

COMMUNITY, SOLITUDE, PATRIARCHY, AND
PROTO-FEMINISM IN THE OLD ENGLISH
LIFE OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfathers, without whom, in many ways, I would not be here.

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the binaries of community/solitude and patriarchy/proto-feminism in the *Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt*. For various reasons scholars such as Hugh Magennis believe that the *Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, although included in a manuscript of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*, was not by Aelfric. I argue that the character of Zosimus in this vita embodies the characteristics of community and patriarchy, which I call the Aelfrician model, and the character of Mary of Egypt embodies the characteristics of solitude and proto-feminism, which I call the non-Aelfrician model. I further argue that these two models, the Aelfrician and non-Aelfrician, are complementary in the *Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt*.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis concerns how the binaries of community/solitude and patriarchy/proto-feminism are portrayed in the anonymous Old English text of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* (from here referred to as *Life of Mary*). Specifically, the male character, Zosimus, encompasses the attributes of community and patriarchy and the main character, a female, encompasses the attributes of solitude and proto-feminism. Further, in the *Life of Mary*, these two poles evident in Christianity are interdependent rather than antagonistic. Mary of Egypt's story has been peculiarly appealing and enduring. It was especially popular in the Middle Ages, particularly in the Orthodox Church, but also in the Roman Catholic Church. Even in the twentieth century, the *Life of Mary* has been the subject of two novels, a poem, and two operas. Hugh Magennis has called her a female with spiritual authority, something that was perhaps subversive to the patriarchal order of late Anglo-Saxon England.

Mary's story is contained in a copy of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*. However, as will be addressed later, Hugh Magennis, a leading scholar on Mary of Egypt, finds it almost certain that the *Life of Mary* was not written or condoned by Aelfric. Aelfric, along with other Anglo-Saxons of the late tenth century such as Aethelwold, was attempting to build a patriarchal Christian order. Magennis finds this profound tale of a woman's power directly antithetical to Aelfric's mission. Another marked difference with Aelfric's ethos is that Mary is a total hermit. When Zosimus finds her in the trans-Jordan desert she has literally seen no one for decades. This is in direct contrast to Aelfric's nearly exclusive interest in saints who had some pastoral duty or community ties.

There is a divergence of opinion concerning Mary's existence. The Old English *Life of Mary* was translated from the Latin version, which was translated from the original Greek version. This Greek version, attributed to Sophronius was possibly based on Cyril's *Life of Cyriacus*. Cyril's *Life of Cyriacus* may have been based on an actual woman. In this version, Mary is simply a female hermit who had previously been a cantor in a church in Jerusalem. In order to refrain from leading men to debauchery, she

renounces the world and retires to the desert. The many miracles that Mary performs in subsequent accounts cause one to wonder if part or all of Mary's life had been fabricated. Attempts to date Mary's death from information in the texts put her in the fifth or sixth century.¹ Jane Stevenson plainly states, "Mary of Egypt was invented in the sixth century" (19). However, as with many saints' lives, certain incidents in Mary's life could have been embellished. Pierre Deloos claims that although saints (in many cases) actually lived, their lives were constructed for a specific audience, which in this case would have been people in late Anglo-Saxon England. Jane Stevenson suggests that the *Life of Mary* reflects the religious interests and attitudes of Anglo-Saxon England. Mary's is the story of a so-called "penitent whore" (in actuality she was extremely promiscuous but did not seem to profit directly from this). Fictional harlot-saints in hagiography perhaps reflect historical figures such as Theodora, a wife of the emperor Justinian, who had previously been a former actress and prostitute. Certainly a story like Mary's could threaten a male-dominated order such as late tenth-century England. In fact, Stevenson suggests that the story of Mary reflects "male paranoia about women" (26).

My principle argument is that in the *Life of Mary*, the character of Zosimus represents the "Aelfrician model" of patriarchy and community while the character of Mary represents the "non-Aelfrician model" of proto-feminism and solitude; further, in this vita these two polarities are complementary. By complementary, I mean that both Mary and Zosimus, and the social bodies they symbolize, depend upon the other in order to completely express their inherent characteristics and find whatever qualities are lacking in each separately fulfilled. I base my ideas of the Aelfrician and non-Aelfrician models on the work of Hugh Magennis. Besides translating the *Life of Mary* in the *Old English Life of Mary*, and writing an introduction to this book, Magennis contributed the article, "St. Mary of Egypt and Aelfric: Unlikely Bedfellows in Cotton Julius E. vii?" in the *Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, edited by Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross. As stated, Magennis finds it almost certain

¹ Paul the Deacon's Latin version puts Mary's death on April 2. Sophronius's Greek version puts Mary's death on April 1. In both accounts, she dies on Good Friday. This gives us 443, 454, 527, 538, or 549 for the Latin account and 421, 423, 511, 516, or 522 for the Greek account.

that the *Life of Mary*, although contained in a collection of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*, was not written, or condoned, by Aelfric. The most obvious reason is that the *Life of Mary* is not mentioned in the table of contents of the *Lives of Saints*. Also, the Old English *Life of Mary* is more literal than Aelfric's translations tend to be and uses a different vocabulary. However, part of his evidence, relevant to my argument is that the character of Mary, both in her conversion from being a nymphomaniac into a penitent hermit, and in her extremely eremitical life, are completely antithetical to Aelfric's ethos. Magennis states that the *Life of Mary* often exhibits a "high ideal of monasticism and a powerful image of female sanctity" (21-2) —both un-Aelfrician. According to Magennis, Aelfric preferred saints who maintained some pastoral duties or community ties over hermits. At the time that Zosimus found Mary, she had been in the desert for forty-seven years, seeing no one. Zosimus also wrote exclusively about steadfast virgins in his vitae of female saints. In contrast, Mary of Egypt is known as a "harlot-saint." Although she did not receive money for sexual favors, she did lead an extremely promiscuous youth, undergo a conversion, and subsequently retire to the desert to be a hermit. Further, Aelfric put all his female saints in *Lives of Saints* firmly under male authority. Mary, being alone in the desert, had no men over her, not even a bishop. Thus Magennis concludes, "The inclusion of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* in Cotton Julius could hardly have been sanctioned by Aelfric or his closer associates" (110). Based upon Magennis' argument, I assign the term "Aelfrician model" to the attributes of community and patriarchy and assign the term "non-Aelfrician model" to the attributes of solitude and proto-feminism. I then make the assertion that Zosimus represents the Aelfrician model and Mary represents the non-Aelfrician model.

I adapt the idea of the complementarity of the characters Zosimus and Mary from the work of Jane Stevenson. Stevenson, in her article, "The Holy Sinner: The Life of Mary of Egypt," also in the book the *Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, develops the idea that Zosimus and Mary are opposite, but complementary symbols for two separate strands of Christianity. First, she argues, the characters of Zosimus and Mary seem to need each other. Zosimus needs Mary for her innate spiritual wisdom; Mary needs Zosimus for the sacraments, which he, as a priest, can dispense. Stevenson's imaginative leap is that this mutual need between Zosimus and Mary symbolizes the mutual need of two

strands of Christianity: that of the “wild, God-possessed saint” and that of the established church. She says that these two strands had existed since the Peace of the Church. In other words, the strand of the intuitive mystic who has direct experience of God vied with the established church of (male) priests and bishops. Stevenson states that Mary, as a hermit in the desert, represents this mystic strand of Christianity. And she states that Zosimus, who is a priest or bishop, represents the established, institutional, strand. Stevenson then postulates that the mutual complementarity of the characters Zosimus and Mary symbolizes the mutual complementarity of these two strands of Christianity. I borrow from Stevenson the idea of a complementary relationship between two opposite poles. I argue specifically that in *Life of Mary* the Aelfrician model of community and patriarchy represented by Zosimus and the non-Aelfrician model of solitude and proto-feminism represented by Mary are mutually cooperative rather than antagonistic.

The Old English version of the *Life of Mary* is the oldest vernacular treatment of this text.² The preface to the Old English *Life of Mary* identifies Paul the Deacon as the translator of the vita from Greek to Latin. In the Old English text, an anonymous first person narrator justifies the retelling of Mary’s story as moral instruction and inspiration. This narrator then introduces the priest Zosimus, who will find Mary in the desert, as an accomplished ascetic and monk. He then tells how an angel directs Zosimus to travel to a certain monastery near the Jordan River. Once at this monastery, Zosimus goes into the desert in observance of Lent, as is the custom at this monastery. There in the desert, Zosimus encounters Mary of Egypt, who at first tries to flee from Zosimus; but at length, Zosimus catches her. Mary then tells her story to Zosimus: She is first an extremely promiscuous adolescent and young woman in Alexandria. She is lead to board passage on a ship which is destined for the Celebration of the Cross at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. She is miraculously barred from entering the church. She undergoes a dramatic conversion, prays to the Virgin Mary, and vows to repent. She hears a voice: “If you cross over the river Jordan, there you will experience and obtain good repose” (Magennis 95). She then travels to the Church of St. John the Baptist by the River Jordan and washes herself in the water. She then goes into the desert and

² There are two fragments extant of this text and one complete one. The two fragments are 1) Gloucester, Cathedral Library 35 and 2) London, British Library, Cotton Otho B. X.. The complete text of the *Life of Mary* in Old English occurs uniquely in the manuscript of Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*, London, British Library, Cotton Julius E. vii.

becomes a hermit, fleeing from all people. At the point that Zosimus finds her, she has been in the desert 47 years. Throughout her narration, Mary describes her many temptations to Zosimus. After telling her tale to Zosimus, she instructs him (it is now Lent) to return in a year to give her communion on Maundy Thursday. Zosimus returns in a year and does so. Mary then instructs Zosimus to again return in a year. When Zosimus comes back the next year, he finds Mary dead, with her name, the day she died, and instructions to bury her written in the sand. Zosimus marvels at this since Mary was illiterate. As Zosimus ponders how to dig in the hard, sandy soil, a tame lion miraculously appears, who then digs the grave.

As mentioned, the Latin text, which the anonymous Old English text was based on was translated from the Greek by Paul the Deacon, most likely in the 790s. Paul the Deacon was a scholar attached to the court of Charlemagne, under whose favor he wrote the *History of the Lombards*. Before the Norman Conquest, the only Latin version of the *Life of Mary* circulating in the British Isles was Paul's³. Hugh Magennis believes that the anonymous Old English text, dating from the fourth part of the tenth century was based on "an earlier and better version of the Cotton-Corpus [Legendary]" (100). Paul the Deacon's Greek source is attributed to Sophronius, bishop of Jerusalem, who most likely wrote the vita in the late sixth century or early seventh century. Sophronius' version itself is perhaps based on Cyril of Scythopolis' Life of Cyriacus, written c. 560 C.E.. Cyril's account could be factual, or at least based on fact. It claims that a female hermit existed in the trans-Jordan desert. In Cyril's story, Abba John, a disciple of Cyriacus, meets a woman named Mary living alone in a cave. This Mary had been a harpist in the Church of the Anastasis in Jerusalem, which she had left to avoid scandal. Mary had subsisted on one jar of water and a basket of food. John leaves her, and, on the return trip, finds her dead. He (and perhaps another) buries her. As opposed to Cyril's version, Sophronius' story (which became the Latin version and then the Old English version) is as much about Zosimus as Mary. Zosimus grows from being a smug ascetic to having a real appreciation for the grace of God. Sophronius' version is different from Cyril's version in the following ways: Zosimus replaces John and becomes another protagonist. Mary has three loaves of bread instead of a

³ These are extant in 1) Cotton Claudius A. i, s. x^{med} 2) Cotton-Corpus Legendary a) the British Library, BL Cotton Nero E. i, parts i and ii and b) Salisbury Cathedral Library 221 + 222 ff. 195v-205v.

basket of food. Instead of a harpist in Jerusalem, Mary is a harlot in Alexandria. Also, certain miracles are added: Mary walks on water; Mary has prescient knowledge of Zosimus; and a tame lion digs her grave.

