

# Monnica: My Mother

## A study of the mother of Saint Augustine

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It seems strange, at the time the Oedipus complex was being unravelled, that the case history of Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 350-434) and his mother Monnica<sup>1</sup> should not have been more generally used as basic illustrative material. Perhaps it was too firmly embedded, in the lay mind, in the bracket of salvation-history to be eligible for general use. Fortunately, however, the portrait of this provincial Roman-African mother has been preserved simply because it was safely insulated within the pages of a 'devotional' book—the *Confessions* of Augustine, a writing that itself has barely begun to disgorge its total psychological treasures. To excise and examine the history of Monnica will tell us a lot about Augustine, which in its turn could tell us a lot about Augustine-style Western Christianity—a grass-roots examination that is becoming a popular lay pastime.

The biography of Monnica presents a complex study. At times Augustine almost persuades us into believing that she is actually the *theme* of the *Confessions*:

'Do Thou inspire, O Lord my God, do Thou inspire Thy servants, my brethren, Thy sons, my masters, whom I serve with heart and voice and pen, that whoso reads these pages may remember before Thy altar, Monnica, Thy handmaid . . . so shall her dying request be granted to her in richer abundance by the prayers of many, through my *Confessions*, than through my prayers.'

But even when he presents her 'straight' he depicts a complicated love-hate relationship, however much he attempts to polish up the love aspect. Added to which is the immense difficulty presented by Augustine's own dichotomous style of writing and thinking whereby he presents Monnica to us through a series of quite contradictory lenses. For whatever Augustine's original intentions may have been with regard to writing a cautionary tale of his dissolute, pagan youth now that he was the hard-working Bishop of Hippo, the theme ran away with him—the Bishop lost the reins. To the lasting benefit of Western man, the young, fiery, immensely creative poet, thinker and experimenter in living (such as only a Blake could depict in any visual art) escaped from the intention of the Bishop, and presented us with probably one of the truest psychological pictures of life-as-it-is-lived that has ever been recorded in any

<sup>1</sup>Like, I imagine, most of our readers, I have always called her 'Monica', but apparently all MSS. of the *Confessions* have 'Monnica' and Professor Trend in *The Donatist Church* says that this is a Berber name 'deriving, perhaps, from the Libyan deity Mon'. In the circumstances I defer to our learned author. (*Editor*.)

period. It certainly requires digging-out through the somewhat over-pious patina of his current literary convention, but everything that soars and searches throughout the *Confessions* is carried on the back of the autobiography which remains so powerful because it feels to be so true.

One of the points of correction that the Bishop-author could work on in his runaway manuscript was the presentation of his mother, Monnica. But when one reads the *Confessions* with no holds barred, responding only to the onrush of confidences that the young Augustine pours out, the varnish across the face of Monnica soon cracks. What emerges is the portrait of a woman who is surely the patron-saint of Woman's Lib. and who was certainly the scourge of this son of hers who was to become in many ways the architect of Europe—and she confronts us as livingly as if she breathed. It says a great deal for Saint Augustine that he managed to find out so much about her—how she had been brought up, what her marriage was like—so that he was able to present a fairer portrait of her than if he had just been showing her as his own childish and adolescent eyes had seen her. Nevertheless he hardly evokes a person one could love, though certainly he shows us a person we must respect.

*Monnica: a prayers-and-tears woman*

To understand her better one must know something of her historical and geographical context. The fact that she stood out at all in Augustine's life meant that she had an unusually powerful personality to emerge from the background of an age when, in general, women were wallpaper.

In the mid-fourth century A.D. the North African provinces (Africa) were the granary of Rome and hence prosperous and somewhat independently minded. African Christianity was distinctly provincial in that it was legalistic, ritualistic and 'pure'—very reminiscent of Judaistic 'law keeping'. It bred its own ultimately disastrous heresy, *Donatism*, but was, of itself, too conservative to appeal to a forward-looking mind such as Augustine's, and his eventual conversion to Christianity came out of quite a different stable. Although Rome was so soon to fall, no wind of change as yet blew in Africa, and there was apparently no anxiety in Augustine's family over anything more dramatic than money and the children's education. Africa was hot and the desert loomed always in the background. Temperaments were passionate and it is no criticism of Monnica to say that she was a prayers-and-tears sort of woman. Such a description in later times would have portrayed a passive disposition adapting with patient fortitude to the contrariness of life. But in Monnica's case it meant that she cried from rage and passion, and a determination to get her own way; and that her prayers were assaults on the ear of God in an attempt to compel him to be her ally. Augustine cried a lot, too, and he was no weakling.

