

*Desire*  
The Life of St Mary of Egypt

I view my crime, but kindle at the view, Repent old pleasures, and  
sollicit new

Alexander Pope, 'Eloisa to Abelard'

As the texts examined in this book demonstrate, Anglo-Saxons understood suffering and danger to be useful for learning, but only within limits. King Alfred, who wishes for a physical ailment to curb his desires and allow him to study, finds that the disease ultimately hinders his concentration. Bede uses the case of a linguistically disabled, scrofulous youth to show the liberatory potential of grammar, but that freedom is symbolised by a complete cure from bodily illness. *Solomon and Saturn I* draws on the mnemonic power of imagined violence to teach the Lord's Prayer, although the true student of its lesson, the reader, only needs to imagine it happening to a demonic figure. Ælfric Bata fills his Latin textbook with dangerous situations and negatively charged vocabulary; at the end of the *Colloquies*, however, he also shows how classroom violence can interfere with discipline and authority. *Andreas* uses terrible wonder to spur moments of recollection and learning, but leaves the lesson open-ended. Desire is intertwined with suffering in a number of these examples, although the precise nature of the relationship changes. In Alfred's case, bodily pain is intended to extinguish lust, while in Bata's *Colloquies*, carnal desire is a disruptive force in the monastery. On the other hand, *Solomon and Saturn I* and *Andreas* use their student figures to model productive curiosity for their readers, to inflame them with longing for prayer and knowledge.

The Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* presents a new relationship between pain, desire, and learning. Saintry passions are usually violent proof of a holy person's exemplary virtue, heroic scenes in which Christian truth is asserted and taught. Mary suffers a different kind of passion, one that combines old and new meanings of the word. Her 'passion' is not one of pincers or hot coals but of relentless temptation. Erotic desire is

her torture; it comprises the martyrdom that gives her the authority to teach Zosimus, an elderly monk who begs her for spiritual enlightenment. There is a quandary at the centre of their instructional encounter, however. The displacement of a saint's torture from body to conscience renders it less visible. In order for Mary to teach Zosimus the lesson of God's grace, she must reveal the nature of her suffering. Unfortunately, describing her sexual longings threatens to renew them and to imperil Zosimus' spiritual purity. Mary thus turns out to be an ambivalent mentor, at once drawing Zosimus away from his dangerous spiritual pride and pulling him into her sordid sensuality.

The *Life's* synthesis of pain and desire is illustrated by a telling translation in a passage where the aged holy woman describes her hesitation about being a teacher.<sup>2</sup> Zosimus, an elderly monk perfected in ascetic practices, has chased Mary through the desert and compelled her to tell him the story of her sanctity. She accepts her didactic role with apprehension: coerced into relating her youthful escapades, in this case her decision to buy passage by sea to Jerusalem with sexual favours, she nevertheless fears its seductive potential:

Miltsa me, abbud, forðon ic gewilnode mid him to farenne, þæt ic þe ma emwyrhtena on þære þrowunge mines wynlustas hæfde. Ic cwæð ær to þe, 'Ðu halga wer, miltsa me, þæt þu me ne genyde to areccenne mine gescydnysse.' God wat þæt ic heora forhtige, for þam þe ic wat þæt þas mine word ægðer gewemmad̃ ge þe ge þas lyfte. (OE 401–407)

Take pity on me, abbot, because I wanted to travel with them so that I would have more associates in the passion of my sensual pleasures. I said to you earlier, 'You holy man, take pity on me, so that you do not compel me to recount my confusions.' God knows that I fear them, for I know that my words corrupt both you and this air.

Here, Mary recognises the continuing danger of her past sins. Her words can defile, pollute, or injure Zosimus and the very air around them, as the verb 'gewemmad̃', translating 'maculant' (420), indicates. The Old English translator's choice of *gewemman* echoes the verb *geweman*, 'to turn, incline, seduce', a verb that could be used for the positive guidance offered by a teacher, but also to denote tempting or devilish seduction.<sup>3</sup> In the Old English translation, Mary recognises even more profoundly the dual nature of her teaching of Zosimus: the words she uses to explain God's grace and lead him to truth can also injure and seduce him.

Mary's brief, emotional speech condenses the subtle tensions that characterise her pedagogical encounter with Zosimus. It also contains a

linguistic expansion. The translator renders the Latin 'libidinis passionem' (417, the passion of wantonness) as 'þære þrowunge mines wynlustas'. In contrast to the Latin *passio*, which ranges in meaning from suffering, pain, and martyrdom to strong emotion, affection, desire, and lust,<sup>4</sup> Old English *þrowung* has the more restricted sense of passive or painful suffering of an action.<sup>5</sup> *þrowung* is the lexeme of choice for translating the crucifixion of Christ and martyrdoms of the saints into Old English.<sup>6</sup> Whether by choice or revealing error, the translator of the *Life* presses *þrowung* into service as 'lust' or 'desire'. Mary, a saint who will die of natural causes after years of penitential abstinence in the desert, thus describes herself as enduring an unlikely martyrdom in the very heat of her fleshly desires. By placing Mary's suffering at a point in her life when she is most emphatically following the flesh, the translator suggests a notion of penitence and learning intimately bound up with moral frailty. In contrast to Christian martyrs whose charismatic authority is crystallised as they deny the needs of their bodies and passively suffer tortures imposed by temporal authorities, Mary's *þrowung* occurs when she pursues her bodily lusts.<sup>7</sup>

The *Life's* adaptation of *þrowung* gestures to the unexpected locus of Mary's authority, and it also marks a turn inward.<sup>8</sup> In an echo of Ælfric's description of the Virgin Mary's suffering, Mary of Egypt's *passio* is primarily of the emotions, less so of the body. In his homily on the Assumption of the Virgin, Ælfric writes that the Virgin Mary was even greater than the martyrs, because 'heo þrowade þone martyrdom on hire sawle þe oþre martyras þrowodon on heora lichaman' (she suffered that martyrdom in her soul that other martyrs suffer in their bodies).<sup>9</sup> Just as Ælfric claims that Mary is entitled to the greatness of a *passio* despite not having died a martyr, so does the *Life of St Mary of Egypt* posit a saint whose inner anguish gives her spiritual authority.<sup>10</sup> However, while the tortures most martyrs undergo are visible to the eye, a fact reflected in the trope of the witnessing multitude in medieval *passiones*, the martyrdom of the soul must be described, argued for, and imagined. While the audience of a physical passion can, at least within the narrative frame, watch and passively learn, the student of an internal martyrdom must actively picture the saint's suffering in order to understand the magnitude of her sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, the instructional relationship in the *Life of St Mary of Egypt* centres around the need for acts of narration and imagination. As the slippage of *þrowung* suggests, for Zosimus to comprehend Mary of Egypt's salvation and subsequent sanctity, he must first understand her sinfulness.

The Latin and Old English lives of Saint Mary of Egypt present passion as an essential component of the most successful mode of pedagogy. In its

examination of model teachers, the *Life* traces an arc from the textbook perfection of Zosimus to the radical imperfection of Mary, and it does so because only Mary's sinfulness can demonstrate the capaciousness of divine grace. Mary's pedagogic effectiveness depends on her frailty and desire, on saintly *passio* experienced in the midst of sensual lusts rather than undertaken to avoid them, and on the communication of longing that, like much monastic expression, draws its affective force from intimate and erotic language. The result is two instructional encounters between Zosimus and Mary characterised by oscillation between sanctity and temptation, curiosity and coercion, holy desire for learning and lust for the teacher's body. This wavering is intensified in the Old English version, which emphasises Mary's corporeality, her seductive force, the presence of temptation in her encounter with Zosimus, and the relationship of these elements to Zosimus' vigorous curiosity.<sup>12</sup> Through a systematic series of translation choices, the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* makes unstable desire a key element of spiritual discipleship.