As I stated above, the Old English *Life of Mary* occurs uniquely in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*. As also stated above, Hugh Magennis finds it almost certain that Aelfric did not write it. Who did write it, however, is unknown. Being written in the vernacular, rather than Latin, this version of *Life of Mary* would be more available to lay people. Magennis states, "In translating this legend from Latin into the vernacular the anonymous Old English writer was making available to a wider audience of Anglo-Saxon men and women material that would otherwise have remained the preserve of those in religious life" (Magennis 2). The *Life of Mary* is one of four vitae in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* thought to have not been written by Aelfric. The other three are the *Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, *Eustace*, and *Euphrosyne*. According to Magennis, most of *Lives of Saints* was transcribed by a single scribe. However, a second scribe apparently covered most of the transcription of *Legend of the Seven Sleepers*. Magennis states, in addition "[there] appears to be a third scribe...copying the rest of the *Legend* and all of the *Life of Mary*" (20). This, along with its omission from the table of contents, seems to indicate that *Life of Mary* was not part of the original book, but was added later. Magennis suggests "As to why...the *Life of Mary* in particular should have been selected for insertion in the manuscript, the likelihood is that this was a text that was conveniently at hand and was deemed suitable by an editor" (21). I argue later, however, that the inclusion of *Life of Mary* was a deliberate effort to promote a non-Aelfrician theology, or, in a wider sense, a different theology than that of the Benedictine Reformers as a whole. This would have been the result of the marginalization of women, lay people, and married clergy under the Benedictine Reform Movement. Magennis maintains, "[The *Life of Mary*] was in circulation long enough before its inclusion in Cotton Julius for significant corruption to have been introduced into the Old English text but exactly *how* long it was in circulation we cannot tell" (23). Magennis goes on to state, "The likeliest conclusion we can come to is that the translation is either the work of a contemporary of Aelfric's or derives from a slightly earlier period" (23). Hugh Magennis corroborates my theory that *Life of Mary* presents a non-Aelfrician theology. He concludes, "The *Life of St*

Mary of Egypt may be seen, therefore, as representing a tradition of non-Aelfrician hagiography in later Anglo-Saxon England” (23).

The sources I use for this essay can be grouped into five categories: anthropological theory, medieval studies, medieval texts, scholarship on the *Life of Mary*, and scholarship on saints’ lives. I use five texts that I label as anthropological theory. Anthropology provides a basis for many of the theoretical concepts that I use in the essay, especially ideas concerning rites of passage, religion, and the hero’s journey. Arnold van Gennep wrote the first treatise concerning rites of passage in 1909, titled appropriately enough, *Les Rites de Passage* (first translated into English in 1960 as the *Rites of Passage*). This was the genesis of the theory of the three stages of the rite of passage, separation, transition, and reincorporation. Mircea Eliade was one of the pioneers in the study of religion, and I use the *Sacred and the Profane* and the *Myth of the Eternal Return*. These concern how humans derive meaning from seeing the world in a religious way. They also touch on rites of passage and the symbolic meanings of religious rites. The text I use of Joseph Campbell’s, the *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, develops his concept of the hero’s journey from van Gennep’s three stages of the rite of passage. Victor Turner also elaborates van Gennep’s three stages of the rite of passage, focusing particularly on the middle term, transition, which he maintains is characterized by liminality and communitas.

Medieval Studies provide much of the historical information I use, including social history, and theoretical approaches to understanding medieval texts. The first such text is by Peter Brown, entitled *Body and Society: Men and Women and Renunciation in Early Christianity*. The text provides information on men’s and women’s roles in early Christianity. The *Encyclopedia of Monasticism* offers the historical background for the sections on the Desert Fathers and Mothers. The *Making of the Magdalen*, by Katherine Ludwig Jansen, provides the information in the essay on Mary Magdalen. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, by Caroline Walker Bynum, provides information on the women’s sphere as opposed to the men’s sphere. Virginia Blanton’s book, *Signs of Devotion: the Cult of St. Aethelthryth in Medieval England 695-1615*, provides a theoretical model for understanding saints’ lives. Blanton in turn draws upon some ideas concerning signification in Sarah Beckwith’s *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval*

Writings, which I also use. The two chapters of the *Anglo-Saxons* by Eric John provide background on the history and theology of the English Benedictine Reform Movement.

The next category is that of texts written in the medieval era (or in the case of the *Bible* antiquity). These provide the actual texts that I look at. The first, of course, is the *Old English Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, translated, with an introduction, by Hugh Magennis. I also use as sources other saints' lives in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*. I use the King James Bible, specifically the account of Jesus' test in the wilderness in the Gospel of Luke. The *Life of Antony*, by Athanasius, is doubly important to subsequent Christian culture. First, Antony himself was the prototype of the desert hermit, providing a basis not only for other anchorites, but also for cenobites such as those following the rule of St. Benedict. Second, the text itself, by Athanasius, provided a model for subsequent saints' lives. It effectively synthesized narratives from the *Bible* and Classical biographies to produce a new genre, the saints' vita. I use the introduction of *Wisdom of the Desert* (a translation of the *Apophthegmata* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*) by Thomas Merton since it gives insight into the psychology of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

The fourth category of sources I have used is that of scholarship on *Life of Mary*. The first three of these are important to the development of my central thesis. The fourth I mention for the sake of completeness. There are not many scholars on St. Mary of Egypt; the most important is certainly Hugh Magennis. His article, "St. Mary of Egypt and Aelfric: Unlikely Bedfellows in Cotton Julius E. vii?" in the collection of essays, *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, edited by Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross, provides the basis for my concepts of an Aelfrician model and a non-Aelfrician model. Jane Stevenson's work is another extremely important source. Her essay, "The Holy Sinner: The Life of Mary of Egypt", also contained in *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, is also basic to my project. Elaine Pagel's the *Gnostic Gospels*, while not directly concerning Mary of Egypt, provides invaluable information concerning the relationship of Mary Magdalen and Peter, which is somewhat analogous to the relationship of Mary of Egypt and Zosimus. Andrew Scheil has also produced some scholarship on Mary of Egypt, notably his article "Bodies and Boundaries in the Old English Life of

St. Mary of Egypt” in *Neophilologus*. One of his principle arguments in this article is that Mary represents the female sexual body while Zosimus represents the male ascetic body.

The last category of sources for my essay is that of scholarship on saints’ lives in general. These concern ways to approach saints’ lives. Both Pierre Delooz’s “Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Sainthood in the Catholic Church,” contained in *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*, edited by Stephen Wilson, and Edith Wyschogrod’s *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* explore how saints’ lives are constructed for their intended audiences.

Pierre Delooz has said that, “All saints are more or less constructed in that, being necessarily saints for other people, they are remodeled in the collective representation which is made of them” (195). In her book *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Aethelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615*, Virginia Blanton discusses the construction of saints’ lives for particular audiences and the relationships of signs, texts, and culture. Blanton looks at how “symbols are culturally contingent” (Blanton, 132). That is, she examines how the meaning of a symbol is embedded in, and derives its meaning from, the specific culture in which it is found. The same symbol in different cultural contexts would have very different meanings. This refutes the structuralist view that symbols have everywhere essentially the same meaning. Sarah Beckwith says in the introduction to *Christ’s Body: Identity, culture, and society in late medieval writings* that symbols are “signifying devices which provide the communicative context through which social worlds are imagined, invented, and changed” (2). In other words, symbols can ultimately stand for social worlds. Blanton’s book specifically addresses St. Aethelthryth, but we can learn from it some of the relationships between texts, symbols, and culture, and also the construction of saints’ lives for specific audiences and purposes. Aethelthryth is notable for having maintained her virginity through two marriages. Blanton says, “The image of Aethelthryth’s chastity, therefore, seems not to have been constructed for women” (128). Blanton is discussing here the patriarchal order that Aelfric and Aethelwold were attempting to establish in late tenth century England. In relation to this, Blanton states, “The power to choose between procreation and chastity, therefore, had to rest with the husband, and the images given in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints* underscore the reform’s placement of men in leadership roles” (128). This bolsters my argument that the

Aelfrician model is inherently patriarchal. It also sheds light on my supposition that patriarchy is related to a preference for virgin women. In the case of Aethelthryth, at least, the story of her prodigious virginity through two marriages, whether true or not, served to function as propoganda for monastic men, or perhaps as a means to increase the prestige and political standing of the monastery of Ely, which Aethelthryth founded. In this case, the incorruptibility of Aethelthryth's body (her body did not decay after she died) supports the political and economic wellbeing of the monastery at Ely where she was buried and which claimed her.

Edith Wyshogrod, in *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, goes further in looking at the way meaning is conveyed in saints' lives. She says that saints' vitae are temporal narratives that express meaning over time as opposed to fixed moral dicta. The meaning of a saint's life unfolds over time and may mean different things to different people. So in Wyshogrod's analysis, the *Life of Mary* is not a static statement of a moral principle, but rather a narrative unfolding with a teleological purpose.

Wyshogrod says, "In sum, the sequential structure of hagiography is such that the story's denouement is not a theory built up from events that serve as the theory's support, but a coming to fruition of a life by way of the story's time tried events" (9). She describes three narrative strands in *Life of Mary*. First is the strand of Mary's life from her promiscuous youth to her conversion in Jerusalem to her solitary life in the trans-Jordan desert. Second is the authorial voice that is the progression of the narrative outside of the characters. Third is the interpretation or appropriation of meaning by the community which is hearing, reading, and experiencing the *Life of Mary*. The purpose of *Life of Mary*, and hagiography in general, is for Wyshogrod not to gain aesthetic appreciation, nor to learn a neat moral dictum, nor even to emulate Mary's life, but to elicit spiritual motivations within the readers appropriate to their own lives.

The literary and spiritual precursors to hermits such as Mary were the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. These were people, beginning in the third century, who left the world to devote themselves entirely to God, living alone in the deserts of Palestine, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. The *Apophthegmata*, or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, recorded their sayings. There were 120 "abbas" or fathers and 3 "ammas" or mothers in this work, including Theodora, Syncletica, and Sarah. The monastic life, characterized by

celibacy, physical discipline, and withdrawal from the world created the environment for “spiritual transformation” (Stewart 372). These desert monks had a two-fold life: 1) personal spiritual discipline (solitude) and 2) the sharing of prayers, advice, and the Eucharist (community). Thus they had two criteria: love for God and love for other people. Besides ascetic disciplines, these monks pursued Bible study, fasting, and the communal celebration of the Eucharist. Although these desert monks did not have rules themselves, Saint Benedict and the subsequent founders of Irish monasticism drew much of their rules from these early fathers. Columba Stewart says of them, “The fundamental practices of night-time vigil, regular times of prayer, manual labor, a single daily meal in mid-afternoon, and abstaining from meat were common” (372).

These early Christians felt compelled to reject even a “Christian State” for the solitude of the desert. Thomas Merton says in the introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert* that these people believed that “To leave the world is in fact, to help save it in saving oneself” (23). Note the similarity to Aelfric and Mary. Aelfric was attempting to institute his idea of a Christian social and political order; Mary rejected all social and political structures. These Desert Fathers and Mothers were leaving behind the temporal, worldly Body of Christ for the “spiritual and extramundane mystical Body of Christ” (Merton 4). This order of the desert was characterized by what Victor Turner calls liminality. Liminality will be addressed in greater depth later in this thesis. For now, note that one of the salient features of liminality is a genuine feeling of spiritual egalitarianism between fellow participants in a community. Merton says, “The society [the Desert Fathers] sought was one where all men were truly equal, where the only authority under God was the charismatic authority of wisdom, experience, and love” (5).

Antony of Egypt, circa 250-356 C.E. was the first and most important of these Desert Fathers and Mothers. The *Life of Antony* was written by Athanasius, the “controversial and frequently exiled bishop of Alexandria,” (Gregg 1) shortly after Antony’s death in 356 C.E.. The *Life of Antony* was proto-typical in two ways: Antony himself was the proto-type of the desert hermit and *Life of Antony* was the proto-type of the saint’s life, or *vita*. It was originally written in Greek, but soon translated into Latin. Antony was not the first person to retire from a secular life to live an ascetic one, but was nevertheless a seminal figure in

monasticism. Robert C. Gregg comments on Antony's spiritual influence: "...the prominent features of Antony's regimen have become integral elements in the definition of ascetic piety" (7). Although in *Life of Antony*, a young Antony meets men who have already withdrawn from worldly life to pursue spiritual matters, Antony seems to have been the first to go into the desert to pursue this spiritual life. Gregg states: "Antony's distinctive contribution to the development of asceticism was his transfer of the monastic life from the periphery of established communities to the barren and isolated setting of a hermitage and indeed Athanasius remarks that before [Antony] 'no monk knew at all the great desert'" (8). Gregg further states, "There is no reason to doubt Antony's reputation as such a pioneer, nor to doubt that this marked a new epoch in Christian experience" (9).

Athanasius's *Life of Antony* was a truly seminal text. It drew upon both Biblical antecedents and Classical models to produce a new genre: the saints life, or vita. Biblical precursors to *Life of Antony* include the temptation stories of the Gospels and "the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, and the angels" (Gregg 4). The Classical precursors of *Life of Antony* include Greek and Latin tales of heroes and sages such as *Life of Pythagoras*, the *Life of Apollinius of Tyana*, by Philostratus, the *Life of Plotinus*, by Porphyry, and the *Life of King Agesilaus*, by Xenophon. So *Life of Antony* had dual bases and dual appeals: the Christian and the Classical. Gregg describes both: the Classical aspect is "the profile of the sophos, or wise man and...the ancient Greek ideal of self-sufficiency" (6). The Christian aspect is described as "a radical definition of Christian identity and purpose" (6). Gregg states that, "By the standards of the Classical World, the *Life of Antony* was an immediate literary sensation" (2). He further states that, "Within a few decades the *Life of Antony* had won acclaim not only among Greek speaking Christians in the eastern Mediterranean, but also among Latin Christians in Gaul and Italy" (3). Coming from these Biblical and Classical antecedents, the *Life of Antony* went on to become the template of the medieval saints' life.