One must simply call it the African temperament, and mention it merely to prevent this characteristic from being interpreted in a modern context.

Monnica had a more important aspect to her temperament than this particular method of expressing it. She had a primary intention and she worked on a particularized plan with unshaken tenacity throughout her entire adult life—this was her determination that her eldest son should be a Christian. Nothing thwarted her. One cannot help admiring her tenacity. Whether one approves her methods is another thing altogether. Augustine finally became a Christian, but whether he would have done so in the natural course of his development without her interference is another question. Perhaps allowing Monnica to interfere in his life revealed his streak of weakness. Obviously these two need to be considered, in this area, as an indissoluble pair.

#### *Augustine's challenge to Monnica*

Monnica was one of two daughters born to a Christian African family about the end of the first quarter of the fourth century. These two little girls were reared by their father's own aged nurse under a very strict regime. Perhaps the nurse had been desert-reared because the first fundamental training she gave her charges was not to become dependent on being able to drink when they were thirsty. The African afternoons were long and hot but they were not allowed even to have a drink of water. The reason given was that if they became dependent on drinking water, later, when they were married and had the keys of their own wine cellars, they would inevitably become wine-bibbers (this is surely a gift to the Behaviourists as a piece of aversion-therapy in reverse!). Yet may be the nurse was right: when Monnica was old enough to be sent from the table to fetch the wine she was eventually chidden by a slave-girl for stealing wine. Like Augustine, maybe she had a tendency to want to experience everything she could, and in her position it was less than suitable.

Monnica married Patricius, a non-Christian who was later baptized on his death-bed, and who was possibly slightly below her in social status—one suspects that she had some sort of hold over him in order to exercise so much freedom within the marriage. They had a small estate at Thagaste and Augustine was the eldest of possibly four children. From the beginning this son was precocious, difficult, obstinate and unbelievably alive. Monnica fairly obviously saw him as her challenge and her task. Nowhere does he report her as being a tender, loving mother. He says that his parents merely laughed when he was mercilessly beaten at school for playing too much—when he was probably only four. This may have been their social context, or perhaps they were already worried that he was an exceptionally wilful child.

When Augustine was ill at puberty with one of his recurrent attacks of fever (malaria?), Monnica, convinced that the child was going to die, arranged for his baptism. When he showed signs of recovery she cancelled the plan.<sup>1</sup> She foresaw the turmoil of his life and was not prepared to submit him to the chance of defiling his Christian identity. Here her determination is seen to be rock-like: she could certainly have achieved a baptism at this time with her husband's consent but her aim was for Augustine to be really Christian and she was not tempted to settle for a half-measure. The whole situation must have puzzled the boy enormously—he would quite like to have been baptized at the time—as he proceeded to plunge further and further into the undisciplined excitements of life. He had, however, registered that Monnica had told him clearly that God was his Father—implying that Patricius was a necessary incidental.

However annoying Augustine may have been to his parents, Patricius was undoubtedly proud in a realistic way of his lively adolescent son. One day he remarked to his wife that the boy was growing up and that they could look forward to grandchildren. She sent for Augustine and gave him one of those terrifying and only remotely understood anti-sex lectures that have been the bane of so many generations of growing boys. Yet he remarks later that if she felt like this they ought to have arranged a marriage for him; the only reason they didn't, he conjectured, was that they were ambitious career-wise for him and didn't want him to be landed with 'the drag of a wife'.

Patricius died when Augustine was only seventeen. He seems to have taken on the family responsibility for a time, and ran an infant school in Thagaste. Perhaps Monnica became understandably over-attached to him emotionally at this time. Perhaps in contrast to a very 'contrived' atmosphere at home, when he finally got to the university at Thagaste he adopted every contrary opinion and style of action. He took a concubine, became a Manichean, competed in theatrical contests, etc. At any rate Monnica despaired. Once when he came home for a visit and exhibited wholly abhorrent behaviour she called in a third party to help her. Her intended aid was an aged Christian bishop who had once been a Manichean. They evidently had a good dinner, after which Monnica had planned to retire and leave Augustine to be lectured. But the old man, detecting that he had met his match, would not fall in with the scheme and told Monnica that he was sure (he knew how to flatter his dominant hostess) that the son of 'such prayers and tears' was bound to turn out all right in the end.

<sup>1</sup>Even Constantine had wisely delayed his baptism till his death-bed; the convention being that the sinner was only allowed to repent once, so that it was safer not to be baptized till you were about to be retired from the fray by death.

