradise. The defiled Mary engages in sexual acts not for payment but for pleasure. She explains to her chaste confessor, Zosimas, that “all unnatural acts were natural for her.” The whore-Mary corrupts Christian pilgrims and inverts the apostolic mission; as the ex-harlot reveals to Zosimas, she used to “hunt for the souls of young men.” Mary’s *vita* parodies the pious lives of more conventional late antique female saints who engage in extraordinary acts of philanthropy,

remove their bodies from the marriage market, and travel independently about the Mediterranean and Holy Land. The harlot-saint's independence stems not from pious continence but from her depraved sexuality. Her philanthropy and charity take the form of the free bestowal of her body on Christian pilgrims; she finances a pilgrimage to the Holy Land by offering her flesh as payment for the voyage. Through her conversion to the radical life of self-renunciation, however, Mary refashions her debauched body into a vehicle of grace.

Grotesque asceticism and heroic compunction transform Mary's sacred image from that of the postlapsarian Eve into the inviolable Virgin Mary, for intense abstinence makes the holy woman's body impenetrable. The Egyptian Mary's sun-scorched skin, woolly-white hair, and naked body are physical prooftexts that the ex-harlot has recaptured the status before sin (*status ante peccatum*). The Jordan River Valley, in Mary's *vita*, is the earthly counterpart of heavenly paradise where human beings—even the most debased sinners—can achieve a celestial perfection. The saint-Mary lives in this hallowed valley as a spiritual being who symbolically baptizes herself in the Jordan River and receives no instruction or communion from the priestly hierarchy until just before her death. She walks on water, levitates, travels at supernatural speed, possesses the power of prophetic clairvoyance, and survives for forty-seven years consuming only three loaves of bread for nourishment. Mary's symbolic life castigates the works-righteousness of Zosimas, who submits to her spiritual authority, dramatically reversing the gender relations of late antiquity. The *vita* of this harlot-saint thus confronts the historian of gender and Christianity with a provocative question: how can texts that contain such stereotypical images of female depravity simultaneously empower corrupt females to such a great extent that they overwhelm spiritual men?

This work approaches the study of late antique and early medieval hagiography, or saints' lives (c. 400–700 CE), from a theological perspective by demonstrating how very different hagiographers from disparate cultures exploited biblical rhetoric both to empower and bridle sacred portraits of women.<sup>4</sup> It examines the three major patterns of female sanctity which range in locus from East to West, in time from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, and in model from independent desert hermit to cloistered ascetic. The book describes the influence of the institutionalization of the male priesthood and the masculinization of the altar space on subsequent depictions of holy women and men. It compares women's *vitae* within the context of corresponding male models of sanctity and shows how rhetori-

cal uses of male and female clothing in hagiographical texts delineate the distinctive theological roles of both sexes.<sup>5</sup>

The book focuses on eight sacred fictions of women from the Holy Land, the late antique Roman Mediterranean, and Frankish Gaul. The lives of the fifth-century legendary saints Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt were enormously popular throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The textual depictions of these two harlot-saints mirror the biblical motif of defiled woman as instrument of salvation.<sup>6</sup> The *vitae* of three influential Roman women—the Augusta Helena (c. 255–329), Jerome's life of the widow Paula (c. 347–404), and the fifth-century sacred biography of Melania the Younger (c. 383–439)—transform the image of the late Roman aristocracy into a charitable, humble, and humanitarian regime that adheres to Christ's precepts.<sup>7</sup> These three lives perform the feminine function of civilizing and humanizing the militant, apocalyptic Christianity of the late Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> The sixth- and seventh-century Frankish hagiographies of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild demonstrate the depiction of holy women as civilizing forces in another turbulent era of western history, early medieval Gaul. This shift in geographical focus is essential because of the enormous influence of the *vitae* of the Romans Helena, Paula, and Melania on Merovingian portraits of phenomenal women.<sup>9</sup> The critical salvific directive of all eight lives is the transformation of female flesh from sin to redemption in imitation of the metamorphosis of fallen Eve into the Virgin Mary.