The idea of the desert is rich with symbolism. First of all is the distinction between the desert and the city. This is a binary that has existed since the time of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. As mentioned, the men and women who retired to the desert did not feel that they were abandoning the world, but taking

the first step to redeeming it, seeking redemption for their own souls. Furthermore, even the anchorites such as Antony would meet on Saturday for fellowship and Sunday for the sacrament of the Eucharist. The desert was a place of solitude, open space, and being with God, while the city was a place of people, decadence, and worldly attachments. Put another way, the desert is characterized by both purity and danger, the opportunity for encountering God and the threat of facing the devil. A person living in the world must live with other people; a person living in the desert must live with herself. The *Life of Antony* vividly brings to life the dangerous part of living alone. For much of Antony's time alone in the desert, he does battle with demons. These can be thought of as internal conflicts with attachments that interfere with unencumbered access to God. It took Mary of Egypt seventeen years in the desert to stop thinking about sex, fish, and lascivious songs.

The desert may also represent the nadir of the spiritual journey, a sense of starting over, the chance for being filled with God because one has emptied himself. We can think of Jesus on the cross or St. Theresa's dark night of the soul. There were many protagonists who confronted God and themselves in the desert: Moses, Elijah, David, the nation of Israel, John and Baptist and Jesus Himself. Luke 4:1-13 describes Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, an analog of the desert:

And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the

Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: And in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. And when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season (*Authorized King James Version*).

The movie *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, has John the Baptist saying to Jesus before His foray in the desert, “The God of Israel is the God of the desert. If you want to speak to Him, you’ll have to go to the desert. Be careful, God isn’t alone out there.” The desert in *Life of Mary* is a place of both sanctuary and potential. Concerning the practice of the monks as the monastery by the Jordan River during Lent to wander in the desert, the text states, “[Each monk] united himself with God in the desert” (71). This is the definition of mysticism. The text also mentions the “inner desert.” After Mary’s discourse with Zosimus, it reads, “Speaking thus, she also asked for a prayer from the old man, and rapidly hastened into the inner desert” (105). Towards the end of *Life of Mary*, the lion which miraculously appeared to dig Mary’s grave is described as “heading into the inner desert, just like the gentlest lamb” (119). This “inner desert” is symbolic for a place of intimate meeting with God. It is analogous to the “inner mountain” (Athanasius 68) in *Life of Antony*. In this work, when Antony desires to be alone, he retires to his inner mountain.

Although I do not specifically use Andrew Scheil’s ideas to develop my argument, he is worth noting here since there are very few scholars on Mary of Egypt. For Scheil, *Life of Mary* is about identities. In his article, “Bodies and Boundaries in the Old English *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*,” he describes a hermeneutical circle of the known and the unknown, the readers’ expectations and the textual silences. He assigned the term “male ascetic body” to Zosimus and the term “female sexual body” to Mary. He says, “The ascetic male body is whole, unitary and inviolate, the female sexual body is ambiguous and

infectious” (144). Again, we are forced to look at the figure of Mary and determine the effect her character has on the reader. Scheil says that Mary’s indeterminacy “unsettles the reader, forcing an interpretation that moves against the currents of expectation” (142). Scheil also uses this perspective to examine a fundamental role reversal in *Life of Mary*: Zosimus, the male, is the seeker petitioning Mary, the female, the spiritual authority. Scheil states, “Paradoxically the masculine ascetic body [Zosimus] seeks a mentor in his quest for self-denial, contradicting the impulse towards solitude and silence” (140). Scheil sees the desert as having intrinsic meaning similar to that discussed above, specifically assigning the Jordan River to be a boundary between civilization and the desert. In this scheme Jordan is a liminal space. Scheil goes on to say, “In a broader sense, boundaries and liminal topography structure the entire narrative of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*” (144). So Scheil sees the issues of boundaries and liminal space as being fundamental to the characters roles of Zosimus and Mary. Combining the ideas of Andrew Scheil and Victor Turner, who postulates that liminality is characterized by an egalitarian fellowship based on shared experience, the liminal region of the Jordan River and monastery by it, the boundary between the city and the desert, would be a place of a true meeting of souls.

This thesis consists of five chapters. This first chapter has given background material, previewed the literature I will use, outlined my approach, and introduced some scholarship on the subject. The second chapter establishes what I call the Aelfrician model. This idea is based on the work of Hugh Magennis and Jane Stevenson. Magennis argues that for several reasons *Life of Mary*, while being included in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*, is antithetical to Aelfric’s ethos. I get the idea of reciprocation between opposite principles from Stevenson. I also look at the work of Elaine Pagels, who, although she does not write about Mary of Egypt, describes a somewhat parallel situation in the early Christian church. I find her opposition of Peter and Mary Magdalen in the early Christian Church an analog for Zosimus and Mary of Egypt (though Peter and Mary Magdalen were antagonistic while Zosimus and Mary of Egypt were mutually supportive). There are other similarities between Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalen, such as the shared name and the so-called “vita eremitica” of Mary Magdalen, which was partially based on the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*.

The third chapter addresses the binary of community/solitude. Establishing this dichotomy is important to my argument that the Aelfrician model emphasizes community while the non-Aelfrician model emphasizes the solitary. This chapter develops these ideas in depth and concludes with a close reading of *Life of Mary* from the standpoint of community and solitude. First, I establish that, in religions generally, and in Christianity in particular, there are inherently two poles, that of community and that of solitude. As opposed to a religion such as Judaism, in which community is primary, and a religion such as Buddhism, in which the individual is primary, Christianity places emphasis on both the salvation of the individual through a relationship with Jesus Christ, and membership in the community of believers, the Church (especially in Catholicism and Orthodoxy). I next introduce the anthropological theories of Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Victor Turner. Eliade addresses rites of passage, death and resurrection, and archetypes. Campbell elaborates the idea of rites of passage into his idea of the universal hero's journey. He also has some insightful ideas concerning the way of the solitary and the way of the group. He also postulates that the hero must return to share her boon with the larger community. Victor Turner also begins with the three stages of the rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. However, he looks in depth at the middle stage, transition. He suggests that this middle stage is characterized by liminality and *communitas*. Turner's idea of *communitas* bolsters my concept of community. I then do a close reading of the text *Life of Mary* examining how Zosimus represents the Christian community and Mary represents the solitary mystic.

Chapter four addresses the binary of patriarchy/proto-feminism. First I examine the older Christian model of female chastity, that of the continent married or widowed woman. Then, I look at the relatively newer model of the dedicated virgin. I then explore the relationship between patriarchy and an emphasis on virginity. Next I look at the theology of Aelfric and the English Benedictine Reformers and how this relates to patriarchy. Then I address female gender roles in late antiquity and what I call proto-feminism. Last I do a close reading of *Life of Mary* from the standpoint of patriarchy and proto-feminism.

The last chapter is a conclusion. The conclusion includes a recapitulation of the main points of the thesis. I also examine some of the implications and questions that some of my ideas, particularly that there

may have been a faction of women, married clergy, and lay people who felt disenfranchised by the English Benedictine Reform Movement. A group such as this would thus be motivated to include a vita such as the *Life of Mary*, which appears contrary to the principles of the Reformers, in a copy of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*.

Chapter Two

The Aelfrician Model

The idea of the Aelfrician model, and thus the non-Aelfrician model, is crucial to my argument. It is based primarily on the work of Hugh Magennis, as found in the introduction he wrote to the *Life of Mary* and his article, “St. Mary of Egypt and Aelfric: Unlikely bedfellows in Cotton Julius E. vii?” contained in *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, edited by Erich Poppe and Bianca Ross. I use his theories to establish that the ethos portrayed in the character of Mary of Egypt, in, of course, *Life of Mary*, is directly antithetical to Aelfric’s ethos in two distinct ways: The character of Mary represents solitude, whereas Zosimus privileges community. Further, the character of Mary represents proto-feminism whereas Aelfric was very patriarchal. If we call emphasis on community and patriarchy the Aelfrician model, then it follows that an emphasis on solitude and proto-feminism would be the non-Aelfrician model. My thesis also rests on the work of Jane Stevenson and, to a lesser extent Elaine Pagels. Stevenson’s article, “The Holy Sinner: The life of Mary of Egypt,” also in *The Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*, establishes the principle of a complementary relationship between two opposites. I use this idea by arguing that the Aelfrician model and the non-Aelfrician model are complementary, or mutually supportive. Pagels, in the *Gnostic Gospels*, describes a relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalen that I find analogous to Zosimus and Mary of Egypt. I finish this chapter by looking at other ways Mary Magdalen is relevant to my overall discussion.

First I will address the textual differences between *Life of Mary* and the writings of Aelfric. As stated, *Life of Mary* is contained in the Cotton Julius manuscript of Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*, but Magennis strongly believes that it was not written by or condoned by Aelfric. He argues that *Life of Mary* varies from Aelfric’s vitae “both in its linguistic usage and in its approach to translation” (101). For one thing, *Life of Mary* does not use the Winchester vocabulary commonly found in Aelfric’s writings. Also, *Life of Mary* is a much more literal translation than those found in Aelfric’s writings. Another point is that *Life of Mary* is an unabridged translation of the Latin precursor. Aelfric typically abridged his translations from Latin to

Old English and would seek to be true to the spirit of the translation rather than giving a literal rendition.

Magennis's last argument based on textual differences is that *Life of Mary* avoids the "kind of emotive and explanatory additions that Aelfric provides" (101).

Magennis's second argument that *Life of Mary* was not written by Aelfric is that Aelfric privileged the communal over the solitary. Specifically, he says, "The form of monastic spirituality celebrated in the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* is a rigorously ascetic and contemplative one" (104). Magennis contrasts this with Aelfric's penchant for the communal: "The celebration of such a life of asceticism and solitude, however, provides a radical contrast with the attitude to spirituality revealed in the other hagiographical texts in the *Lives of Saints* manuscript and in the writings of Aelfric in general" (105). Magennis states that Aelfric typically "[cultivates] a cenobitic rather than eremitical ideal of monasticism" (105), and that Aelfric's ideal "incorporates an active and pastoral dimension" (105). In contrast, Magennis states that in *Life of Mary* "there is an insistent emphasis on the themes of solitude and mortification of the body" (104). Mary does not even observe the minimal convention of communal life, wearing clothes. Magennis further alludes to the stark dichotomy present between *Life of Mary* and Aelfric's model: "Indeed, throughout Aelfric's writings, the monastery is seen primarily not as a place for individual contemplation, but as a community" (105). Aelfric's predilection for the communal over the solitary extends to men as well as women. For example, in Aelfric's vitae he omits lives of the Desert Fathers (and Mothers) and English hermits such as Guthlac. Aelfric does include Cuthbert, but focuses on the miracles and preaching that he did as opposed to contemplation.

Magennis's third argument that Aelfric did not write *Life of Mary* is that Aelfric was not only patriarchal, but included only steadfast virgins in his vitae about women. Aelfric's emphasis on patriarchy is linked to his efforts to reform society. Magennis states, "Aelfric [was] interested in developing in late Anglo-Saxon England a highly organized Christian society" (107). Magennis links Aelfric to the "Winchester" reformers, a Benedictine reform movement led, in England by, among others, Bishop Aethelwold of Winchester. Aelfric was a student and cohort of Aethelwold. According to Magennis, these churchmen were "constructing an ideology of an ordered theocratic society" (107). It is clear that this

Christian order was to be controlled by men. Someone like Mary, a female with spiritual authority, threatened that order. In general, women “were supposedly under the authority of a male hierarchy” (Magennis 107). Aelfric’s preference for men over women is demonstrated in his female saints, such as Eugenia, who become like men. Eugenia and other female saints included in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints* will be addressed later in this thesis. Magennis adds, “Aelfric’s writings reveal a discomfort at the idea of female Christina authority” (107). He elaborates, “In [Aelfric’s] lives of female saints, Aelfric is careful to avoid the suggestion of holy women infringing Christian male authority” (107).