The *Life's* intensified focus on desire leads to an acknowledgement of the danger inherent in the teaching encounter, a recognition of the perilous agency of student, teacher, and the very lesson being imparted. First, the student must desire to learn, and yet curiosity itself has negative connotations in medieval writing. Moreover, if what the student wants to learn is the nature of the ascetic teacher's former sinfulness and the extent of her penitence, he threatens to force her to revisit her sin once again. Indeed, the *Life* at various points depicts both student and teacher as potential rapists so as to convey the violence of their desires and their willingness to coerce. The teacher, on her part, must draw the student to her by alternately concealing and revealing the truth he seeks. The *Life* recognises the same structure of desire we saw at play in *Solomon and Saturn I*, repeatedly showing that only that which is just out of reach, out of grasp, can awaken longing. And yet, Mary cannot teach this particular lesson of God's grace without completely revealing her sordid past, thus threatening Zosimus' purity and her own hard-won peace of mind.

In this chapter I argue for both the centrality and the danger of pedagogic desire in the *Life of St Mary of Egypt*, a reading I believe holds true for its Latin source but is emphasised in the Old English variants. If the *Life* reflects an ascetic strain in insular spirituality, one influenced by figures such as Antony and Paul the Hermit and reflected in Cuthbert and Guthlac, it also demonstrates Anglo-Saxons' interest in and attention to the workings of desire and its intellectual facet, curiosity, in the process of teaching. It offers a salutary contrast to the rhetoric of ascetic perfection

by showing the failings of Zosimus, a monk whose flawless observance of monastic rules has seduced him into pride. Despite the fact that it is not typically part of the story told about the Benedictine Reform or Ælfric's teaching programme, the *Life* should appeal to us precisely because it hints at an alternative tradition in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon hagiography and intellectual life.<sup>13</sup>

### **Ideas of Teaching in the *Life of St Mary of Egypt***

Saints' lives have a way of multiplying themselves, as though the barren bodies of holy people must be compensated for with an excess of textual reproduction.<sup>14</sup> The tale of Mary of Egypt originated in an anecdote in Cyril of Scythopolis' sixth-century Greek *Life of St Cyriacus*, and was elaborated into a fuller narrative later in the sixth century or early in the seventh, questionably attributed to Sophronius of Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> The story entered the Western tradition when Paul, a deacon of Naples, translated it into Latin. There were other Latin versions as well, but Paul's proved to be particularly influential, found in over a hundred medieval manuscripts. This version served as the source of the tenth-century Old English translation.<sup>16</sup> The earliest mentions of Mary of Egypt in Anglo-Saxon England occur in late ninth- and tenth-century calendars, and her *Life* in the version of Paul of Naples was present in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries, though Hugh Magennis considers it likely that Theodore of Tarsus introduced Mary of Egypt to England in the seventh century.<sup>17</sup> Paul's version of the *Life* can be found in the Cotton-Corpus Legendary, a multivolume collection of saints' lives compiled on the continent but known from English manuscripts. This collection, or something similar to it, served as Ælfric's main source for his *Lives of the Saints* in the late tenth century.<sup>18</sup> The Old English *Life* is closer to the texts of the *Vita Sanctae Mariae Egyptiacae* found in the Cotton-Corpus Legendary manuscripts BL Cotton Nero E.i, Part 1 and Salisbury, Cathedral Library 221, than to other versions.<sup>19</sup> However, in some cases the Old English deviates from the Cotton-Corpus text but preserves readings original to the Greek *Life* attributed to Sophronius. For this reason, Magennis argues that the Old English translation must have been based on a Latin text much like those found in the Cotton-Corpus manuscripts, but older and better.<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I compare the Old English translation and its variants to Magennis' text of Paul's *Vita*,<sup>21</sup> based on BL Cotton Nero E.i, Part 1, with the understanding that this is the closest text we have to the English translator's source and not the direct source.

The primary testimony to the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* is BL Cotton Julius E.vii (early eleventh century).<sup>22</sup> Here, the life of this penitent desert hermit has been inserted into a manuscript of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*. That this was a late addition is suggested by the fact that it is out of place in the calendar sequence, and by its absence from the table of contents.<sup>23</sup> It is one of four non-Ælfrician additions to the *sanctorale*, along with the *Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, the *Life of St Eustace*, and the *Life of St Euphrosyne*. Its translator followed the Latin original very closely, keeping so many participles that the English rendering can sometimes read more like a gloss on the Latin rather than a true translation.<sup>24</sup> Fragments of the Old English translation are also preserved in BL Cotton Otho B.x (first half of eleventh century) and in Gloucester, Cathedral Library 35 (mid-eleventh century).<sup>25</sup> Despite the dismissiveness the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* has occasionally drawn from critics – in his earlier work, Magennis characterised it as ‘much inferior to the lives by Ælfric’ and ‘not the work of an experienced translator’<sup>26</sup> – the fact that pieces from three copies survive testifies to its contemporary appeal.

The *Life* begins with Zosimus, a monk so perfect that, at the age of fifty-three, he begins to suspect that he has nothing left to learn. He travels to join a community of monks even more desolate, even more devout, and even more self-denying. Every year at Lent, the men go out into the desert to fast and humble themselves. After days of wandering in the wilderness, Zosimus spies a phantom-like woman, her body blackened by the sun, her hair white as wool. The aged Zosimus is filled with desire, begins to chase her, and ultimately compels Mary to tell him her life story. After leaving her family at the age of twelve for the sinful city of Alexandria, she abandoned herself to vices and lusts, so driven by her libido that she took no money for her favours.<sup>27</sup> Her conversion is propitiated when she joins a group of pilgrims taking sail for Jerusalem, offering the free use of her body as payment. Once in Jerusalem, Mary attempts to enter the temple to see the Holy Cross, but is repulsed by an invisible force. She prays to an image of the Virgin Mary, repents her sins, and is subsequently baptised and flees into the desert. After the encounter in which she recalls her conversion, Mary and Zosimus meet two more times: a year later, Zosimus administers the Eucharist to her, and a year after that, he finds her dead body and buries it with the help of a lioness.