The title, *Sacred Fictions*, expresses the basis of this study—hagiographical motifs driven not by historical fact but by biblical *topoi*, literary invention, and moral imperative. Historians recently have exploited saints' lives for what they reveal about the social, political, and spiritual cultures that produced them. In contrast, the emphasis of this work is *not* on the historical lives of the subject saints but on the theological and didactic agendas of their authors. Clearly some of these *vitae* have more basis in historical fact than others. For example, the lives of Melania the Younger and Paula are relatively well documented. Melania's priest and fellow pilgrim, Gerontius, composed her sacred biography. Gerontius's account is replete with historical detail; however, the priest also creates a "sacred fiction" of his female patron by patently assimilating Melania to the biblical image of the charitable matron. Not all "sacred fictions" are presented in the form of *vitae*. Paula's "life" is actually a late antique *epitaphium*; it is a letter of praise (*laudatio*) written by Paula's friend, the biblical exegete Jerome, and addressed to her daughter, Eustochium. The *epitaphium* de-

tails Paula's pious deeds and saintly death; but it also goes beyond chronicling in that Jerome refashions Paula's laudable life to conform to biblical models of feminine piety. Other kinds of religious texts, such as liturgical calendars, martyrologies, and liturgies commemorating saints' feasts, often contain such spiritual inventions.<sup>10</sup> "Sacred fictions" also can include collections of numinous narratives, such as those allegorical texts which comprise the Helena legend.<sup>11</sup> Of the three late Roman patrician lives studied here, Helena's is clearly the most fictional. The late antique churchmen who constructed Helena's holy image counterbalanced the warlike Christianity of her son, Constantine, by highlighting the philanthropic deeds of his elderly mother. Allegorically, Constantine and Helena became the new Christ and Mary of a resurrected Christian empire.

The lives of the Merovingian saints examined here were written by friends and disciples of the subjects or by hagiographers who desired to foster their cults. By fusing biblical and native Germanic traditions, the culture of Merovingian Gaul put a unique twist on these *vitae*. For example, Rade Gund's male hagiographer, Bishop Fortunatus, portrays her as a Merovingian martyr who crucifies her flesh in imitation of Christ's passion. Fortunatus also punctuates his text with a distinctive Germanic flavor. Rade Gund tends the hearth, carries firewood, mixes drinks with her own hands, and hosts folkloric banquets where she ministers to the poor and diseased. The bishop also recounts in detail Rade Gund's rejection of the characteristic clothing and diet of the Frankish nobility. Despite the Germanic imagery, Merovingian *vitae*, like their desert and Roman counterparts, use biblical rhetoric to demonstrate how fallen female bodies can transmute into mediators of salvation.

Unlike the *vitae* of Rade Gund, Melania, and Paula, which can be documented by other sources, the representations of Pelagia and Mary are mythological and fabricated from biblical rhetoric, apocryphal lives of Mary Magdalene, and the lives of other desert hermits. Clearly the cultures that produced the holy biographies of Mary of Egypt and Rade Gund of Poitiers are disparate, and, as Julia Smith has pointed out, the eastern model of the penitent prostitute had little influence on representations of Merovingian female saints.<sup>12</sup> Although the construction and reception of the images of the eastern and western holy women studied here are not the same, they are comparable because their creators used biblical rhetoric to demonstrate how women who convert to the life of radical self-abnegation become instruments of salvation for men. This book is about the use of biblical discourse by authors from very different cultures and historical eras for this corresponding purpose.

Both Hebrew and Christian scripture use images of defiled women to depict the chasm between humans and God, and the Christian gospels proclaim the hope of universal redemption through Christ's healing and converting of female sinners. Christian hagiographers, including the author of the *vita* of Mary of Egypt, similarly exploit biblical conversion rhetoric to affirm the possibility of universal salvation. The message of such texts is simple: if daughters of Eve can remake their bodies into spiritual vessels, so too can all other sinners.<sup>13</sup> The most enduring paradigms for early women's sanctity—the repentant hermit, the late Roman patrician philanthropist, and the early medieval Frankish cloistered nun—are built on a series of unconventional images of women. Hagiographers make their dynamic women saints walk on water, mystically consecrate the eucharist, and engage in death-defying acts of self-mortification.