Not only was Mary of Egypt a threat to the patriarchal order that Aelfric and the Benedictine Reformers were attempting to establish, she was a so-called harlot saint (strictly speaking she was rather a nymphomaniac since she did not receive remuneration for her sexual favors). According to Magennis, “For Aelfric, only virgins merit the highest reward of the ‘hundredfold fruit’ in the next life...and in his lives of female saints he confines his attention exclusively to virgins” (109). Magennis goes on to state that this “exclusion of other kinds of holy women from his personal ‘canon’ is evidenced throughout his work” (109). I later link this preference for female virgins with a patriarchal world view. In Aelfric, “Conversion and repentance are not major preoccupations in Aelfric’s saints’ lives” (Magennis 103). However, Mary’s story is essentially that, conversion and repentance. Magennis says that, “Rather than describing experiences of enlightenment or recognition on the part of his saints, Aelfric celebrates ‘achieved sanctity,’ unchanging and unchangeable” (103). In contrast to Mary, Aelfric’s female saints are “asexual beings unaffected by carnality” (Magennis 109). This narrow focus on female virgins excluded not only Mary of Egypt, but various widows, martyrs, and women such as Mary Magdalen. Aelfric’s female saints are “usually young girls, whose minds are impervious to temptation” (109). Magennis comments that, “To the writer of the *Life*, Mary is particularly admirable because she has come so far...from the enslavement of sexual appetite to spiritual perfection” (109).

Jane Stevenson is another scholar featured in the *Legend of Mary of Egypt in Medieval Insular Hagiography*. She contributes the article, “The Holy Sinner: The Life of Mary of Egypt.” Among other things in this article, she discerns a mutually cooperative (rather than antagonistic) relationship between the

characters of Zosimus and Mary. She then asserts that Mary and Zosimus embody two different strands of the Christian Church at the time that *Life of Mary* was written. She then extrapolates that the personal harmony between Mary and Zosimus represents a mutual interweaving of these two strands of Christianity. First, she describes the personal relationship: “This story, which intertwines the lives of Mary and Zosimus to their mutual advantage represents them as not oppositional, but mutually supporting” (22). This is clear in the text of *Life of Mary*. Zosimus has been directed by an angel to find a spiritual master in the trans-Jordan desert. Perhaps he expected a man, but instead he found Mary. Zosimus is deferential to Mary in his language. He frequently addresses her as “Mother” or “longed for sight.” He even weeps at her feet. Mary respects Zosimus’s role as priest or bishop, at times reminding him of his office. Stevenson describes Zosimus’s personality before finding Mary as “narrow, innocent, and smug” (22). She states, “For Zosimus is a bishop...a power within Christian communities” (22). Stevenson uses the phrase “for all her solitude” (23) to describe Mary. She then extends the argument from the characters Zosimus and Mary to the social bodies they represent:

In the world of the sixth century, there was a considerable tension, which had existed since the Peace of the Church, between the wild, God-possessed saints who fled into the desert for a life of superhuman asceticism focused only on God, and the orderly life of the established church run by bishops to whom this-worldly concepts such as careers, endowments, and politics, and (let it be said) pastoral responsibility continued to mean a great deal (22).

Last, Stevenson refers to the “exquisitely careful balancing act by [the] author [of *Life of Mary*]” (23) in making these two possibly antithetical religious attitudes mutually complementary. My own idea is that Zosimus derives his authority from the community, the church, and Mary derives her authority from a solitary encounter with God.

Elaine Pagels describes a similar opposition such as that between Zosimus and Mary of Egypt in the early Church between Peter and Mary Magdalen; however, in this instance Peter and Mary Magdalen

and the strands of Christianity they represent are antagonistic rather than complementary. Pagel's work shows that the dichotomy inherent in *Life of Mary* between an intuitive understanding of God and the established Church had existed since the foundational period of Christianity. In my thinking, Zosimus is analogous to Peter and Mary of Egypt is analogous to Mary Magdalen. Mary Magdalen was also known as a harlot-saint, although this part of her story, according to Katherine Ludwig Jansen, was fabricated by Pope Gregory the Great. Likewise to Mary of Egypt, Mary Magdalen is totally absent in Aelfric's work. Mary Magdalen plays a crucial role in the New Testament: She is cured of possession by a demon by Jesus. She is one of Jesus' most loyal followers. She is present at the crucifixion of Jesus. She brings ointment to Jesus' tomb, and (in three gospels) she is the first to see the risen Lord. Finally, she has the privilege of announcing the resurrection of Jesus to the disciples. Mary Magdalen was so important in the Gospels that Augustine attributed the salvation of humanity to her as well as the Virgin Mary (as Augustine attributed the fall of humanity to Eve).

Besides their respective relationships with Zosimus and Peter, Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalen share a common name. In the early Middle Ages names were considered to have inherent meaning which reflected the character so named. St. Jerome noted that "Mary" means "illuminator," or "illuminated one," or perhaps "drop of the sea" (Jansen 20). Based on Mary Magdalen's importance to the New Testament, as noted above, it is evident that she could be said to have "illuminated" the Gospels or have been especially "illuminated" by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Mary of Egypt "illuminated" Zosimus with her spiritual knowledge or was also "illuminated" by the Holy Spirit. A synonym for "illuminated" is "enlightened." Zosimus notes that, when Mary of Egypt knew his name presciently, "[Mary] had been enlightened with divine foreknowledge" (75). Zosimus continues, "In this above all divine love is manifest in you that you called me by my name, whom you had never seen before" (77). Of course, Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalen share the same name as the Virgin Mary. So, on the same principle, Mary of Egypt (and Mary Magdalen) could be said to have similar attributes to Jesus' mother, such as compassion and forgiveness. The Virgin Mary is notable for her role as a intercessor. Indeed, that is the role that she performed for Mary of Egypt in the courtyard of the church in Jerusalem hosting the Feast of the Cross. Zosimus prays for Mary

of Egypt to intercede for him: “Intercede for me now, you who have been made dead to the world with regard to the concerns of youth” (77).

The vitae of Mary of Egypt and Mary Magdalen are also related. After 313 C.E., when Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, it became more difficult to be martyred. So the written accounts of the deaths of martyrs came to be replaced by the lives of confessor saints. Vitae became popular, recounting the heroic deeds of saints. Mary Magdalen’s first vita is known as the “vita eremitica,” written in the ninth century in southern Italy. This vita eremitica of Mary Magdalen was conflated with the vita of Mary of Egypt, perhaps because both were considered to be harlot-saints. The vita eremitica of Mary Magdalen recounts that after the ascension of the Lord, Magdalen fled to the desert where she lived as a hermit for 30 years without food or clothing. This obviously parallels Mary of Egypt, who, as a penitent, fled to the desert and lived solitarily for decades without food or clothing. Obviously, the desert figures in both the *Life of Mary* and the vita eremitica of Mary Magdalen. Here, the desert symbolizes a place of meeting, away from the city, with both purity and danger. The purity aspect is the possibility of encountering God; the danger aspect is the chance of facing Satan, or one’s own temptations.

Elaine Pagels describes in the *Gnostic Gospels* an analogous relationship to Zosimus and Mary in the early Church. She describes a traditional, institutional, Catholic/Orthodox branch of the early Church, exemplified by Peter, and a mystical, prophetic, Gnostic branch exemplified by Mary Magdalen. However, whereas, as we have seen in the work of Jane Stevenson and my own arguments, the relationship between Zosimus and Mary was reciprocal and cooperative, Pagels posits that the relationship between Peter and Mary Magdalen was oppositional. As indicated by the title of her book, Pagels’s work in this volume concentrates on the Gnostic Gospels. These offer us a broader perspective than that of the canonical Gospels alone. Of course, the canonical Gospels are undergirded by the Catholic/Orthodox theology while the Gnostic Gospels are undergirded by Gnostic theology. In particular, the *Gnostic Gospel of Mary [Magdalen]* demonstrates the conflict between the Catholic/Orthodox faction of the early Church and the Gnostic faction of the early Church through the personal rivalry between Peter and Mary Magdalen. Pagels states in relation to a prophetic vision that Mary Magdalen has experienced concerning the risen Lord,

“Peter, apparently representing the Orthodox position, looks to the past suspicious of those who see the Lord in visions...Mary, representing the Gnostic, claims to experience his continuing presence” (15-16). This gives some evidence that, at least in Christianity, there had been a fundamental dichotomy between a traditional, institutional side of the religion and a mystical, experiential side of the religion since the days of the early Church.

Peter can also be seen as representing a patriarchal attitude and Mary Magdalen a proto-feminist attitude. Likewise, the Orthodox/Catholic branch of Christianity can be seen as patriarchal while the Gnostic branch of Christianity can be seen as proto-feminist. Pagels describes the rivalry between the Orthodox/Catholic and the Gnostic camps in early Christianity: “Gnosticism, with its emphasis on personal inspiration, inevitably came into conflict with the institutional church, whose insistence on tradition and hierarchy allowed the Gnostic sects no quarter” (24). Gnosticism was a sect of early Christianity that placed emphasis on inner, spiritual revelation, or “gnosis”. In contrast with the Orthodox/Catholic faction, the Gnostic faction employed some feminine language in describing the Deity, which followed through to political attitudes. Pagels states, “In simplest form, many Gnostic Christians correlate their description of God in both masculine and feminine terms with a complementary description of human nature” (79). She then explores the political consequences of that theological attitude: “Gnostic Christians often take the principle of equality between men and women into the social and political structures of their communities...We can see, then, two very different patterns of sexual attitudes emerging in Orthodox and Gnostic circles” (79). Pagels then links these gender issues with the characters of Mary Magdalen and Peter: “Other secret [Gnostic] texts use the figure of Mary Magdalen to suggest that women’s activity challenged the leaders of the Orthodox community, who regarded Peter as their spokesman” (77). We could suggest that Mary of Egypt, though, as far as we know, orthodox in her theology, echoes the Gnostic side of Christianity that existed in the early Church. It also suggests that there was a side of early Christianity that did not exclusively conceive of God in masculine terms. Perhaps people such as Mary of Egypt were drawing on this dormant aspect inherent in the religion.

Chapter Three

Community and Solitude

Having elaborated my idea of the Aelfrician model, I will address the binary of community/solitude. I argue that in religions in general there are two basic poles: the community and the individual. In religions such as Buddhism, the individual is primary, while in religions such as Judaism, the community is primary. In Christianity, there is equal emphasis on the solitary person and the communal group (at least in Catholicism and Orthodoxy). Somewhat akin to Buddhism, the salvation of the individual is important. However, at least in Catholicism, membership in the Church, “God’s instrument on Earth” is paramount. The God of the Hebrew Bible has a pact with the Jewish nation. If one thinks of salvation, one thinks of the salvation of Israel. Jesus Christ has a pact with the individual believer; He saves the person, not the group. This is especially the case of Protestantism. Membership in a social group does not save the person; private faith saves a person. Then a Church is simply a voluntary association of like-minded believers. In Catholicism, however, there is more or less equal emphasis on the individual and the group. Jesus saves the individual person, but membership in the Church, effected by Baptism, is necessary for this salvation. This is the reason excommunication was (and is) such a terrible thing; it cuts the person off from the Church. These dual aspects of the individual and the community in Christianity are fundamental to my ideas of solitude and community in *Life of Mary*. I argue, based on the above, that there is an inherent division in Christianity between the aspects of solitude and community

Next I look at the anthropological and religious theories of Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Victor Turner. These concepts shed light on the rites of passage inherent in *Life of Mary*, the journey of the hero, in our case Mary of Egypt, and aspects of community and solitude relevant to my argument. Fundamental to the theories of all three of these thinkers is the idea of the rite of passage. A rite of passage consists of three stages: separation, initiation, and reintegration. Arnold van Gennep first expounded this concept in his book *les Rites de Passage* (published in French in 1909, translated to English in 1960). Examples of rites of passage include birth rites, and rites of puberty, marriage, and death. For Eliade, these

rites of passage allow the pre-modern, religious person, whom Eliade calls “homo religiosus,” to participate in a wider cosmos. For Eliade, passage from one state to another is a universal religious trope: “initiation, death, mystical ecstasy, absolute knowledge, faith...are equivalent to passage from one mode of being to another” (*Sacred and Profane* 181). Frequently, this ontological threshold is accompanied by a physical threshold. Passage from a mundane reality into a sacred reality is symbolized by crossing a door into a church, mosque, temple, etc. Eliade continues, “Each of [the rites of passage] always involves an initiation, for each of them implies a radical change in ontological and social status” (*Sacred and Profane* 184).