Critical approaches to the Old English *Life* have addressed its quality and features as a translation,<sup>28</sup> its treatment of Mary's sanctity from allegorical and generic perspectives,<sup>29</sup> and its depiction of gender relations between Mary and Zosimus,<sup>30</sup> often with open-ended results. Indeed,

analyses of the *Life* typically find the text ambiguous and opaque. In Colin Chase's reading, for example, the answer to the *Life*'s central question of how to become perfect 'remains unexpressed in words in the text, residing in thirty years of desert silence which she barely mentions and cannot describe'.<sup>31</sup> Andrew Scheil focuses on the indeterminacy of Mary's body and Mary's *vita*, showing how Mary appears to us – and to Zosimus – as woman, animal, spirit, and body in rapid succession.<sup>32</sup> Clare Lees and Gillian Overing see this ambiguity in Mary's form and meaning as a sign of Zosimus' inability to read and see spiritually, and an impetus to his subsequent education.<sup>33</sup> In Lees' later return to the text, she and Diane Watt argue that Mary's transcendence of her 'womanliness and physicality' render her 'transgendered or genderqueer'.<sup>34</sup> Patricia Cox Miller, writing about the Latin version of the *Life*, argues that 'the figure of the harlot-saint is a grotesquerie – a not-quite-coherent construct – and as such brings to its most acute expression the problematic quality of early Christian attempts to construct a representation of female holiness'.<sup>35</sup> The difficulty of placing Mary may lie as much in certain modern perspectives on sanctity. After all, in her sexual availability, Mary resembles other reformed harlot saints such as Mary Magdalene, the prosperous actress Pelagia, and the prostitute Thaïs, each with her own long textual tradition.<sup>36</sup> Virginia Burrus has noted that interpreters of these holy harlots tend to consider 'sinfulness and sanctity' as necessarily opposing terms. Instead, Burrus argues for recognising that the power these women hold to turn their viewers to Christian faith is closely allied to their erotic seductiveness. Burrus stresses – in a way that is even more true for the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* than for the Latin – 'the *continuity* of her seductive seducibility, the *enviability* of her convertibility, the *lure* of her capacity to desire'.<sup>37</sup> The fact that so many literary analyses of Mary of Egypt's narrative end in equivocality might mirror the ambivalent nature of Mary's holiness, but it might also reflect the complex notion of sanctity and didactic authority at work in her *Life*.

While the *Life*'s most important instructional relationship is that of Mary and Zosimus, it is introduced by reflections on the kinds of teaching that take place in Zosimus' two monasteries. Indeed, the *Life*'s close attention to modes of monastic education prepares the reader to understand how Mary's pedagogy works. These monasteries represent two different ways of learning, namely by imitation of charismatic example and through introspection and solitary ascetic experience. These didactic methods are presented as successful, but only to a certain extent. As I will show, Mary's teaching incorporates aspects of each, but the transformative power of her pedagogy is founded in its astute use of pure and impure desire to spiritually edifying ends.

The story begins with what seems to be a terrifically successful model of teaching. Zosimus' life is unsullied, his practices steady and fruitful, even though his textbook asceticism leaves him unsatisfied and proud. He is constant and spiritual in psalmody and meditation on Scripture, and his dedication is often rewarded with divine enlightenment, 'godcundan onlihtnyse' (OE 40–48). Indeed, knowledge of his apparent perfection has made him the ancient monastic equivalent of a star professor:

Swa soðlice he wæs fulfremod on eallum munuclicum þeawum, þæt wel oft munecas of feorrum stowum and of mynstrum to him comon, þæt hi to his bysne and to his larum hi gewriðon and to þære onhyringe his forhæfednyse hi underðeoddon. (35–39)

He was indeed so perfected in all monastic practices, that very often monks came to him from distant places and monasteries, so that they bound themselves to his example and to his teachings, and subjected themselves to the imitation of his self-restraint.

Zosimus serves as a *bysen*, or example, to the monks who come to imitate him, in the tradition of education, or *paideia*, through charismatic pedagogy. Ancient *paideia* was an intimate process, a close relationship between teacher and pupil in which the student perfected himself by modelling his words and manners on the example of his master. The masculine pronouns are deliberate: Peter Brown has stressed the importance of male bonding at the heart of this relation. In antiquity, writes Brown, 'a literary tradition existed for the sole purpose of "making [persons] into classics": exposure to the classics of Greek and Latin literature was intended to produce exemplary beings, their raw humanity molded and filed away by a double discipline, at once ethical and aesthetic'.<sup>38</sup> Christian thinkers took up the idea of a teacher whose very life and body are example and text to be imitated, only with God as the ultimate exemplar. Exemplary teaching was a common feature of ascetic life as it is represented in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and in other early eremitic lives, and it is no surprise to find it in the *Life of St Mary of Egypt*.<sup>39</sup> The draw of an exceptional master or model could also be attributed to charisma, a gift or grace of God diffused to laymen through saints and holy persons. Stephen Jaeger, who has studied the continuation of this form of pedagogy in the cathedral schools of the tenth to twelfth centuries, stresses that 'charisma stimulates imitation'. And so it is that, despite the intense focus in charismatic pedagogy on the presence, the body, the immediate sight of the teacher, this same teacher also functions the way a text does, a classic that moulds its readers, or in Jaeger's



terms, 'a learnable discourse', 'a living textbook'.<sup>40</sup> This is the relationship Zosimus evidently had with the men who came to emulate his ascetic habits, and it is the relation he seeks with another master as he begins to journey away from the monastery he inhabited since childhood.<sup>41</sup>

The widespread admiration Zosimus enjoys for his seemingly flawless life tempts him to pride. Troubled by the idea that he might not be able to find any more teachers, he laments:

Hwæðer ænig munuc on eorðan sy þæt me mage aht niwes getæcan oððe me on ænigum þingum gefultumian þæs þe ic sylf nyte oððe þæt ic on þam munuclicum weorcum sylf ne gefylde, oþþe hwæðer ænig þæra sy þe westen lufiað þe me on his dædum beforan sy. (62–67)

Is there any monk on earth who could teach me anything new or support me in any matters that I did not myself know, or that I had not accomplished in monastic works, or is there any among those who love the desert who is better than me in his deeds?

Zosimus' role as an idealised, exemplary teacher thus results in his own spiritual stagnation, and impedes him from further learning. The *Life* does not explicitly state that his pupils' adoration has resulted in Zosimus' perception of himself as unequalled throughout the world, but the language used to describe both his perfection and his pride supports the idea. While students come to him because he is 'fulfremod' to emulate his 'bysne' and 'larum' (35–39), these words reoccur when he is 'gecnysned fram sumum gepancum swa swa he wære on eallum þingum *fulfremed* and he nanre maran *lare* ne *bysene* ne beporfte on his mode' (59–61, troubled by the thought that he might be perfected in all things and might not need any more teaching or example in his mind). The angel who appears to Zosimus succinctly presents the *Life's* critique of exemplary pedagogy when he points out that 'nis nan man þe hine *fulfremedne* æteowe' (70–71, no one can reveal himself to be perfect). The first sense of this somewhat convoluted advice is that perfection is impossible for mere mortals, especially for someone like Zosimus, who has yet to know real spiritual struggle. The angel's phrasing also hints at the problem of representing perfection to others.

Consciously presenting oneself as perfect can lead to pride, itself a decline from perfection. An illustrative example from the *Verba Seniorum* demonstrates the tendency of truly 'perfected' hermits to conceal their strict practices in order to avoid fame and the adulation of the multitude Zosimus seems to enjoy.<sup>42</sup> When travelling brothers decide to test Agathon's

famed humility by accusing him of pride, fornication, and other faults, the saintly man admits every one of the sins and throws himself on the ground to beg for forgiveness. He affirms every false accusation, with the exception of heresy, which is a separation from God. He later explains: 'I maintained the previous faults and sins for humility's sake, so that you may believe me a sinner. For we know that if the strength of humility is guarded, great is the health of the soul.'<sup>43</sup> As Agathon demonstrates, among Christian ascetics the only convincing performance of perfection is a rigorous show of fallibility. The *Life* will introduce a similar notion that true humility resides in acknowledging one's sinfulness when Mary recounts her past exploits, with the important difference that Mary's faults are real.