*Augustine's escape and re-capture*

Now comes a scene that is waiting for opera representation. Augustine, now a teacher of Rhetoric in Carthage, became sick of rioting students and, generally wanting to travel, accepted a proffered appointment in Rome. But he only got away from Monnica by the skin of his teeth. (In the following extract I have omitted the pious trappings and extracted the bare story):

' . . . My Mother grieved deeply over my departure and followed me down to the shore. She clasped me tightly in her embrace willing either to keep me back or to go with me; but I deceived her, and pretended that I had a friend whom I would not leave till the ship sailed. Thus I lied to my mother . . . and I escaped. . . . Yet she refused to go home without me, and I hardly persuaded her to pass the night in a memorial chapel of the blessed Cyprian hard by the ship. But in that night I secretly set forth. . . . The wind blew and filled our sails and the shore receded from our gaze. . . . There was she in the morning wild with grief. . . . For she loved to keep me with her, as mothers are wont, yes, far more than most mothers. . . . When she had made an end of accusing my deceit and cruelty she returned to her house, while I went on my way to Rome.'

Within a year Augustine had been transferred to Milan (the principal city of the Empire). He was studying the writings of Plotinus and listening to the sermons of Bishop Ambrose. He was no longer a Manichee and was living with his same concubine (or common-law wife) and son Adeodatus, now aged twelve. He was yet again dangerously ill. Monnica turned up to nurse him—he gives us no clue as to why she arrived, though he recounts the fierce storm which nearly sank the boat she travelled in . . . perhaps he wished it had. It may well have been during this convalescence that he began to fall under her spell as a person. At any rate she was now able to exact her revenge for her repudiation on that African beach.

Observing that Augustine was now in a good social position (there is an element of social climbing in this African mother and son), she decided to revise her programme. Rather than stick out for a total conversion to an ascetic, Christian withdrawal from life, she decided that the programme she had originally designed would be equally well fulfilled if Augustine were to be baptized, marry, rear a Christian family and live comfortably as Professor of Rhetoric in the capital city. At some time before she began to put the alternative into operation she must have partially convinced Augustine of its good sense. She then proceeded to look around for a family with a marriageable daughter which was prepared to negotiate with her. Having found a possibility she now decided that the concubine must go. Perhaps, when she stood on the Italian beach with her mute, heartbroken son and watched the ship that was taking the girl back to Africa sail out of sight, she felt fully in charge of the pro-

ceedings at last. She had, of course, kept her attractive, intelligent grandson in Italy. And she had not yet broken the news to Augustine that the age of his proposed bride was the same as his son's—twelve—and that he would have to wait two years before he could marry.

By now Monnica had completely insinuated herself into Augustine's life. The only options that were left open to him were to proceed along the marriage-family lines, or the ascetic-Christian lines. Either was equally acceptable to Monnica. Perhaps he was too dispirited to cope with life on its own terms any more. Perhaps he convinced himself that these were the natural lines of his own development. But Monnica certainly established herself at the heart of his life and 'mothered' him and his friends. He sees nothing strange that, after his 'conversion' in the garden, both he and Alypius should rush straight into the house and tell Monnica of their experience. Her patient determination was certainly being blessed. It was not necessary even to bring a wife into the household now that they had been converted to continence.

Throughout the months of Christian instruction at Cassiciacum, Monnica was in the background looking after the young men gathered together for theological study. Baptism completed, the family party and its friends, grandmother, son and grandson and the others, decided to return to the family estate at Thagaste and establish a Christian retreat and teaching-centre. But while they were waiting for a ship at Ostia Monnica died. She could not have chosen a more perfect moment. Had she lived longer she might have found conditions considerably altered for her among the group of young men, most of whom later were to become bishops and Church administrators, for they would soon have surpassed her and she might well have had to drop back into being a mere housekeeper. As it was, her dying was a supremely successful act, and an experience for the whole group. She was completely in tune with Augustine and his friends, she had lost all her qualms about dying away from her homeland, and she could look back on her life as a journey that had reached its aimed-for goal—Augustine had become a whole-hearted Christian. The fact that her grandson (so soon to be dead, too) wept bitterly for her is an obvious tribute. Yet one can only say that nowhere does she warm the heart of the reader of the *Confessions*—and perhaps this is how Augustine intended it should be. For he may still have remembered the tears of the girl being sent back to Africa as an obstruction to his forthcoming social marriage. Indeed, now that the framework of judgment has to be as wide as the framework of human ethics, the whole question of that relationship, even allowing for its historical context, stands awkwardly when it is placed out of the Christian context.