An important concept in Eliade’s work is that the rites that humans perform were instituted by divine beings. According to Eliade, “Every ritual has a divine model as an archetype” (*Myth of the Eternal Return* 21). He states in another book, “Initiation rites, entailing ordeals and symbolic death and resurrection, were instituted by gods, culture heroes, or mythical ancestors” (*Sacred and Profane* 187). This statement makes two points. First, all initiation rites, common to all societies except perhaps modern secular society, involve symbolic death and resurrection. Second, these rites gain potency because they were instituted in *illo tempore* (Eliade’s phrase) by gods, heroes, or first ancestors. For Eliade, this repetition of divine archetypes has two principle results: “By imitating the gods, man remains in the sacred, hence in reality” (*Sacred and Profane* 99) and “By the continuous reactualization of paradigmatic divine gestures, the world is sanctified” (*Sacred and Profane* 99). Eliade cites John Chrysostom concerning the metaphor of immersion in water, or baptism: “This symbolism [of immersion in water] is admirably expressed by John Chrsystem (Homil. In Joh., xxv, 2) who, writing of the multivalence of baptism says, ‘It represents death and burial, life and resurrection...when we plunge our heads into the water as a sepulcher, the old man is immersed, buried wholly, when we come out of the water, the new man appears at the same time’” (*Sacred and Profane* 133). Mary of Egypt had such a “death/resurrection” experience resembling baptism at the crux of her journey, immediately after her conversion and before her retirement to the trans-Jordan desert. She describes her experience: “...I descended into the Jordan and washed my hands and face with the holy water, and I partook in the life-saving and undefiled sacrament of our Lord Saviour Christ in

that same church of the holy precursor and Baptist John..." (95-7). This is the lynchpin of her journey, the point of passage from the city to the desert. It gives meaning to her story.

Joseph Campbell bases his central idea in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, that of the hero's journey, upon the rite of passage. As a structuralist, Campbell believed that myths across all cultures and all times are essentially the same. Thus Campbell refers to "separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (30). For Campbell, rites of passage serve to take the people undergoing the ceremony from the "attitudes, attachments and life patterns" (10) of the old identity to the "forms and proper feelings" (10) of the new identity. When the person undergoing the rite of passage returns to regular life (back to the community) he will be "as good as reborn" (10). We can see here a pattern of the hero making a solitary journey, gaining divine wisdom, and coming back to the community to share this knowledge. For Joseph Campbell, the hero, which can be any and all of us, has the "difficult, dangerous task of self-discovery and self-development" (23). Campbell further states the practical function of myth realized by the rites of passage: "The tribal ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, installation, and so forth, serve to translate the individual's life-crises and life-deeds into" (383) supra-individual archetypes.

In Campbell, both the way of the solitary and the way of the group lead to the same realization of the basic human paradigm symbolized by myth. Campbell echoes Emile Durkheim when he states that, "Rites of initiation and installation, then, teach the lesson of the essential oneness of the individual and the group" (384). For most people, by participating in the social life and rites of the group the individual is assimilated to the human archetype. "But there is another way," states Campbell, "in diametric opposition to that of social duty and the popular cult" (385). That is the way of the individual hero who embarks on his own quest to find the universal Truth. From the point of view of the group and the way of social duty, the "exile from the community is nothing" (385). However, from the point of view of the individual hero who rejects traditional group identity, this "exile is the first step of the quest" (385). Therefore, in Campbell there is the way of the solitary hero and the way of group identity, both leading to a realization of the

essential human nature. Mary of Egypt, as a penitent hermit in the desert, follows the way of the individual. Aelfric's model, based on community, follows the way of the group.

The individual that takes the solitary path to self-realization is Campbell's "hero." Mary of Egypt is such a hero. As noted above, Campbell was a structuralist. His basic idea in a *Hero With a Thousand Faces* is that of the monomyth—the paradigmatic "hero's journey," having the same essential parts regardless of context or time period. While this idea could be extremely reductionist, obviating the significance of real cultural differences and contexts, Campbell's work does shed some light onto certain aspects of the *Life of Mary*. A salient example of a hero's journey is that of Shakyamuni, the Buddha. First he left his princely life to pursue a quest for Enlightenment. He then obtained Enlightenment, or Nirvana; however, if his story had ended with his attainment of Nirvana, no one would know his teachings. Crucial to the hero's journey, he had to return to the world to share his boon (Campbell's term). Likewise, if Mary of Egypt had not returned to the world (through Zosimus) her spiritual wisdom would never have been known by anyone other than herself. This highlights Zosimus's function as an agent of the community, forcing Mary to reintegrate to the community and share her boon. As the future Buddha left his princely life in order to find Enlightenment, Mary left behind her life of promiscuity in order to become a penitent saint in the desert. But, just as it was the will of the gods that Buddha should return to the world to share his wisdom, it was evidently God's plan (an angel directed Zosimus to find Mary) that Zosimus find Mary in the trans-Jordan desert. The text of *Life of Mary* states that Mary "was filled with the spiritual mysteries within the temple"(93). This is analogous to Campbell's mysterious spiritual adventure or the gaining of the boon. Zosimus can be seen as the community forcing Mary, the solitary saint, to return to the world to share her knowledge. So Mary gives Zosimus, and by extension the other monks at his monastery, and then the readers of *Life of Mary*, the boon of true spiritual teaching.

As evidence of her intimate knowledge of God, Mary demonstrates miraculous powers. The first time Zosimus encounters Mary, she levitates: "[Zosimus] swore, proposing God as witness of his words, that while [Mary] continued thus with her prayer, he raised his eyes a little from the ground to see her elevated just the height of a man's forearm above the ground, and she began to pray hanging in the air"

(81). The second time Zosimus encounters Mary, she walks on water: “[Mary] blessed the waters of the Jordan with the sign of the cross of Christ...she plunged the sign of the cross into the waters. Thus she made her way towards [Zosimus] on top of the soft waves” (111).

Arnold van Gennep’s original model of the rite of passage outlined in his book, *les Rites de Passage* (published in French in 1909, translated to English in 1960) is separation → transition → incorporation, or, put as another way, preliminal → liminal → postliminal. Victor Turner, his book *the Ritual Process* (first published in 1969), elaborates van Gennep’s original model. He extends the process of preliminal → liminal → postliminal to structure → anti-structure → structure. The structured phase is analogous to *gesellschaft*, a sociological term for a system of social relationships characterized by rationally developed, impersonal exchanges. The unstructured phase is analogous to *gemeinschaft*, a sociological term for a system of social relationships characterized by strong feelings of kinship, sentiment, and shared traditions. Turner sees these two opposites as the two sides of the same coin, though. Neither structure nor anti-structure can exist in the absence of the other. Turner concentrates especially on the middle stage of the rite of passage, the liminal. He echoes Campbell in describing the socialization function of the hero’s journey or the rite of passage: he states that the persons undergoing a rite of passage submit to “an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community” (Turner 103). Liminality has another aspect, though; it is often a period of ordeals, trials, and humiliations. As sex is a social function, various social sexual practices accord with these different states. Therefore, certain sexual practices (or lack of practices) characterize the preliminal and the postliminal on one hand, and the liminal on the other hand. Sexual practices such as sex in marriage participate in the structure or order of ordinary society, and thus typify the preliminal and the postliminal stages. In contrast, free love and celibacy, which are outside the normal structures of social relationships, typify the liminal stage.

Victor Turner uses the phrase “*communitas*” to describe the close, egalitarian fellowship that cohorts often feel going through the trials, ordeals, or tests of the liminal stage. *Communitas* is thus the sense of community that participants feel when going through the middle stage. It is characterized by a spontaneous, immediate relatedness. Peter Brown says that “All over the Mediterranean area, the controlled

liminality of pilgrimage allowed women to experience, for long periods of time, the heartening freedom of the desert” (272). This means that, through pilgrimage, women could experience true religious fellowship. So in structure (the preliminal and the postliminal), there are legal, political, and economic relationships; in *communitas* (the liminal) there are unstructured, egalitarian bonds between people based on shared religious experience. The word “*communitas*” is obviously related to the word “community.” To experience *communitas* implies a sharing of a sense of community. The question arises, “Can one experience *communitas* with God while one is alone?” Mary of Egypt could be said to have had a connectedness to God while in the desert alone. Mary of Egypt certainly shares *communitas* with Zosimus in the desert. We have seen, from the works of Eliade, Campbell, and Turner, that theories extending from the idea of a rite of passage show that both the way of solitude and the way of community can lead to an attainment of essential human nature. Both solitude and community are necessary for religion, then, and they are complementary aspects of the whole.

These two poles, community and solitude, are manifest in the characters of Zosimus and Mary. Zosimus is characterized by community and Mary is characterized by solitude. Zosimus is very much a creature of the cenobitic monastery. This is true during his time at his original monastery and his time at the monastery on the Jordan River. It is true that Zosimus is an accomplished ascetic. That is one reason why he has been directed to go to this new monastery on the Jordan River. Zosimus excels all others at asceticism, but has grown complacent. He has been directed to find a spiritual master in the desert (whom he thinks will be a man) so he can learn of other ways to know God. Nevertheless, Zosimus has always lived in the company of other monks. That is why, in comparison to Mary, who is a total hermit, Zosimus represents the Christian community.

Zosimus came to his first monastery when he was very young. The text states, “This man [Zosimus] lived his life from the beginning in a monastery in Palestine” (61). As mentioned above, Zosimus excelled at asceticism. The text reads, “...in the works of abstinence he became the most accomplished in all the works of the monastery” (61). It goes on to say, “...from the time his mother gave

birth to him, and until his fifty-third year he remained there living by the rule” (63). It is clear that Zosimus is complacent, and even perhaps a little prideful; he wonders aloud:

Can it be that there is any monk on earth who can teach me anything new or help me in any matters that I myself do not know or that I myself have not perfected in monastic works, or is there anyone among those who love the desert who is superior to me in his actions? (63).

The text continues:

As he pondered these things and others like them, there stood by him an angel, and it said to him, ‘O, Zosimus, you have succeeded in a most praiseworthy manner. However, there is no person who may show himself perfect. Much greater is the struggle that lies ahead of you than that which has passed, though you do not know it. But in order that you may be able to perceive and understand how great are other paths to salvation, go out from your land and come to the monastery which is situated near the Jordan (63).

Once Zosimus travels to the monastery by the Jordan River, he explains his reason for coming to the abbot of the new monastery:

There is no need, father, for me to tell you where I have come from, but I have sought you out here for reasons of learning, because I have heard about many spiritual practices among you here, and they are beyond expression pleasing to God (65).

In contrast to Zosimus, Mary is a solitary hermit of the desert. She tells Zosimus, “So I came to this desert, and from then until this present day, I have kept apart, always fleeing away, waiting and hoping for God” (97). Another passage also alludes to Mary’s solitary status and association with the desert:

“Believe me, I have never seen any person except you, neither wild beast nor animal of any kind, since I crossed over the river Jordan and came here into this desert...” (103). Not only is Mary a hermit, she is a mystic. Although some scholars maintain that there was little esoteric mysticism in early desert

Christianity, there are clearly references in works such as the *Life of Antony* and in *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* to some kind of union with God or experience of spiritual mysteries. When Mary finally enters the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, she has a direct experience of the divine. She says, “So I was filled with the spiritual mysteries within the temple” (93). Similar wording is found in *Life of Antony*. Antony reappears after nearly twenty years of solitude as though he hadn’t lost a day. He was neither fat nor emaciated. Athanasius states, “Antony came forth as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God” (42). So we can see that Zosimus is associated with a cenobitic spirituality while Mary is associated with an eremitical spirituality of the desert.

There is a mutual interest between the solitary Mary and the community represented by Zosimus. Zosimus, and by extension the Christian community, needs the spiritual wisdom of Mary. Conversely, Mary shows concern for the larger community. If she doesn’t need the larger community, she at least care about it. Zosimus specifically petitions Mary to pray for the Church and for the world: “For God’s sake pray for the world and for me in my sinfulness, so that the toil of this journey and the path over so great a desert may not become fruitless to me” (79). Mary does show an interest in the world, the Church, and the government. She inquires of Zosimus, “Tell me how now today Christ’s people are ruled in this world and how the emperors are, or how the flock of Christ’s true-believing congregation are now looked after” (79).