The practices of Zosimus' second monastery embody another theory of learning: there, solitary ascetic experience is key to spiritual improvement, and the fruit of this process of discovery is closely guarded. In contrast to the first monastery, which was evidently porous enough for Zosimus' discipline to become famous beyond its walls, here the most profound lessons are kept hidden, as is, indeed, the monastery itself. Upon arriving, Zosimus presents himself as a potential student, telling the abbot: 'ic for lare intigan eow her gesohte' (87–88, I sought you here for reasons of learning). The discerning abbot replies by ignoring Zosimus' claim that he wants to learn, and implicitly addresses the famous monk's understanding of himself as a model and teacher: 'Ne mæg ænig mann oþerne getimbrian buton he hine sylfne gelomlice behealde and he mid sylfrum andgyte þæt beo sylf wyr-cende, God to gewitan hæbbende' (94–97, Nor can any man teach another unless he observe himself frequently, and unless he works on that himself with sober perception, with God as a witness). In an instructional moment with mildly antagonistic subtext, the abbot implicitly questions the extent to which Zosimus could have been an excellent teacher in the first place. He calls into question the simple exemplary model of pedagogy, in which externally sensible practices such as prayer, work, and stability are admired and emulated. Instead, he bases didactic authority on a move inward, on wrestling with one's sinfulness in the face of God, not before an audience of disciples. However, while the new monks' practices give every indication of being spiritually salutary, their insistence on secrecy and silence keeps them from teaching the grace of God.

The *Life's* introduction first announces its concern with secrecy and revelation, with stories that must be told and those better left unsaid. Its narrator begins by citing Raphael's injunction in the Book of Tobit not to keep the works of God secret: 'Soðlice hit is swiðe derigendlic þæt man cynnes digle geopenige, and eft þære sawle is micel genyðrung þæt mon

þa wuldorfæstan Godes weorc bediglige' (11–14, Truly it is very harmful to reveal the secrets of one's kin, and again it greatly debases the soul to hide the works of glorious God). While he subsequently uses this as justification to relate the story of Mary despite its implausibility, his (altered) citation of Tobit reveals an awareness of the problem posed by secrets. The divine must be discerned from the human, the danger of telling weighed against the consequences of silence. The theme of secrecy occurs again in the description of Zosimus' second monastery, located in a place 'swa westen and swa digle þæt næs na þæt an þæt heo wæs ungewunelic ac eac swilce uncuð þam landleodum him sylfum' (130–32, so isolated and so secret that not only was it unfrequented but also unknown to the very people of that country). While Zosimus is accustomed to being famous for his severe practices, in the new monastery monks are required to remain quiet about the ascetic wandering they undertake in the desert during the first week of Lent. Not only do they not boast of their abstinence, they are forbidden to ask one another about what practices they undertook: 'heora nan oþerne ne axode on hwilce wisan he þæs geswincas gewin gefylde' (177–78, none of them asked each other how he accomplished the struggle of that exercise).

The monastery's rule is intended to preserve the monks' humility, a quality Zosimus has notably lacked. Since the abbot explains to Zosimus that sober introspection is necessary for anyone who might become a teacher to others, the monastery's practice of secrecy at Lent also seems to support the kind of inward focus that will result in learning. During their most profound ascetic experience, the monks are to concern themselves only with their own souls, not with the achievements of others. And yet, the consequence of this policy is that any divine experience occurring in the desert may not be taught. The monastery's fine practices during the rest of the year serve as a model for imitation: 'Pas weorc Zosimus behealdende hine sylfne geornlice to fulfremednysse aþenede' (117–19, when Zosimus beheld these works he eagerly extended himself to perfection). However, when the monks exit their monastery doors entrusting themselves to divine providence, the results of that providence remain concealed. Contra Raphael's command, whatever God works in the desert is kept hidden. Mary's teaching ultimately strikes a balance between the prideful visibility of Zosimus' instruction of other monks and the unproductive secrecy of his second monastery's ascetic practice, vacillating between the desire to hide the secrets of her personal sins and the need to reveal God's intervention in her life. Strictly speaking, neither her solitary reflection nor her ascetic feats in the desert teach Zosimus. Rather, he learns because she

chooses to tell him about them, the revelation of her own sordid past being necessary to demonstrate the extent of divine grace.

### Mary of Egypt's Pedagogy

But what, and how, does Mary teach? Education in the *Life's* first monastery consists of exemplarity with inadequate reflection, while the second monastery privileges intense personal reflection but neglects to transform its lessons into exemplary teaching. Mary, on the other hand, models introspection and the resulting compunction for Zosimus, showing him how she faced her sinfulness so that he may come to terms with his own. The central moment in her own education occurs at the church in Jerusalem, when, exhausted by repeated attempts to enter, she reflects on her sinfulness:

Pus ic þrywa oþþe feower siþum þrowode minne willan to geseonne and eac to fremanne, and þa ða ic naht ne gefremode þa ongan ic ofer þæt georne wenan, and min lichama wæs swiðe geswenced for þam nyde þæs gebringes. Ða gewat ic witodlice þanone, and me ana gestod on sumum hwomme þæs cafertunes and on minum mode geornlice þohte and smeade for hwilcum intigum me wære forwyrned þæs liffæstan treowes ansyn. Þa onhran soðlice min mod and þa eagan minre heortan hælo andgit, mid me sylfre þencende þæt me þone ingang belucen þa unfeormeganda minra misdæda. Ða ongan ic biterlice wepan and swiðe gedrefed mine breost cnyssan and of innewear-dre heortan heofende forðbringan þa geomorlican siccetunga. (476–89)

Thus I suffered my will to see and to do, and since I did not accomplish anything I began then to think about that eagerly. And my body was very tired because of the force of that pushing. Then, truly, I went from there, and stood alone in a corner of the courtyard, and in my mind I thought and considered carefully for what reason the sight of the living tree was denied me. Then the understanding of salvation touched my mind and the eyes of my heart, with me thinking that my inexpiable transgressions had locked the entrance to me. Then I began to weep bitterly, exceedingly troubled I beat my breast, and, lamenting from my inward heart, I began to bring forth sorrowful sighs.

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. To begin with, the first line contains another unusual use of 'suffering', all the more remarkable because it seems not to be a translation. In the Latin, Mary describes herself as 'conans et nihil proficiens' (483–84, attempting and not accomplishing anything), and there is no mention of suffering or will. Magennis translates this as 'I attempted to see and also attain what I wished', thus loosely

following Skeat, who renders the line 'I endeavoured to behold and also to fulfil my will.'<sup>44</sup> Both Skeat and Magennis thus translate *þrowian*, a word meaning 'to suffer', with an active sense it does not possess.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, this confusing passage in the Old English contains another mini-passion for the future Saint Mary, one combining physical exhaustion and emotional compunction. The scene of anguish is, moreover, also one of learning. The English translator intensifies the notion that this experience of suffering is an occasion to think, a moment in Mary's education when she becomes a deliberate student of her own soul. The Latin chooses a single construction to describe Mary's thinking: 'uix aliquando ob quam causam prohibebar uidere uiuificum lignum in cogitatione reduxi' (487–89, just a little later I recalled in my thoughts the reason why I was prevented from seeing the lifegiving cross). In contrast, the Old English text uses three verbs to emphasise Mary's intellectual search for understanding, *wenan*, *smeagan*, and *þencan*. As in the other texts explored in this book, pain is a stimulus to thinking and understanding.