*Was Monnica a happy woman?*

Was Monnica a happy woman? I doubt if this question would

have been in her repertory. She was certainly a successful woman in the sense that the enterprise of her life succeeded. But she was also a righteous woman, and perhaps that sums up the elusive, annoying quality in her. She couldn't always have been so right, or if she was always so right in all the details then she must have been wrong somewhere about the whole main theme, where it was too big to show. This is the suspicion.

That she was not only determined but 'steered' her course is reflected in her account of how her marriage with Patricius worked. Augustine reports:

'As soon as her years were ripe for marriage she was given to a husband, and served him as her lord, labouring to gain him unto Thee, preaching Thee to him by that character whereby Thou hadst made her beautiful, dutifully amiable, and altogether suitable in her husband's sight. She endured with patience his infidelities and never had any disagreement with her husband for this cause. He was a man, moreover, of great good humour but of a violent temper. She had learned not to resist the anger of her husband by word or deed. But when he was composed and quiet, and she found her opportunity, she would explain her conduct, if it so happened that he had taken groundless offence.

'In fine, when matrons, whose husbands were not so passionate as hers, came and talked to her, showing her the bruises on their faces and complaining of their husbands' lives, she would playfully but seriously blame their tongues, telling them that, when once they had heard the marriage lines read over to them, they ought to have looked upon them as indentures by which they were made handmaids; . . . and, when they wondered at such words, knowing what a fiery husband she had to put up with, yet knowing also that no one had ever heard, or seen any marks to prove, that Patricius had beaten his wife or been estranged from her for a single day by any domestic quarrel, if they asked the reason, she told them her rule of conduct . . . those who followed her advice had good cause to be thankful; those who rejected it were trampled upon and ill-used.'

### *Monnica's Visions*

What remains to be explained is the source of her power over Augustine. She had visions: visions were to her as arguments are to a thinker, though even Augustine does not commit himself to their total validity. But in actual practice, at the level of day-to-day living, the person who seems to draw on some level of knowledge other than reason (as the modern fortune-teller in various manifestations) can ultimately score points over the power of thought simply by undermining confidence in it. Monnica could do just this to Augustine and, when he became intellectually overstrained, her visionary intuitions seemed to be more reliable than his intellectual wanderings and panics. She could legitimately be criticized for overplaying the part, but living in a world which actually used

this faculty as currency (the necromancer was an accepted member of society) it was natural for her to believe in her own faculties and to use them to reinforce her support of her son's needs and his overall 'guidance'.

'When, by my request and of her own impulse, she called upon Thee daily with strong cries of heart, that Thou would'st discover to her in a vision Thy purpose as to my marriage, Thou would'st never answer.

'She saw indeed some vain creatures of her imagination, such as are conjured up by the strong pre-occupation of the human spirit, and these she related to me, but slightly, and not with the assurance that she used to have when Thou hadst given her a revelation. For she always said that she could distinguish, by a certain feeling impossible to describe, between Thy revelations and the dreams of her own soul.'

Socially Monnica must have been a formidable, provincial Roman matron. One cannot believe that she was without charm—or were all Augustine's young friends in need of mothers? The formidable Bishop Ambrose of Milan, with whom Augustine would have given almost anything to have been able to discuss his religious difficulties, quickly became a friend of Monnica's soon after her arrival in Milan. The closest intimacy that Augustine had with him at this time was being complimented on having Monnica for a mother!

When Augustine writes:

'All who knew her praised, honoured, loved Thee in her, because she felt Thy presence in her heart whereof the fruits of her holy conversation were the proof. She had been the wife of one husband, she had requited her parents, had governed her house piously, was well reported for good works, had brought up children of whom she travailed in birth anew as soon as she saw them go astray from Thee . . .'

this is the language of obituary. For what reason should we try to wrest this woman from her 'setting'? A decade or so ago she was certainly a gift to psychoanalysis. But the Oedipus complex need no longer be proved. So what can she offer to more sophisticated research?

It has been clearly demonstrated that Augustine's conversion was the end-result of a long and deeply-held desire of Monnica's. Ask then: what was the feed-back from this situation into Augustine's own life after Monnica's decease?

Remembering always that people influence events more at the subliminal than at the conscious level, it would be reasonable to suggest that Augustine's shaping of the Catholic Church as it gathered itself together out of the bleeding remains of the Roman Empire was very similar to Monnica's shaping of Augustine, and hence enshrined a similar ambivalence. Augustine may well be 'blamed' for many of the hang-ups that became the structure of