In the ethos of early Christianity, the city and the desert were often opposed. The city represents civilization, decadence, and sinfulness, whereas the desert represents solitude, purity, and meeting with God. In the text of *Life of Mary*, the desert is associated with solitude. It is even symbolic of solitude and meeting with God. At one point the text says, “And when the end of his prayer had been completed, [Zosimus] then turned his eyes and really saw there a human being hastening westwards in the desert, and it was actually a woman that appeared there” (73). This is significant in two ways: it associates the desert with solitude (Mary is trying to be alone) and it shows that Mary is initially trying to avoid meeting any other person. As mentioned earlier, this confrontation of the solitary hero and her community is a stage in Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey. The enlightened hero does not necessarily want to return to the mundane world; sometimes, as in this case, the community must pursue the hero and force her to return to

the world to share her wisdom. At another point in the text, Mary “asked for a prayer from [Zosimus], and rapidly hastened to the inner desert” (105). This “inner desert” is symbolic of inner knowledge of or solitude with God. This is parallel to the “inner mountain” in *Life of Antony*. When Antony felt the pressure of so many people desiring his prayers, healing, and counsel, he retired to the inner mountain. Athanasius states, “. . . a certain voice came to [Antony] from above. . . if you truly desire to be alone, go now into the inner mountain” (68). At the end of *Life of Mary*, a tame lion miraculously appears to dig a tomb for Mary, who has died. The text states, “And [Zosimus and the lion] went away together, the lion heading into the inner desert, just like the gentlest lamb” (119). We can assume that the inner desert is the source of this miracle, and whence it will return. So we can see that Zosimus is associated with community and Mary with solitude. Since community is a quality evident in the Aelfrician model and solitude a quality evident in the non-Aelfrician model, Zosimus is associated with the Aelfrician model and Mary with the non-Aelfrician model. Further, the interest that Mary shows in the larger world, through the person of Zosimus, and the real need of Zosimus for the spiritual wisdom a solitary like Mary possesses, symbolize the reciprocal nature of the Aelfrician model and the non-Aelfrician model in the *Life of Mary*.

Men and women could be equals as martyrs. In Christianity, unlike in Judaism, women were considered the equal of men in manifold ways. Consider the different sexual roles for women in Judaism and Christianity.

Chapter Four

Patriarchy and Proto-feminism

Before the paradigm of the steadfast female virgin in Christianity, which Aelfric condoned, the model of the chaste Christian female was that of a continent married woman or a widow. Vibia Perpetua, a real woman and the mother of a child, represents the old ideal of chastity in widowhood, which included participating in normal social structures. She was also a famous martyr. The gender roles of women were significantly different between Christianity and its mother religion, Judaism. In Judaism, a good woman was a married woman. If a Jewish woman became a widow, she was encouraged to marry again. In Christianity, a widow would be encouraged to be continent. Of course, the population of Christian communities was supplied through sexual intercourse among the laity. The laity was also responsible with supplying the material wealth of the Church. The spiritual roles of women in Christianity were also different than that of Jewish women. The early Christian Church welcomed the material and spiritual contributions of women, unlike the Jewish community, which was dominated by men. Wealthy, influential, continent widows were both benefactresses and intelligent participants in the third century Church. So, in practice, in the third century, continent Christians were likely married or widowed, not virgins. Peter Brown states, "When Tertullian spoke of castitas, he did not mean virginity; he meant sexual activity whittled away to a minimum in marriage and abandoned totally after marriage" (149).

In the fourth century, the paradigm of the dedicated virgin girl began to supplant the previous paradigm of chastity in marriage and widowhood. The rise of the ideal of the steadfast virgin girl dedicated to the Church was contemporaneous with the acceptance and legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. While Christianity was persecuted in the Roman Empire, the ultimate expression of Christian devotion was martyrdom. This entailed following Jesus Christ, symbolically and actually, all the way to his death on the cross. Certainly by the time that Christianity was made the official religion in the Roman Empire, it became impossible to be martyred, unless one traveled to a foreign land. So those people seeking

to be spiritually elite had to look for other ways to express their devotion. This eventually led to desert hermits such as St. Antony and girls who were dedicated as virgins to Church.

The story of Thecla, the heroine of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, is a convenient marker for the end of the older Christian ideal of the married, or widowed, continent laity fully participating in normal social structures and the beginning of the dedicated virgin ideal of a believer not only not participating in the procreative process, but also rejecting involvement in normal social institutions. Beginning in the second and third centuries, Christianity produced a new literary genre, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Peter Brown states, “These Acts reveal to us a Christianity very different from that either of a Tertullian or of a Clement of Alexandria” (155). The Apocryphal Acts were typically based on the late classical Romance, having themes of impact and vocation. In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla is a heroic virgin girl who follows Paul on his travels. Thecla, who in contrast to Vibia Perpetua, was not a real woman, represents the new virgin ideal of the believer who forsakes all for Christ. Thecla obviously has amorous feelings for Paul, but these emotions are channeled into Christian love. The important thing is that Thecla gives up everything, not only sex, but family, marriage, motherhood, and non-religious vocation, in order to follow Jesus, which in her case was realized by following the apostle Paul.

By the fourth century, there were two models of virginity in the Christian Church: the bearded male hermit in the desert and the protected, controlled domestic girls (dedicated virgins). Peter Brown quotes the *Canons of Athanasius* as saying, “In every house of Christians, it is needful that there be a virgin, for the salvation of the whole house is that one virgin” (264). If the meaning of the word “household” is extrapolated to an entire community, that one virgin is then the salvation for that community. According to Brown, these Christian virgins had two messages for pagans. First, they were to shine the light of Christ through pure fixtures that would illuminate true religion. Second, they were a statement of the paradoxical inconsistency in Christianity which says that God instituted marriage yet reserves the highest praise for non-participants in creation.

These dedicated virgins did not choose their status. According to Peter Brown, “[Dedicated virgins] had grown up in households where the control of parents over the marital prospects of young adolescents in general, and of girls in particular, had remained absolute” (260). He goes on to state, “Such children were seldom free agents” (260). Whereas in the Graeco-Roman world extra children, particularly girls, who were less valued, could be exposed in infancy, Christian families did not have this option. Dedicating girls to the Church reduced dowry payments and similar expenses. These dedicated virgins led very sheltered lives. If these girls left the house at all, it was likely to attend church. According to Brown, many of these young girls had “grown from childhood untainted by profane public space” (277).

The phenomena of dedicate girl virgins is related to patriarchy. Patriarchy is based on the control of females by males. Dedicated virgins were controlled by bishops and male clergy, and symbols of these men’s power. In a patriarchal system such as this, a state of innocence is projected onto certain chosen females in order to absolve the controlling men from their own inherent sin. So the idealized state of another compensates for the non-ideal state of oneself. Brown discusses the “ritual humiliation” (259) that the dedicated virgins of the church of Alexandria experienced under the bishopric of Athanasius in the fourth century and how this affected Athanasius. Brown states, “Any attack on the virgins of the church was an attack on the status of the formidable Patriarch himself” (259-60). These virgin girls also represented the power of the Church as a whole: “Dedicated virgins...marked out, even more clearly than did the gold patens and chalices, the shimmering silks, and the translucent marbles of the fourth-century Christian sanctuaries, the arrival of the church as a permanent institution in the Roman world” (Brown 261-2). Brown comments on the importance of these virgin girls to male clergy: “Dedicated women came to be thought of as harboring a deposit of values that were prized, by their male spokesmen, as peculiarly precious to the Christian community” (263).

Aelfric, among others, was attempting to institute a patriarchal Christian order in late tenth century England. Aelfric was a member of the English Benedictine Reform movement, as was Aethelwold, his teacher. This association is reflected in Aelfric’s theology and attitude towards women. Aethelwold was bishop of Winchester, “a major site of the monastic reform” (Blanton 66). Virginia Blanton discusses

Aethelwold's influence: "Aethelwold organized a network of monks who...took their Winchester traditions with them to their new homes" (67). The Benedictine Reform movement was an attempt to reinstate rigorous adherence to the rule of St. Benedict in Benedictine monasteries, which had gotten lax in some communities. Eric John states, "[Aethelwold's and Aelfric's project] was all part of the same enterprise: the presentation of the new spirituality, of a new form of monasticism, as part of the essential tradition of the Church" (*Vikings* 203). English reformers such as Aethelwold, and after him, Aelfric, were strongly influenced by the reform movement on the continent. John states, "[Oswold], like the other great reformer of the day, Aethelwold, bishop of Winchester, sent a number of disciples to Fleury for training, some of whom became abbots and bishops in their turn" (*Edgar* 182). So the English reformers were directly related to Fleury; Fleury was in turn influenced by the center of the reform movement itself, Cluny. John elaborates, "Odo, second abbot of Cluny and the founder of its true greatness, had, through his family connections, got the major abbey of Fleury, on the Loire, to reform" (181). There were political dimensions to the English Reform Movement. Specifically, there were economic and political ties between Aethelwold and King Edgar. Edgar was king of all England since 959, and king of Mercia since 957; he died in 975 at the age of 32. John explains, "The reformers...all relied in various degrees on royal power to protect their liberties and keep the local magnate and the local bishop from interfering within the monasteries..." (*Vikings* 203). Virginia Blanton also comments, "Aethelwold demonstrated support for Edgar's political policies, even as the king financed Aethelwold's attempt to build a monastic empire" (124-5).

Aelfric, being Aethelwold's student, inherited many of the reform ideas emanating from the continent. Eric John states, "Aelfric derived his ideas from those current in more advanced circles on the continent, notably Fleury" (*Vikings* 203). He goes on to state, "At the centre of what such men wrote was a theology of kingship" (*Vikings* 203). This theology of kingship related contemporaneously to King Edgar, but potentially to any future king. Aelfric was especially interested in affirming a king's power, since, as stated above, the monastic reformers depended upon the king's protection from lesser nobles and clergy. However, Aelfric wanted to be able to check a bad king's edicts and actions. The solution that Aelfric and

other reformers found was to associate the king with Christ himself, providing theological sanction, but also a certain standard to maintain. John states:

It has been pointed out that in connection with Edgar's rather theatrical coronation how this [theological/political] problem was tackled by equating the role of a Christian king with that of Christ himself, thus at once hedging the decrees of a 'good' king with a kind of vicarious divinity and providing a platform for charges of blasphemous tyranny against kings who manifestly were not imitations of Christ (*Vikings* 203).

Aelfric's theology of kingship, which was at the center of his theological thought, was inherently patriarchal. His emphasis on divinely sanctioned male roles inevitably devolved into an overall patriarchal theological attitude. This fits with the general position of women in late tenth-century England. Virginia Blanton states, "In the early Christian Insular tradition, women participated regularly in the foundation and leadership of monastic communities." (106) She goes on to say, "By the tenth century, this paradigm seems to have been substantively dissolved, a fact that is reflected in the education of men and women" (106). She elaborates:

The social and political changes enacted by the reforms included an emphasis on scholastics, but this appears to be true mostly in the male houses. Religious women no longer elected to lead double monasteries; they were prohibited from participation in the mass, enclosed within female-only institutions, restricted in their leadership roles, and separated from educational centers, which reduced their access to Latin texts and, as the paucity of surviving manuscripts from nunneries shows, to vernacular texts. Religious men, by contrast, were assuming leadership roles in monasteries, carefully regulating the church's rituals, monitoring the separation of male and female houses, extending their control over the lay community, and producing books of various types, service books in particular (107).

Blanton writes specifically about Aethelthryth in her book *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Aethelthryth in Medieval England, 695-1615*, but some of her conclusions apply to Aelfric's attitudes towards women in general. I am tying Aelfric's patriarchal attitude to his preference for female virgins. First, however, it must be said that Aelfric promoted virginity or post-marital chastity for men as well as women. Blanton states, "Aelfric indicates, moreover, that a move to monastic chastity is possible for all men, virginal or paternal" (117). Part of the problem with Aelfric's patriarchal attitude in works such as *Lives of Saints* is that, according to Blanton, the intended audience was monastic males. Blanton's comments about Aelfric's vita of Aethelthryth reveal his attitudes towards virginity in women in general (at least the women he would write about): "Aelfric's account of Aethelthryth follows this model by emphasizing God's protection of her virginity through not one but two marriages" (113). Blanton also remarks on Aelfric's patriarchal propensity: "The power to choose between procreation and chastity, therefore, had to rest with the husband and the images given in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* underscore the reform's placement of men in leadership roles" (128). Blanton ties together the construction of saints' lives to serve ideological purposes, Aelfric's politics, and his representation of females: "The interdependence of Aelfric's political message and Aethelwold's propagandist enthusiasm for monastic centralization, therefore, rests on a carefully constructed image of Aethelthryth, one that focuses male attention on chaste monasticism, not on female bodies" (128).