Mary's reward for her meditation in the courtyard is compunction. She imagines herself in the presence of the Virgin Mary, and after begging her to chase away foul thoughts, is rewarded with illumination:

Donne ic soðlice oferflowendlice sorgigende weop, and ic heardlice mine breost cnyssende þonne geseah leoht gehwanon me ymbutan scinende, and me þonne sona sum staþolfæstlic smylnyss to becom. (637–41)

Then I truly wept with overflowing sorrow, and I beat my breast harshly. Then I saw a light shining from all sides around me, and then a steadfast tranquillity suddenly came to me.

The gestures she uses to express her contrition echo other moments in the *Life*. Later, in the desert, when tempted by the memory of the lewd songs she used to enjoy, she repeats these movements of sorrow, 'wepende, mine breost mid minum handum cnyssende' (630, weeping, beating my breast with my hands). The Old English translation reinforces the repeated image of Mary beating her chest by rendering the different Latin verbs for striking with the same English word: while the Latin varies diction with 'pectus tundere' (492), 'pectus ... percutiens' (612–13), and 'pectus ... tundebam' (619–20) respectively, the Old English regularly uses *cnyssan*. Since *cnyssan* can be used in Old English figuratively for the violent motions of the mind, the translator also uses it to gloss *pulsare* earlier in the story.<sup>46</sup> Zosimus, at the peak of his supposed perfection, is 'pulsatus ... a quibusdam cogitationibus' (69–70) or 'gecnyssed fram sumum geþancum' (59),

although he happens to be struck by the wrong thoughts. The Old English text thus suggests a connection between Zosimus' and Mary's spiritual progress, unifying their moments of painful self-reflection under one word.

Despite this foreshadowing, when Zosimus 'pulsates' he has yet to learn how to assess himself correctly. In a sense, also, he must learn how to suffer, having wallowed in the false tranquillity of pride. In the course of hearing the story of Mary's conversion and witnessing her miraculous powers, he both understands his own fallibility and suffers in a way that echoes her travails. After seeing her walk on the surface of the Jordan, he acknowledges his imperfection: 'Wuldor sy þe, Drihten God, þu þe me þurh þas þine þeowene æteowdest hu micel ic ... on minre agenre gesceawunge on þam gemete þæra oþra fulfremodnysse' (820–23, Glory be to you, Lord God, who through this your maidservant showed me how much I [am inferior] in my own observation when compared to the perfection of others). Finally, when faced with the daunting prospect of burying Mary's corpse in the hard desert earth, he comes to resemble Mary aching to enter the church in Jerusalem:

And seo eorðe wæs swiðe heard, and ne mihte he adelfan, forþon he wæs swiðe gewæced ægðer ge mid fæstene ge on þam langan geswince, and he mid sworetungum wæs genyrwed, and mid þære heortan deopnyse geomrode. (915–19)

And the earth was very hard, and he could not dig, because he was very weakened both with fasting and due to the long toil, and he was oppressed with panting, and mourned from the deepness of his heart.

Exhausted with futile physical labour, sighing and mourning from his heart, Zosimus recalls Mary's suffering in the courtyard. Rather than a key early moment in a saintly *Bildungsroman*, however, physical and emotional distress seem to be part of Zosimus' main lesson, the completion of the education he began when he left his first monastery.

Seen from this perspective, Mary's teaching of Zosimus seems to strike just the right balance between introspection and exemplarity, inner and outer teaching. She describes for him both the intellectual processes leading to her compunction and the gestures with which she performs her shame; he learns to feel what she feels, to weep as she weeps. Moreover, since Mary asks him to keep her story secret only while she lives, her eventual death liberates him to tell his fellow monks about the wonders he saw and heard in the desert. At the end we are told that the monks 'ealle Godes mærdæ wurðodon' (952–53, all praised God's glories), a conclusion

which seems nicely to resolve the problem of secrecy introduced at the *Life's* beginning. However, describing the *Life's* pedagogy in this way leaves out the main force driving the relationship between Mary and Zosimus, and indeed, underpinning much education in the *Life*: desire. For while the *Life* presents its readers with a salutary ending – Zosimus recognises his fallibility, he learns to suffer and praise the Lord – the path to this conclusion is a treacherous one. Mary's pedagogy of desire brings up anxieties concerning representation, compulsion, seduction, and temptation, all of which are braided throughout this tense instructional relationship.

While Mary's instruction of Zosimus incorporates pedagogical methods in use at the two monasteries, its characteristic quality is the presence of desire. Mary gains her authority to teach not only from the feats of abnegation she performs after her conversion, but from the *passio* she endured in the midst of her iniquity, a suffering coterminous with lust. Her insatiable passions lead her to find God, and she manipulates Zosimus' longing for her and her story to teach him the power of divine grace. In short, desire, even when directed towards the wrong object, propels the characters towards compunction and illumination. The *Life's* perspective on spiritual improvement is thus in line with Geoffrey Harpham's observation that 'while asceticism recognizes that desire stands between human life and perfection, it also understands that desire is the only means of achieving perfection, and that the movement towards ideality is necessarily a movement of desire'.<sup>47</sup> My discussion of *Solomon and Saturn I* demonstrated how the poem uses Saturn's curiosity about a prayer he will never possess to spur new enthusiasm for the Pater Noster in the minds of literate Christian readers. The *Life of St Mary of Egypt* structures desire in a similar, though not identical, fashion. It is not a story of yearning for impossible things, for indeed, both main characters ultimately achieve their spiritual goals. Instead, it repeatedly shows Mary and Zosimus hastening towards an object, often without even knowing what it is they have begun to desire, their eagerness increasing as they encounter obstacles on the way, and, finally, reaching satisfaction. Despite the fact that most of its action takes place in the desert, the *Life* is filled with borders and barriers: the door to Zosimus' new monastery, the valley separating Mary and Zosimus at their first meeting, the temple door that repels Mary, the Mediterranean sea, and the Jordan river.<sup>48</sup> In a recurrent visual motif, these features of the *Life's* landscape act as hurdles, delaying the characters' physical or spiritual gratification. Appropriately enough, Mary, with her sun-scorched skin, recalls the bride in the *Song of Songs*.<sup>49</sup> The *Song*, with its depiction of a bride and bridegroom approaching each other yet kept apart, represents a

similar understanding of the way desire is evoked, frustrated, and increased. Patricia Cox Miller has traced Jerome's use of the *Song of Songs* to describe ascetic longing, as it 'constructs erotic love in such a way that its climax is always deferred, never quite reached, yet it holds out union as the end toward which the lovers strive'.<sup>50</sup> Gregory the Great used the bride's search for her bridegroom in the *Song* as an illustration of the way wise men's desire for God is often delayed so that it might grow.<sup>51</sup> Mary's dark skin, with its biblical and patristic resonance, would have been yet another visual index of longing increased by frustration.

Although the most successful mode of teaching represented in the *Life* is based on longing, a pedagogy of desire brings with it complications. First, desire can be morally execrable or laudable depending on whether its object is worldly or divine, and the intellectual subset of desire known as curiosity shares this dual nature. The language used to describe longing in the *Life* reflects this wavering between the soul's ardour and the burning of the flesh. The second problem with desire is that it leads to coercion. The lover, the seeker, the one who wants to know and to possess, is also someone who is potentially willing to force satisfaction from the object of desire. For this reason, teaching by desire is an unstable proposition, incorporating both seduction and the threat of violation.