The same hagiographers, however, counteract these unorthodox representations of women's power by including spiritual motifs that invariably domesticate female authority. Women's hagiography teaches that the daughters of Eve must make their bodies impenetrable through militant chastity, self-entombment, spiritual exile, or institutionalized claustration. Repentant women must adhere to Pauline strictures concerning their status in the public church, and they must eradicate feminine self-indulgence through ascetic attire and philanthropy. Finally, the spiritual powers (*charismata*) of cloistered nuns must operate within a feminized, domestic environment. Female saints clean altars, catch demons with their spindles, and miraculously perform domestic chores. They atone for Eve's fall by enclosing their bodies in tiny cells, coffins, and tombs. An enshrined, penitential woman who atones for the sorrowful life of the postlapsarian Eve is a salvific instrument in Christian history.

The hagiography of female saints replicates the process of redemption. By transforming profane female flesh into a vehicle of grace, women's conversion extends the hope of universal salvation to sinful humanity. Dynamic male saints act out the linear progression toward salvation through a series of exemplary deeds. Late antique and early medieval Christians interpreted Christ's crucifixion as a kind of exorcism, initiating the expulsion of evil from the world. The great Egyptian male hermits thus reproduce the redemptive powers of the crucifixion by exorcizing legions of demons who take the shapes of beasts, serpents, reptiles, crocodiles, bishops, and seductive women. For the male hermits, evil is an external force that must be eliminated from the world. Female ascetics, however, immure themselves in claustrophobic cells, expiate their sins, and place themselves under the mentorship of male teachers. For women ascetics, the battle

against evil is generally internal, a struggle against the female nature itself. While the holy man ventures into the world or the wilderness to battle heroically against evil, the holy woman turns inward to heal the fissures of a corrupted self. The *vita* of a holy man records the transformation of male flesh from dust to spirit, from Old Adam to New Adam or Christ (1 Corinthians 15.45–47; Genesis 2.7). Female *vitae* describe how exceptional holy women remake the fallen body of Eve into the body of the “New Eve” or the impenetrable Virgin Mary. Biblical discourse endowed hagiographical *vitae* with the male prototype of the “New Adam/Christ” and the corresponding female model of the “New Eve/Mary.”

Paradox, inversion, reversal, transformation, and rebirth are all essential components of sacred discourse. Masculine and feminine spirituality both appropriate traditional constructions of male and female behavior and invert them to instruct human audiences that the sacred operates in a manner antithetical to profane convention. Medieval theologians manipulated the paradoxical nature of sacred gender. Early theologians interpreted the crucifixion as an exorcism, while later biblical exegetes understood it as a childbirth.<sup>14</sup> The wound in Christ’s side gives birth to the church (*ecclesia*), just as Adam gave birth to Eve from his side. Medieval depictions of Christ crucified compare the bleeding Messiah with lactating females who nourish infants. Christ feeds Christians with the blood that pours through the wound in his side, his own flesh performing the female function of providing food and nurturing new life.<sup>15</sup> Through similar paradoxical imagery, the Virgin Mary functions as a Christian priest because she first consecrated Christ (the eucharist) in her womb. She is also the Christian altar, for her lap displays the baby Jesus just as the sacrificial table exhibits the eucharist. The enclosed space of the Virgin’s body functions as a receptacle of grace, and medieval “opening-virgins” (*vierges-ouvvrantes*) portray Mary’s womb as sheltering the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The enigmatic nature of sacred gender runs counter to the frequent assumption of modern scholarship that early societies operated under rigidly polarized masculine/feminine categories: “intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy, and order/disorder.”<sup>16</sup> Church writers, however, blended both masculine and feminine characteristics not only in the *vita Christi* but also in the sacred lives of holy women and men in order to demonstrate the otherworldly nature of Christian sanctity.