As seen above, Aelfric was a member of the English Benedictine Reform Movement, as was his teacher, Aethelwold. At the center of the theology of Aelfric and the Benedictine Reformers was a theology of kingship. This theology was inherently patriarchal, as only a man could vicariously share Christ's kingship. Above, Blanton notes that the Reformers took leadership roles away from women, secluded females in nunneries, restricted them from active roles in celebrating Mass, and excluding them from scholarship and education. It was not only women, however, that were alienated. The reformers also vitiated the roles of lay church members and married clergy. Virginia Blanton states, "Some of the political moves that supported this [reform] ideology involved an aggressive policy of extending monastic land rights, the reduction of lay-tenant status within the churches, and the expulsion or cloistering of the

(mostly) aristocratic married clerks” (73). So there were potentially many people who felt marginalized by the Reformers and thus would have a motivation to present an alternate theology to that of these Reformers. I suggest that a backlash against the English Benedictine Reform Movement occurred and was given flesh by, in part, including the *Life of Mary* in the collection of Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*. Why, however, did the anonymous writer of *Life of Mary* (or the editor who would have included the vita in *Lives of Saints*) have wished to present this alternate theology as complementary, as I suggest, rather than antithetical? This person apparently did not wish to completely reject the reformers theology, perhaps in part because he couldn’t escape it. If the *Life of Mary* were completely antithetical to the established order that the Reformers were establishing there would still be an unbridgeable lacuna between the two positions; no healing or reconciliation would exist. So rather than present an antithesis, the anonymous writer (or editor) of *Life of Mary* sought to present a synthesis of the patriarchal, community-centered theology of Aelfric and the other Reformers, and the feminist, solitude-based theology presented by the person of Mary of Egypt.

Aelfric’s patriarchal attitudes are reflected in his vitae of women in *Lives of Saints*. The women included in this rather large collection of saints’ lives, besides *Life of Mary* (which was not written by Aelfric), are Eugenia, Basilissa (with her husband Julian), Agnes, Agatha, Lucy, Aethelthryth, Euphrasia (Euphrosyne), Cecilia, and Daria (with her husband Chrysanthus). Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints* clearly privileges maleness. Not only do men possess agency and leadership roles, the male psyche is regarded as somehow higher spiritually. In order to remain in cognito and perhaps to avoid inciting men to passion, Eugenia poses as a boy. She cuts her hair and dons a boy’s garb. Her vita reads, “She desired to approach the Christians in the garb of a man, that she might not be betrayed” (Aelfric 29). Even more telling is the next passage: “Eugenia then dwelt in the minster with a man’s mind, though she were a maid...with gentleness of mind and great humility, and by her holy virtues pleased the Saviour” (Aelfric 31). This implies that the male psyche was thought to be inherently more virtuous. Further, Eugenia is clearly under the supervision of Bishop Helenus, to whom she has revealed herself. The text reads, “...the bishop bade the converted maiden still to continue in the man’s apparel” (Aelfric 31).

The typical plot of these vitae involves the saint being tortured in order to renounce Christianity and worship or offer sacrifice to Roman gods. This saint is then saved by many miracles, converts many people, but is eventually martyred. Central to all these vitae is virginity. The vita of Eugenia states, "...that [Eugenia] should extremely suffer persecutions because of her virginity" (31). The titles of vitae of all women saints in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* have the suffix "Virgin." This is the case even when these same women were martyrs.⁴ The vitae of no men, even when they were virgins, contain the word "virgin" in its titles. Virginity in both women and men is seen as a source of power. The vita of Eugenia states, "[Eugenia] by her virginity gloriously flourished" (25). Virginity was also seen as especially spiritually meritorious. The vita of Lucy states, "The apostle promised those who preserve chastity, that they are God's temple, and the Holy Ghost's habitation" (215). The outstanding characteristic of Aethelthryth is that she preserved her virginity through two marriages. Aelfric valued virginity in men as well as women. Julian was promised a chaste marriage by Jesus. He lived in a chaste relationship with his wife, Basilissa, so that "through Christ, we two shall never be severed" (93). The man whom Julian brought back to life exclaims, "...what pure virginity is in this noble Julianus" (107).

Women's fasting is related to the typical female roles of food preparation and feeding. As men gave up typical male roles, concerned with wealth and power, when renouncing the world, women gave up typical female roles, concerned with providing nourishment, and as we will see shortly, fertility, when renouncing the world. Caroline Walker Bynum states in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, that "In the majority of cultures, food preparation is a woman's role" (189). She further explains, "We can say that medieval women tasted and fed others because preparation and distribution of food were women's concerns" (192). Besides simply renouncing what one has, women's eating and fasting held spiritual meaning: "Women's eating, fasting, and feeding others were synonymous acts, because in all three the woman [is] fused with a cosmic suffering that really redeemed the world" (289). So in the act of devotion, women and men found different modes of expression from among the Christian symbols available to them. Walker Bynam states,

⁴ All of the women in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* are martyrs except for Aethelthryth. The titles of all the other women except Cecilia omit the term "martyr" (although these women were martyrs). The title of St. Cecilius' vita is "Passio of Saint Cecilia, Virgin."

“But from among the symbols and doctrines available to them, women and men chose different symbols—men renouncing wealth and power, women renouncing food” (295). So, for instance, St. Francis, as a man, gave wealth and power. Concerning women, Peter Brown states that in response to the sexual temptation afforded by relationships with men, “[Female] virgins frequently defined themselves as separate from the world through an exceptionally rigid control of diet” (269). Female ascetics often expressed devotion through exceptional control of the body. Brown states, “Women ascetics were famous for their ability to endure preternaturally long fasts” (269). So, women fasted to renounce the world because it was an inversion of their normal roles.

Mary of Egypt, as a woman, gave up food. She also performed a miracle with this same food, further highlighting the religious impact of food upon female saints. Mary mentions her subsistence upon three loaves of bread three places in the text. These occur when she is recounting her life to Zosimus. In the first instance, Mary tells Zosimus, “Then I met someone, and he gave me three pennies, with which I bought myself three loaves [of bread] which I took as subsistence for the blessing of my journey” (95). Later in the text, Mary tells Zosimus, “I bought two and a half loaves [of bread] with me when I crossed over the Jordan. After no length of time they dried up just like stone, and became hard, and I subsisted on those, making use of them for some time” (97). Soon after that she explains to Zosimus, “For seventeen years, as I have told you already, I used the loaves and afterwards I lived on the plants I found in this desert” (101). As Mary renounces the typical concerns related to women, she is blessed by God in an analogous fashion. She explains her spiritual rewards to Zosimus, “Truly, I am nourished to satiety with most abundant sustenance, that is, with the hope of my salvation” (103).

Besides giving up food as penance, Mary of Egypt abandons other behaviors associated with women, specifically sex and traditional gender roles. Analogous to the relationship of food and fasting above, women renounced sex because it was associated with the other chief female role in late antiquity and the Middle Ages—fecundity. Just as fasting is the inverse of preparing and giving food, sexual abstinence is the inverse of fertility. Joyce Salisbury discusses virginity and female roles in the *Life of St.*

*Helia*⁵ in her book *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins*. Salisbury refers to the idea of sexual renunciation as being the inverse of child-bearing: “As we have seen, the associations between fertility and its apparent opposite, virginity, are not new with Helia; there was a long tradition of such association in Iberia and elsewhere” (78). Obviously, when Mary of Egypt renounces the world and becomes a hermit in the desert, she becomes celibate. In this respect, she foregoes the fecundity expected of women who were married. She also foregoes the traditional gender roles of wife, mother, and daughter. She obviously neither marries nor bears children. She even gave up the role of pious daughter: “I had a brother and my homeland in Egypt, and I lived there with my parents. In the twelfth year of my age I began to spurn their love, and I went to the city of Alexandria” (83).

Mary is even without clothes, the minimal convention of community. The same passage that tells of Mary’s lack of clothes also mentions her female sex: “Abbot Zosimus, have pity on me for God’s sake, I beg you, for I am a person of the female sex and am completely bereft of bodily clothing...” (75). So, in the text, being without clothes is juxtaposed with Mary being a woman. Community is the basis of social roles and thus gender roles. Therefore, for Mary to be a woman without clothes is to be a woman without standard gender roles. As with food and fasting above, Mary is rewarded in an analogous fashion for what she has given up in this life. Discussing her spiritual gifts with Zosimus, she says, “and I am clothed with the garment of the Word of God, who embraces and encompasses all things” (103).

There is a prominent gender role reversal at work in *Life of Mary*. In the case of the Desert Fathers, the spiritual authority was a man. Supplicants would come to receive prayers, advice, and healing from “abbas.” In Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*, the female saints were firmly under the authority of a man, usually a priest or bishop. Of course, there were Desert Mothers, but they were definitely the minority and what we know of them is through the writings of men. So conventionally, the role of spiritual authority would belong to a man, while the role of supplicant would belong to either a man or woman. The *Life of Mary* is progressive in that Mary, a woman, is the spiritual authority. But Mary was a “proto-feminist” in

⁵ The *Life of St. Helia* is found in a tenth-century manuscript kept in the Escorial monastic library outside Madrid.

another way. She rejected the usual roles for women, that of wife, mother, and housekeeper. She defines herself not by her relationships with other people, but by her own decisions and actions. I argue that, in *Life of Mary*, the character of Mary represents the proto-feminism outlined above. I also argue that Zosimus represents the patriarchy that was conventional in late Anglo-Saxon England and clearly favored by Aelfric. I then maintain that the interaction between Mary and Zosimus become metaphorical for the interactions of feminism on the one hand, and patriarchy on the other.

At the beginning of *Life of Mary*, Zosimus is the spiritual master. The text states, “Very often monks came to [Zosimus] from distant places and monasteries, in order that they might attach themselves to his example and his teachings and subject themselves to emulation of his abstinence” (61). Clearly, Zosimus is the elder to be emulated here. As Jane Stevenson has said, Zosimus is “narrow, innocent, and smug” (22). In order that Zosimus may learn “how great are other paths to salvation” (63), an angel appears to Zosimus, directing him to travel to the monastery by the Jordan River in order to learn something new. Zosimus then travelled to the monastery by the Jordan River, where he was welcomed into their community. Zosimus clearly expects to find a male spiritual authority. When Zosimus went into the desert to observe Lent, as was the custom at this monastery, he “desired to come across some father in the desert, who might edify him in certain matters which he himself was not aware of before” (71). However, whom he found was Mary of Egypt. Zosimus is in awe of her from the first moment: “[Mary’s] words really brought great dread and fear upon Zosimus, and he kept trembling and was suffused with drops of sweat” (77). Mary then assumes the role of spiritual authority and Zosimus the role of supplicant. Zosimus addresses Mary, “O spiritual mother, reveal now what you are in your appearance, for you are truly God’s handmaid” (77).

In another, profound way, Mary of Egypt represents female attributes. Her personal intercessor before God is the Virgin Mary. As anthropologists such as Joseph Campbell have proposed, the Virgin Mary represents the female side of the divine. The Virgin Mary is instrumental in Mary of Egypt’s conversion. At this point in the text, Mary of Egypt has traveled to the festival of the holy cross at a church in Jerusalem, perhaps the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. When she tries to enter the church to venerate the

cross, she is miraculously repelled. At this point, Mary sees an image of the Virgin Mary and prays to her: “O glorious lady, who bore the true God in bodily childbirth, I fully know that it is not proper or fitting that I who am so dire a sinner should look upon and pray to your image... Allow me and give me leave to open the entrance of you holy church, so that I may not be made a stranger to the sight of the precious cross...” (91). The next passage emphasizes the role of the Virgin Mary as intercessor. Mary of Egypt addresses the Virgin Mary: “I will commit myself to you and choose you as my advocate against your Son, and I promise both of you that never after this will I defile my body in the terrible shameful lust of wicked promiscuity...” (91-93).

After praying to the Virgin Mary, Mary enters the church easily, “... as if all the force that previously had guarded the door against my entry, afterwards prepared the entry for my path” (93). At this point, Mary relates “I was filled with the spiritual mysteries within the temple, and I was deemed worthy to pay reverence to the mysteries of the precious and life-giving cross” (93). In fact, through praying to the Virgin Mary, Mary has a direct experience of God: “I saw then a light shining everywhere about me, and at once a secure peace came upon me” (99). Throughout the rest of Mary of Egypt’s life, the Virgin Mary would remain her intercessor. When Mary would find herself in temptation, she says she would “come in my thoughts before the image of the good and holy mother of God, who had previously received me in covenant with her. And weeping in front of her I would ask that she would drive away from me those foul thoughts that afflicted my wretched soul” (99).

The sublimated erotic interest between Zosimus and Mary is another way that the two are complementary. This underlying erotic interest is expressed as a close spiritual connection. There is a strong history of spiritual closeness between celibate men and women in early Christianity. Peter Brown discusses this in his book *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. He says, “An intense sense of spiritual companionship drew male and female ascetics together” (266). He goes on to say that the liberal support networks that female ascetics had “meant that ascetic women were free to seek protection and spiritual guidance from males of any kind—from relatives, from ascetic soul-mates, and from men of exceptional insight or learning” (266). Although Mary of Egypt,

as a hermit, had no networks of like-minded women, we can certainly think of Mary and Zosimus as spiritual soul-mates. The text of *Life of Mary* specifically attributes the Holy Spirit to the bringing together of Zosimus and Mary. Mary says to Zosimus, “The grace of the Holy Spirit has guided you for the purpose that you may do some service to my little body” (79). Zosimus, in particular, seems to display an almost openly erotic attraction for Mary. Zosimus prays that he may see “that longed-for countenance again” (107). In the same scene, “Zosimus then stretched himself forward and kissed the ground on which [Mary’s] feet had stood...praising and blessing our Lord Saviour Christ” (107). It is interesting that in ancient Hebrew the feet were considered a metonym for genitals. A little later in the text he prays to God, “Do not keep me, Lord, from the vision which formerly you showed to me” (109). Mary and Zosimus do actually kiss, but just prior to taking communion: “[Mary] offered the old man the kiss of peace” (111).