Although the *Life* begins with an account of Zosimus, chronologically speaking the first education in desire is Mary's own. Despite her aggressive pursuit of sex and other gratifications of the flesh early in her story, she is passive in her passion, powerless to resist its urges. As she begins to make her way toward the Cross, we see her longing increase as its object is withheld, first by her difficulties in obtaining passage to Jerusalem, then by being barred from the church. In the desert she eventually learns to master her temptations and basic bodily needs, but as her encounter with Zosimus demonstrates, she also learns to manipulate desire more astutely when dealing with others. This is not to say that desire becomes a tamed, controllable force, for Mary repeatedly indicates that it is not, but that she provokes it more effectively.

Tellingly, during her youthful sexual escapades Mary has not yet understood how desire functions, nor how best to elicit it. She explains that she did not demand any gifts for the loss of her virginity because she wished to satisfy her burning lust:

ac ic wæs swiðe onæled mid þære hatheortnyssse þæs synlustes, þæt ic gewilnode butan ceape þæt hi me þe mænigfealdlicor to geurnon, to þy þæt ic þe eð mihte gefyllan þa scyldfullan gewilnunga mines forligeres (376–79)



but I was so inflamed with the fervour of sinful lust that I wished they would run to me in greater numbers, without pay, so that I could satisfy the wicked desires of my fornication.

The focus here is on her own lechery, but she also wants to awaken desire in others, to have her potential lovers run towards her the way Zosimus later does. As a young woman, she believes the way to do this is to make herself available to all men, or even to force herself on them when they do not readily oblige, as with her fellow sailors on the boat.<sup>52</sup>

Zosimus goes to the desert because he wishes to find a teacher, and in this sense he already has an object of desire before he ever sees Mary. Seeing Mary, he runs towards her in order to know, 'to oncnawenne' (225), what kind of wild animal or 'wildeor' she might be. We are meant to understand his chase of her in the context of his search for enlightenment, but his longing has a violent undertone. Upon seeing her he immediately wants to 'join' himself with her. His fervour seems appropriate as an expression of monastic longing for the sacred, but the chase vascillates between terrifying and ridiculous:

Sona swa hi Zosimus geseah, þa witodlice, his ealdan ylde ofergetiligende and þæt geswinc his syðfætēs ne understandende, mid hrædestan ryne þenigende arn, forþam þe he gewilnode hine geðeodan þam þe ðær fleah. He witodlice hire wæs ehtende, and heo wæs fleonde. (227–31)

As soon as Zosimus saw her, then truly, overcoming his old age and ignoring the effort of his journey, he hastened, exerting himself with the fastest running, because he wanted to join himself to the one who was fleeing there. He was really pursuing her, and she was fleeing.

As Scheil has also argued, this is a parodic staging of a potential rape scene.<sup>53</sup> Readers of the *Life* would have been familiar with the many tales of female saints whose virginity was threatened by lustful Roman governors and who bravely resisted. We can think even more concretely of how this passage might have been construed by an Anglo-Saxon reader by reading it within its manuscript context in BL Cotton Julius E.vii, where it fits uneasily into the *Lives of Saints*. Ælfric prefers his female saints to be ignorant of the pleasures of the flesh, though they certainly have enough opportunities to learn. Examples abound: the wicked pagan suitor of Saint Lucy attempts to take her to a brothel; Saint Agatha is sent by her cruel suitor to a prostitute to be perverted; Saint Agnes' suitor has her stripped and led naked to a brothel.<sup>54</sup> Read in this context, the chase scene in the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* not only reminds its audience of the

way female saints are usually victimised by their eager suitors, but renders the generic sexual aggression of hagiographies comical by replacing the virile pagan governor with a gasping senile ascetic, and the nubile virgin with a repentant, elderly harlot.

While Zosimus had searched for a 'father', his need for a mentor is transformed into a more complex emotion, combining the urge to learn with yearning for the beloved teacher, and expressed in the erotic vocabulary of monastic devotion. After their first meeting, Zosimus prays that God will show him 'þone gewilnodan andwlitan' (761–62, that desired face) again. Granted another brief encounter a year later, he laments: 'Eala, wære me gelyfed þæt ic moste þinum swaðum fyligan and þines deorwurðan andwlitan gesihðe brucan!' (840–42, Oh, that it would be permitted to me to follow in your footsteps and enjoy the sight of your precious face!). Another year afterwards, he returns to the desert, searching for her once again:

Ða æfter oferfarenum þæs geares ryne, becom on þæt widgille westen and geornlice efste to þære wuldorlican gesihðe, and þær lange hyderes and þyderes secende for, oþþæt he sum swutol tacn þære gewilnedan gesihðe and wilnunge þære stowe undergeat, and he geornlice mid his eagenas scearpnyssum hawigende ge on þa swiðran healfe ge on þa wynstran, swa swa se gleawesta hunta, gif he þær mihte þæt sweteste wildeor gegripan. (867–75)

After the year's course had passed, he came to the vast desert and zealously hurried to that glorious sight, and there he went, searching for a long time hither and thither, until he perceived some clear sign of the desired sight and of the desire of that place. And with the sharpness of his eyes he eagerly looked right and left, like the most skilful hunter, whether he could seize the sweetest wild animal there.

While at this late point in the narrative Zosimus recognises Mary's ascetic authority, his longing for her is still expressed in terms both erotic and brutalising.<sup>55</sup> Once again, she is more animal than human, and once again, an undercurrent of violence characterises Zosimus' pursuit of her.

If the language of monastic longing for the divine is here used in a way that draws attention to its base, sexual valence, so is Zosimus' curiosity. One of Mary's speeches conflates Zosimus' need to know with his need to see or have her, a reference to the carnal dimension of curiosity, or to what Augustine described as 'concupiscentia oculorum':<sup>56</sup>

Hwi wæs þe, la abbod Zosimus, swa micel neod me synful wif to geseonne, oððe hwæs wilnast þu fram me to hæbbenne oþþe to witenne, þæt þu ne slawedest swa micel geswinc to gefremmanne for minum þingum? (271–75)

Oh, Abbot Zosimus, why did you have such a need to see me, a sinful woman, or what do you want to have or to know from me, that you did not rest from going to so much trouble on account of me?

Still, despite the aggressive implications of his curiosity, in chasing Mary he also resembles her as she hastened towards baptism in the River Jordan: ‘*Ða þa ic þone weg wiste, ic wepende be þam siðfæte arn, symle þa axunga þære ascan towriðende, and gemang þam ðæs dæges siðfæt wepende gefylde*’ (569–72, When I knew the way, I ran along that path weeping, constantly twisting inquiry onto inquiry, and in the course of this I finished the day’s journey weeping). Like Zosimus, she runs, weeps, and asks, desperate to know the path to salvation. Her goal in this case is an unambiguously positive one, but the recurring motif of longing, chasing, desiring to see, know, and experience remains profoundly ambivalent. While desire is central to the teaching encounter between Mary and Zosimus, and indeed, part of what makes it so transformative for the latter, the *Life* understands it as a dangerous emotion, uneasily wavering between spiritual and physical objects. The Latin version of Mary’s life already depicts teaching as a morally precarious undertaking, and, as I will show, the Old English translation systematically emphasises how hazardous Mary and Zosimus are to one another.