The lives of late antique and early medieval holy women (and men) also contain instances of spiritual cross-genderings. Holy women are both

masculine (spirit) and feminine (flesh), and their sacred biographies both empower and restrain their spiritual activities. Averil Cameron has argued that early Christian writings couple outspoken misogyny with a kind of early Christian feminism.<sup>17</sup> Dyan Elliott has noted that in the lives of pious women “submission inevitably overshadows subversion in the hands of a skilled narrator.”<sup>18</sup>

Feminist theologians, historians, and literary critics of the past two decades applied contrasting hermeneutic approaches to the existence of both misogyny and feminism in the same text. In the 1970s radical feminist theologians concentrated on the misogynous motifs of Christian discourse, denouncing the scriptural representation of God the Father as a phallic conspiracy.<sup>19</sup> In the 1980s, more moderate feminist interpreters of the Bible reacted against the polemical exegesis of the previous decade by recovering the “secret history” of early Christian women’s authority, independence, mobility, prophetic power, and charismatic potency.<sup>20</sup> The rediscovery of the antique women’s *ecclesia*, they maintained, provided a vital model for contemporary Christian feminists who did not want to reject the church as a misogynistic, patriarchal community.<sup>21</sup>

Church historians and hagiologists who subscribe to this “hermeneutics of remembrance” have proclaimed that holy women experienced a gender revolution in late antiquity. In her 1991 work on early women saints, Joyce Salisbury championed the late antique gender revolution by featuring holy women’s “freedom from social expectations,” “freedom of thought,” “freedom of movement,” and “freedom from gender identification.”<sup>22</sup> Salisbury identified such activities as living or traveling independently and rejecting marriage to practice celibacy as demonstrations that holy women wielded power and autonomy that went well beyond the norm for late antique and early medieval women. There is little question that most *vitae* of holy women contain the textual cross-genderings emphasized by Salisbury. But she reached her conclusions by considering only the feminist rhetoric of women’s hagiography and downplayed its misogynist counterpart.

Both the radical feminist hermeneutic of the 1970s and its theoretical antithesis, the “hermeneutic of remembrance,” focus on only half of the paradoxical treatment of women in sacred discourse. Because hagiographical texts duplicate biblical motifs, women’s *vitae* reproduce the enigmatic portrayal of women in scripture. Late antique and early medieval saints’ lives suggest that women’s piety and depravity are codependent and that male altar servants alone possess the power to exorcize feminine corruption



and reunite women with God. Even in the iconoclastic *Life of Mary of Egypt*, an apparently independent figure confronts a hierarchical patron, kneels pliantly before him, and accepts communion. Women's *vitae* need to be reexamined with an eye toward the highly rhetorical and symbolic meanings contained in their sacred biographies.

Very recent work on women and early Christianity has been influenced by post-structuralist interpretations of the social and cultural construction of gender, sexuality, and the body.<sup>23</sup> Historians focusing on these constructions examine the fluidity of gender models and the means by which various historical cultures recreate the categories of "masculine" and "feminine" in order to accommodate changing social, political, economic, and spiritual precepts. This methodology also considers more fully the relationship between author and text and between sacred image and didactic purpose.<sup>24</sup> Male writers who constructed the symbolic images of holy women did so not only to glorify the piety of female saints but also to suppress the vacillating faith of men and to feature powerful, independent holy women's submission to the male hierarchy.

Kate Cooper suggests that late antique women's lives should be reinterpreted in terms of the messages they direct to Christian men since "both speaker and audience were generically understood as masculine." Late antique *vitae* did not "straightforwardly represent flesh-and-blood women themselves," according to Cooper, but "rather served to symbolize aspects of the tension to be found among men."<sup>25</sup> Christian writers wrote for a "masculine" audience, and female saints' lives can be used only circumspectly to document the actual condition of late antique and early medieval Christian holy women. The *Life of Mary of Egypt*, for example, is not really about Mary: the *vita* elucidates "the tension to be found among men"<sup>26</sup> because the male compiler of this mythological life used the heroic conversion of an illiterate, sinful woman to castigate the spiritual pride of a works-righteous male priest. In so doing, the hagiographer employed a rhetorical technique drawn from the Christian gospels.

The evangelists often contrast the rational intellect of the male apostles with the emotional and simple minds of women. Faithful women believe in Christ without hesitation whereas the male apostles doubt, demand "signs and wonders," and cling to earthly things. Christ (Matthew 16.22–23) vents his wrath at the apostle Peter, who is not able to comprehend the spiritual significance of the future passion: "And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid, Lord! This [the crucifixion] shall never happen to you.' But he [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me,

Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.'" In the *Life of Mary of Egypt*, Mary functions as the converted woman whose simple faith is pure and spontaneous. Her confessor, Zosimas, personifies the doubting apostle who clings to the rational intellect and to "human things."