There are other facets to the mutual respect and need between Zosimus and Mary. Zosimus needs Mary’s innate spiritual authority; Mary needs Zosimus’s blessing and the sacraments which he can dispense. This is basically Jane Stevenson’s argument, but I suggest that it symbolizes the mutual need between a patriarchal order, which Zosimus exemplifies, and a feminist order, which Mary exemplifies. This mutual need and respect is demonstrated by the prostration that each shows the other: “Then [Zosimus] immediately prostrated himself on the ground and asked for [Mary’s] blessing. [Mary] in turn prostrated herself and asked for his blessing” (75-77). Mary honors Zosimus’s sacerdotal function: “It befits you, abbot Zosimus, to pray and to bless, because you are sustained by the special knowledge of the priesthood and you fathom the sacramental rites of Christ with the gifts of godly thing, serving for many years at his altar” (77). From Mary, Zosimus gains humility. This is the reason that the angel directed him to come to the trans-Jordan desert:

O Zosimus, you have succeeded in a most praiseworthy manner. However, there is no person who may show himself perfect. Much greater is the struggle that lies ahead of you than that which has passed, though you do not know it. But in order that you may be able to perceive and understand how great are other paths to salvation, go out from your land and come to the monastery which is situated near the Jordan (63).

After meeting Mary, Zosimus prays, “Glory be to you, Lord God, who have shown me through this servant of yours how much in my own estimation I [am inferior] in comparison to the perfection of those others” (111). Mary, in turn, gains from Zosimus connection with the Christian community and the sacraments which give meaning to her life: “[Mary] spoke as follows: Lord, let now your servant go in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation” (111-3). Finally, at the end of their relationship, after Mary has died, Zosimus learns Mary’s name, “...rejoicing very much about it...” (117).

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This essay explored the binaries of community/solitude and patriarchy/proto-feminism in the Old English *Life of Mary*. Based on the work of Hugh Magennis, I assigned the characteristics of community and patriarchy to the Aelfrician model and the opposite characteristics of solitude and proto-feminism to the non-Aelfrician model. I then argued that in the *Life of Mary*, the character of Zosimus represents the Aelfrician model of community and patriarchy while the character of Mary represents the non-Aelfrician model of solitude and proto-feminism. I further argued that in this vita these two polarities are complementary rather than antagonistic. It is important that it is complementary rather than antagonistic because the complementary attribution allows the chance of reconciliation. Magennis, perhaps the leading scholar on the Old English version of the *Life of Mary*, finds it almost certain that the *Life of Mary*, although included in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*, was not written by, or condoned by, Aelfric. This is important to my argument that the ethos portrayed by Mary of Egypt was antithetical to Aelfric's ethos. Magennis has three basic points upon which he bases this argument. First, the literary style of *Life of Mary* did not match Aelfric's typical usage. This and the blatant omission of *Life of Mary* from the table of contents in *Lives of Saints* provide concrete evidence that the *Life of Mary* was not written by Aelfric. However, the second and third points are more directly related to my argument. Second, Aelfric wrote exclusively about saints with community ties. Mary of Egypt was a complete hermit. Third, Aelfric did not write about any women who were not virgins. Mary, being a harlot-saint, was certainly not a virgin. Her life was one of conversion and repentance. I tied Aelfric's penchant for virgin women to his patriarchal attitude. Therefore, I argued that Zosimus has attributes that conform to Aelfric's preferences, the Aelfrician model, and that Mary has attributes that are the antitheses of Aelfric's preferences, the non-Aelfrician model.

The Introduction discussed the textual history of *Life of Mary*, certain background information, the procedure I used, and a review of the literature used. The Old English version of *Life of Mary* was

translated from a Latin text, which was itself translated from a Greek text. A central question has been who wrote the *Life of Mary*. According to Hugh Magennis, it is not known who wrote the vita; it is not even known with which institution the anonymous author was associated. Central to my argument is that the ethos of Mary portrayed in the text is fundamentally different than the ethos promoted by Aelfric. I argued in Chapter Four, Patriarchy and Proto-feminism, that there were people such as women, laity, and married clergy who would have been opposed to Aelfric and the other English Benedictine Reformers. One of these people could possibly have written *Life of Mary*. I also reviewed other medieval (or in the case of the Bible, antique) texts relevant to understanding the literary and cultural milieu. There were certain literary precursors to *Life of Mary*, the most obvious of which was the *Life of Antony*, by Athanasius. This vita was important in two ways: the text itself was the model for subsequent saints' lives, and the person of Antony was the model for subsequent desert ascetics, the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers. There were three women included in the *Apophthegmata*, or *Sayings of the Fathers*, which recorded the tales told by Desert Fathers and Mothers. Mary of Egypt, whether real or constructed, was a Desert Mother. The *Bible* was also important in similar ways. Both Jesus and the nation of Israel were tested in the wilderness, an analog for the desert. The *Life of Antony* and the *Bible* would have been familiar to whoever wrote *Life of Mary*. Women could have felt a kinship for the Desert Mothers recorded in the *Apophthegmata*.

The second chapter dealt with the Aelfrician model. First in this chapter, I looked at how I extrapolated the binaries of community/solitude and patriarchy/proto-feminism from Magennis's analysis of *Life of Mary* and Aelfric's ethos. I then examined the scholarship of Jane Stevenson and Elaine Pagels. Stevenson asserts that in the *Life of Mary*, Mary and Zosimus embody two different strands of Christianity, the mystical and the sacerdotal, and that these are mutually supportive rather than antagonistic. This idea has, along with Magennis's work, informed my idea of the Aelfrician model and the non-Aelfrician model, especially the complementary nature of these two polarities. Elaine Pagels does not write about *Life of Mary*, but I have found in her opposition of Peter and Mary Magdalen in the early Christian Church a parallel with Zosimus and Mary of Egypt. Pagels argues that Peter represents the Catholic/Orthodox branch of the early Church while Mary Magdalen is associated with the Gnostic branch. This is analogous to

Zosimus representing a patriarchal position and Mary representing a proto-feminist position. In fact, the Gnostic faction, personified by Mary Magdalen, was more female-centered in its theology and social practice than the Catholic/Orthodox faction. Another corollary of Pagels's work is that as the early Church was split into two factions, the Catholic and the Gnostic, the tenth century English Church could have been split into two factions, a pro-Benedictine Reform group and a more feminist anti-Benedictine Reform group.

From examining the Aelfrician model in the second chapter, I moved to looking specifically at the community/solitude binary in the third chapter. First, I argued that community and solitude are two basic poles in Christianity, and indeed any religion. I then examined the anthropological theories of Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Victor Turner. Each of these writers based their ideas on the rite of passage—separation, transformation, and reintegration—first elaborated by Arnold van Gennep. Eliade focused on religious rites. For Eliade, participation in rites of passage allows humans to participate in a meaningful cosmos. One such rite is the “death/resurrection” experience, one of which Mary undergoes in the Jordan River. Campbell worked the idea of the rite of passage into the “hero's journey.” As Mary embarks on a religious quest, leaves society, is spiritually transformed, and finally is reintegrated with the community in the person of Zosimus, she can be seen as a Campbellian hero. Turner focused on the middle, or liminal, stage of the rite of passage, which is characterized by what he calls “communitas.” I contend that communitas is associated with the community aspect of religion. I then undertook a close reading of *Life of Mary*, looking in particular at elements of community and solitude in the text. My main contention was that Zosimus embodies the community aspect of Christianity and that Mary embodies the solitude aspect of Christianity. Put another way, Zosimus is associated with a cenobitic spirituality while Mary is associated with a spirituality of the desert.

In the fourth chapter, I looked at the patriarchy/proto-feminism binary. First I examined the older Christian model of chastity for women based on minimal sex in marriage and celibacy in widowhood. This attitude was personified by Vibia Perpetua, a mother and a real woman. In the fourth century a new model of chastity for women in the Christian Church came into being—that of the steadfast virgin. This attitude

was personified by Thecla, a fictional virgin girl who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys. It is telling that the older, and (as I argue) less patriarchal model was personified by a real woman while the (as I argue) more patriarchal steadfast virgin model was represented by a fictional woman. In fact, many of these “dedicated virgins” were placed in this state against their wills. I claimed that this preference for dedicated virgins was related to patriarchy. I further argued that dedicated virgins were controlled by bishops and male clergy and were symbols of their power. I examined Aelfric and the English Benedictine Reform Movement, in particular the social ramifications of this movement and its theology of kingship. I argued that there may have been a backlash against the English Benedictine Reform Movement by disaffected women, laypeople, and married clergy, which was manifest by the inclusion of *Life of Mary* in Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints*. We see in the patriarchal order relations of power, while in the proto-feminist attitude which characterizes Mary we see relations of meeting. I noted that there is a gender role reversal in *Life of Mary*: the female is the spiritual authority and the male is the supplicant. I further noted that Mary of Egypt has an intimate relationship with the Virgin Mary, who can be seen as an expression of the female aspect of divinity. I mentioned the sublimated erotic interest between Mary and Zosimus as an example of the mutual need between the two. I further argued that the complementary relationship of Zosimus and Mary, Zosimus needing Mary’s innate spiritual wisdom and Mary needing the sacrament which Zosimus can dispense, symbolizes the mutual supporting relationship of patriarchy and proto-feminism evident in *Life of Mary*.

I would like to conclude by looking at some of the implications of my arguments and pose questions for further research. The biggest question remaining is who wrote the *Life of Mary*? According to Hugh Magennis a different scribe apparently transcribed the last part of *Legend of the Seven Sleepers* and all of *Life of Mary*. This would indicate the extraneous nature of these two vitae. Magennis contends that other than this, there is no indication of the author or editor of *Life of Mary*. There is some disagreement as to the intended audience of *Life of Mary*. Virginia Blanton maintains that the intended audience of Aelfric’s *Lives of Saints* was male monks. This could explain, in part, the emphasis on virginity in the vitae actually

written by Aelfric. However, Hugh Magennis proposes that the Old English language of *Lives of Saints* would make the collection more accessible, particularly to lay people.

I postulate that there was a faction of disaffected women, lay people, and married clergy who felt marginalized by Aelfric and the English Benedictine Reform Movement. These people could have voiced their dissent by including *Life of Mary* in an edition of Aelfric's *Lives of Saints*. The audience of *Life of Mary* would then include these disaffected people. The English Benedictine Reform Movement, originating on the continent at Cluny and other monasteries, sought to reform monastic practice and increase the rigor at associated monasteries. I argue that this movement was inherently patriarchal. Their theology of kingship created divinely sanctioned male roles. Virginia Blanton, in her book *Signs of Devotion*, clearly and unequivocally describes the marginalization of women during the Reform Movement. In tenth century England men gained more educational and leadership opportunities while women lost educational and leadership opportunities. Further, in Aelfric's *Lives of Saints* women were invariably under the supervision of men. Also, in *Lives of Saints* the power to choose between procreation and chastity lay with men. As there were, as Elaine Pagels describes, two factions in the early Church, the Catholic/Orthodox and the Gnostic, there could have been two factions in the late tenth-century English Church, one in favor of the Benedictine Reforms and one opposed. Why seek reconciliation then? It would have been difficult to outright oppose the Reform Movement. It would also have still left a situation of conflict between the two parties. Rather than create an antithesis to the Reform Movement, the wise move would have been to seek reconciliation, a synthesis of the two sides.

The Aelfrician and the non-Aelfrician models and the binaries of community/solitude and patriarchy/proto-feminism give us a way at looking at culture that could provide a useful model for further religious analysis. It seems clear to me that the community/solitude binary and the patriarchy/proto-feminism binary are inherent in religion. These conceptual models give us insight into both religion and society. They also open up further questions. Do we today privilege community over solitude or vice versa? Do we privilege the male over the female or vice versa? It would be interesting to see if there is a cross-cultural link between patriarchy and community on one hand and feminism and solitude on the other hand.

Was there something specific about the late Anglo-Saxon period in England that linked community with patriarchy and solitude with proto-feminism? What about other cultures in different eras? It is clear that a close study of *Life of Mary* can give us insight into the religious culture of late tenth-century England and pose questions we can ask ourselves today.

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