### **The Danger of Teaching**

It is not hard to read the *Life of St Mary of Egypt* along orthodox lines. Mary embodies the voracious sexuality of woman unbridled by Christian doctrine, and her conversion results in the extreme discipline of her soul and body and submission to masculine institutional authority. Her turn to God, as Lynda Coon puts it, ‘could teach Christian audiences that redemption is possible even for the most loathsome sinners’.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, as Magennis points out, the *Life*’s ‘suggestion of spiritual self-sufficiency’ is tempered by Mary’s insistence on receiving the Eucharist, a sacrament for which she is dependent on priests.<sup>58</sup> Zosimus, in turn, despite the signs of pride he displays at the start of the story, is zealous in pursuit of spiritual betterment and correctly identifies Mary as the ideal teacher to lead him to it. Yet despite the fact that the *Life* ultimately depicts the successful education of both Mary and Zosimus, the teaching encounter between these two characters demonstrate the ways effective pedagogy can incorporate threatening subtexts and conflicting vectors of power. The meeting of these two ascetics is a complex tango of danger and desire: bodies threaten to be either deceptive apparitions or temptingly tangible, words recall sins and compel their repeating.

The meeting between Zosimus and Mary is fraught with potential danger starting with his first sidelong glimpse of her. His initial reaction to the sight of Mary is fear, ‘forþan þe he wende þæt hit wære sumes gastes scinhyw þæt he þær geseah’ (209–10, because he thought that it was the illusion of some spirit that he saw there). In both the Latin and Old English versions, Mary is a vision at double remove from physical reality, ‘fantasia alicuius spiritus’ (215–16, the fantasy of some spirit), highlighting her potentially deceptive nature. Zosimus’ momentary fear that Mary may be a ghost or demon suggests more than a mere mirage. The great challenge facing hermits of the desert from St Antony onwards was to withstand the temptations of demons, who might appear as seductive women, ugly hags, or Ethiopian boys.<sup>59</sup> Scheil notes that Mary is reminiscent of the demons who tempt Antony in Athanasius’ *Life of St Antony*, especially since her skin, blackened by the sun, is a visual echo of the demon who appears in the shape of an ugly black boy.<sup>60</sup> This kind of demon could be sexually suggestive, as in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, where Abba Heraclides tells of a would-be monk who sins, ‘a prey to *accidie*’, and is frightened by a black Ethiopian in his bed.<sup>61</sup> The Old English translator recognised and elaborated the menacing implications of Mary’s appearance. His choice of *scinhyw* to translate *fantasia*, a ‘fancy, mental image, imagination’,<sup>62</sup> brings in even more dangerous connotations than the original. According to Bosworth-Toller, *scinhiw* denotes ‘a form produced by magic, phantom, spectre’, and glosses not only *fantasia*, as here, but also *fantasma*, *imaginatio*, and *delusio mentis*.<sup>63</sup> The translator’s choice conveys the idea that Mary, at first sidelong glance, is not just a false apparition or imagined vision, but one potentially brought about by sorcery.

In an oscillation characteristic of the *Life*, both the narrator and Mary herself subsequently draw attention to her corporeality; in a contradiction equally typical of the *Life*, Mary-as-body is even more threatening than Mary-as-ghost. For if a desert demon might tempt Zosimus with the deceptive appearance of a woman’s form, Mary’s flesh is present and visible, albeit not as seductive as it once was. Mary’s speeches throughout the story maintain Zosimus’ interest by alternately concealing and revealing in a rhetorical striptease. Despite her protests, she maintains his interest by being at once available and untouchable, vividly present and always turning out of sight. The way she refers to her own body demonstrates this effect:

Ða witodlice se *lichama* þe ðær fleah ðyllice stemne forð sende and þus cwæð: ‘Ðu abbod Zosimus, miltsa me for Gode, ic þe bidde, forþon ic ne mæg me þe geswutelian and ongeanweardes þe gewenden, forþon ic

eom wifhades mann and eallunga *lichamicum* wæfelsum bereafod, swa swa þu sylf gesihst, and þa sceame mines *lichaman* hæbbende unoferwrigene.' (250–56)

Then truly the body who fled there sent such a voice out and spoke thus: 'You, abbot Zosimus, have mercy on me for God's sake, I pray you, because I may not show myself to you and turn towards you, for I am a woman and bereft of all bodily clothing, as you see yourself, and the shame of my body is not covered.'

The Old English *lichama*, 'body', echoes the Latin text's triple use of *corpus*, giving a sense of Mary as a body, rather than a person, even when she is first heard speaking. We can read this as Mary's insistence on her own frail humanity and lack of demonic power, though the narrator's description of her as a mere *lichama* emitting a voice strikes an uncanny note. However, Mary also underscores her femininity by referring to her body, drawing attention to her visible sex – 'swa swa þu sylf gesihst' – even as she turns to hide it. Mary's is a rhetoric of inverse performatives, directing Zosimus' gaze to the precise area she wants concealed.

A little later during this first encounter, in a section missing from BL Cotton Julius E.vii but found in fragmentary form in Gloucester, Cathedral Library 35, Zosimus sees Mary praying and floating above the ground. Throwing himself down in holy terror, he begins to wonder if 'hit gast wære þæt ðær mid hwylcere hiwunga gebæde hi' (338–39, it might be a spirit that prayed there with a kind of pretense). *Hiwung* can mean 'form, figure' as well as 'pretence, hypocrisy, dissimulation'.<sup>64</sup> While it is often used for dissimulated belief, it can also describe the deceptive shape or appearance of a devil, as in the Old English prose *Life of St Guthlac* and the *Rule of Chrodegang*.<sup>65</sup> Mary reads Zosimus' thoughts, and chastises him for his suspicion:

To hwy gedrefest þu abbot þine geþohtas to geæswicianne on me swylce ic hwylc gast syrwiende gebedu fremme? Ac wite þu man þæt ic eom synful wif, swa þeahhwæðere utan ymbseald mid þam halgan fulluhte, and ic nan gast ne eom ac æmerge and axe and eall flæsc, and nan gastlice. (340–45)

Why do you trouble your thoughts, abbot, to be offended with me as though I were some spirit praying craftily? But know, man, that I am a sinful woman, even though protected from without by holy baptism. And I am no spirit, but dust, and ash, and all flesh, and nothing spiritual.

The tone of Mary's speech here, as in so much of what she says, is rich and modulated, flickering between offended chastisement, unflinching

humility, and ironic flirtation. Again, read in context, Mary's rhetorically laden insistence on the materiality and sinfulness of her own flesh is meant to assure Zosimus that she is not a demonic apparition. It is also a first moral lesson to her eager student: she is telling Zosimus to look more carefully, to be more discerning, to understand how lowly she is and, perhaps more importantly, to learn from her belief in her own worthlessness. As always, however, Mary's lessons have a double edge: in telling Zosimus that she is not dangerous because she is not a spirit pretending to pray, she reminds him of the presence of her body, once seductive and the source of sin.<sup>66</sup> She may not be a spirit, or *gast*, but she is also not exactly the spiritual mother, or 'gastlice modor' (289) Zosimus has in mind.