Although Mary's sacred biography is a highly mythological one, other women's lives—even those with corroborating historical sources—contain similar *topoi* of female depravity and piety. In short, all saints' lives are rhetorical, didactic, and constructed. They are sacred fictions, not factual accounts of human achievements. The lives of the legendary Pelagia and Mary, as well as the better-documented biographies of Melania the Younger and Paula, overstep traditional gender boundaries and conform to more conservative portraits of ancient women. These texts allow the historian to reconstruct the perspective of the male authors rather than the historical reality of the women whose stories are recounted.

Radical portrayals of female saints are those in which holy women follow the charismatic models of Hebrew and Christian holy men, such as Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ, and the apostles. Although the Hebrew and Christian Bibles provide brief references to female judges and prophets, there are no biblical women whose deeds can compare with the miraculous accomplishments of these charismatic men. In fact, the prophet Ezekiel condemns female prophets who make magic veils and wrist bands and who "hunt for human souls" (Ezekiel 13.17–18). In the ancient world, men possessed public authority: "They were astounded at his [Christ's] teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority" (Mark 1.22). In Christian discourse, manhood defined miraculous power, consecrated authority, and spiritual perfection: "Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles" (Ephesians 4.13–14). Christian scripture provides the antithesis of the "manhood of Christ": "Weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3.6–7). Christian hagiographers based authoritative images of both male and female holiness on the "mature manhood of the Son of God." Ascetic practices assimilate the female body to that of Christ crucified, so that holy women literally become Christ and perform his salvific miracles. Powerful women, therefore, are like powerful men. Although

modern readers may be offended by spiritual perfection being defined by manhood, it must be recognized that late antique and early medieval audiences apparently could celebrate female holiness only in terms of a resolutely patriarchal standard.<sup>27</sup>

Conservative or traditional depictions of holy women emphasize the unique spiritual attributes of female sanctity as derived from biblical (and even classical) depictions of women—domesticity, submission to male authority, and the codependency of women’s depravity and piety. Only female *vitae* highlight these particular scriptural components of human spirituality. For example, the sixth-century hagiographer of the Frankish queen, Radegund of Poitiers, depicts the austere nun as meticulously cleaning house—an unthinkable activity for most male saints.

The major patterns for the literary representation of female sanctity duplicate the biblical motif of converted female as instrument of salvation. The three distinct models of female sanctity—the legendary harlot-saint, the patrician philanthropist, and the cloistered nun—are the textual offspring of the paradoxical biblical presentations of women. Scriptural women typically function either as the human embodiment of apostasy from God or as the passive recipients of divine power and grace. The Hebrew Bible (Ecclesiastes 7.26) personifies the rift between humans and God as a menacing female: “And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.” The Christian book of Revelation (17.3–6) embodies Roman depravity by describing the physical appearance of a besotted harlot, who is “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication. . . . And [she was] drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” Yet the gospels repeatedly recount Christ’s healings of idolatrous, depraved, and defiled women—all of whom are earthly manifestations of Revelation’s sordid whore.

In the gospels (Matthew 26.6–13; Mark 14.3–9; Luke 7.36–50; John 12.1–8), a woman anoints Jesus and washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair.<sup>28</sup> In response to this great demonstration of faith, Jesus pronounces that “wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Matthew 26.13). The gospel of Luke identifies the woman with the “alabaster jar of ointment” as a “woman of the city, who was a sinner” (7.37). Christ announces the

universality of the redemptive process by instructing the male apostles to preach the gospels and immortalize the prophetic action of the anointing woman. The biblical construct of repentant woman as symbolic of pristine faith, however, relies on the fundamental correlation between female depravity and redemption, an antithetical alliance that hagiographers reproduce in the sacred fictions of even the most devout holy women. The essential didactic message of the various hagiographical *vitae* examined in this book is that all women—even holy women—must continually combat the female self that is inherently alienated from God.

THE MIDDLE AGES SERIES

Ruth Mazo Karras, General Editor  
Edward Peters, Founding Editor

A complete list of books in the series  
is available from the publisher.

# Sacred Fictions

Holy Women and Hagiography  
in Late Antiquity

Lynda L. Coon

PENN

University of Pennsylvania Press

Philadelphia