The translator's choice of *hiwung* to describe Mary betrays an anxiety regarding representation more generally true for the *Life of St Mary of Egypt*, and links this passage to a moment later in the narrative when Mary really is a deceptive teacher. When describing her sexual adventures on the boat to Jerusalem, Mary will claim that 'nis nan asecgendlic oððe unasecgendlic fracodlicnysse *hiwung* þæs ic ne sih tihtende and lærende' (432–34, there is no speakable or unspeakable form of obscenity that I did not provoke and teach. My italics). The lexical link between these two passages, present in the Old English and not in the Latin, highlights the precariousness of the teaching encounter between Mary and Zosimus, and the danger of trusting a teacher whose previous lessons were, in fact, sinful deceptions. Moreover, the Old English expands on the Latin to underscore the seductive aspects of teaching. While the Latin Mary says she became a teacher to the sailors (445–46, *magistra ... effecta*), the translator extends the idea into two verbs. *Læran* primarily means 'to teach', while *tyhtan* includes this meaning, but is more often used for 'to incite, persuade, provoke' (both God and the devils do it).<sup>67</sup> The translator's choice emphasises Mary's dual role as a teacher who instigates her first pupils to sin, then exhorts her later student to more profound virtue. Early in their first meeting, Zosimus looks for a teacher in Mary, but suspects her of being a ghost who practises *hiwung* in the sense of 'deception'. She argues against that suspicion, but we learn later that she is, in fact, a teacher of *hiwung*, or perversion, and that her speeches can enflame her students to sin.

Mary's coercion of the sailors, conveyed in Latin by *compellere* and in English by *genydan*, is also part of the larger drama of compulsion present in the *Life*. While Mary uses *genydan* to refer to her past sexual predation, she also uses it in two speeches that express her misgivings about confessing these sins to Zosimus in the first place. The first of these is the

passage that began this chapter, in which she recoils in horror as she relates how she bartered for the passage to Jerusalem with her body. She repeats plaintively, ‘Ðu halga wer, miltsa me, þæt þu me ne *genyde* to arecenne mine gescyndnyse’ (404–407, You holy man, take pity on me, so that you do not compel me to recount my confusions). While her next line betrays her awareness that this story, so necessary for Zosimus’ understanding of her prior sinfulness, threatens to defile both him and the air, she also clearly thinks of herself as forced by Zosimus to recount her shameful deeds. Whereas Zosimus’ earlier chase of Mary across the desert could be read a slapstick version of a hagiographic rape scene, this passage marks the moment when his desire to join himself to Mary becomes truly threatening.<sup>68</sup> The use of *compellere/genydan* to describe both the way Zosimus forces Mary to tell her story and how Mary forces the sailors to submit to her sexual advances suggests a disturbing parallel between his Christian, ascetic desire for knowledge of her life and her pre-baptismal yearning for sexual adventure.

Mary also uses *compellere* to describe the peril of relating her story to Zosimus. When relating the seventeen years of temptation she endured in the desert after her conversion, she once again expresses her frustration at having to tell her story:<sup>69</sup>

Cogitationes autem que ad fornicationem iterum *compellebant* me, quomodo enarrari possum tibi? Abba, ignosce, ignis intus infelix corpus meum nimius succendebat, et omnem me per omnia exurebat, et ad desiderium mixtionis trahebat. (622–26)

How can I describe to you the thoughts which drove me again to fornication? Abba, have mercy, a fire wholly lit up my unhappy body from within, and consumed me wholly, and drew me to the desire for intercourse.

In the perilous dynamic between Mary and Zosimus, one based on compulsion of sex, speech, and thoughts, this speech is the final, dangerous reverberation. Mary is a sexually voracious woman who forces men to fulfil her lusts and threatens to tempt Zosimus too. She is a troubling teacher, though one who recognises the hazard she embodies, at once bestial and seductive, when she says to him that if she were to begin relating things about herself, ‘sona þu flihist fram me on þi gemete swilc man næddran fleo’ (353–54, you will soon flee from me in the same way one flees a snake). For his part, Zosimus is threatening due to the violence of his curiosity and intensity of his desire for her as teacher. Not only are they dangerous to each other, but by accepting the role of teacher, Mary becomes dangerous

to herself. To fulfil his need for enlightenment, she must revisit her debasement, an encounter with her past necessary for his education:

Ac me sceamað nu to gereccenne hu ic on þam fruman ærest minne fæmnum had besmat and hu ic unablinndlice and unafyllendlice þam leahtrum þære synlusta læg underþeoded. Þis is nu witodlice sceortlice to areccenne, ac ic nu swaþeah hraðor gecyðe þæt þu mæge oncnawan þone unalyfedan bryne minra leahtra þe ic hæfde on þære lufe þæs geligeres. (365–71)

But I am ashamed now to recount how, in the beginning, I first defiled my virginity and how I unceasingly and insatiably lay subjected to the fault of desiring to sin. This really should be told quickly now, but I nevertheless say it more readily so that you might understand the illicit burning of my sins that I had in the love of fornication.

Mary only half-willingly accepts that she must describe the full extent of her burning lust: she will speak, but speak quickly, and only because knowledge is at stake, so that Zosimus may understand.

Recounting her past sexual escapades is certainly humiliating to Mary, but can it reasonably be said to be dangerous to her hard-won equilibrium? She did, after all, spend a total of forty-seven years in the wilderness before first encountering Zosimus, and when discussing her battle with temptation she only focuses on the first seventeen, implying that the subsequent three decades were placid. However, while the Latin Mary maintains a relatively clear sequence of events in her description of her desert desires, her Old English counterpart makes a number of telling slips that fuse the time of her temptation to the present moment. As a result, the Old English text presents its readers with a Mary still potentially troubled by her bodily needs. This ongoing temptation heightens the tension of her exchange with Zosimus, since it really does imperil her to teach him. Moreover, she teaches him not with the authority of someone who is perfectly and permanently purified of sin, but as a living example of ongoing emotional struggle in the pursuit of asceticism. In both the Latin and Old English texts, Mary explicitly states that recalling her temptations in the desert could renew them. When Zosimus asks her how she was able to withstand fleshly desire over the space of so many years, Mary replies:

Heo þa gedrefedu him andswarode, ‘Nu þu me axast þa ðincg þe ic swiðe þearle sylf befortige, gif me nu to gemynde becumað ealle þa frecdnysse þe ic ahrefnode and þæra unwislicra geþanca þe me oft gedrefedon, þæt ic eft fram þam ylcan geþohtum sum geswinc þrowige.’ (608–12)



Then, troubled, she answered him: 'Now you are asking me about those things which I myself fear very much, if all the dangers I endured and the unwise thoughts that often troubled me should come to my memory now, [I fear] that I might suffer some affliction again from those same thoughts.'

While the Latin text is already conscious of the difficulty of discussing temptation without succumbing to it, the Old English version succinctly presses the case even further. This speech is introduced in the Latin text with an unembellished 'et illa dixit' (592). The English Mary is worried about the thoughts that troubled (*gedrefedon*) her earlier, but the description of her as troubled (*gedrefedu*) as she answers Zosimus reveals that his question has already disturbed her composure. Her use of *prowige*, a direct translation of the Latin *patiar* (596), amplifies the English text's fusion of saintly suffering with erotic desire (403).

The Old English text's heightened attention to temptation is again evident in the passage where Mary worries that revealing her thoughts might drive her again to sex. We have seen how this speech, in both Latin and Old English, helps construct a triangular dynamic of erotic compulsion between Mary, Zosimus, and her own thoughts. Still, the Latin version of the passage at lines 622–26, strictly read, only indicates an aporia: Mary cannot begin to relate the thoughts that previously compelled her to sin. The Old English text reads somewhat differently:

Ara me nu, abbud. Hu mæg ic ðe gecyðan mine gepances, ða ic me ondræde eft genydan to þam geligre, þæt swyðlice fyr minne ungesæligan lichaman innan ne forbernde? (642–45)

Forgive me now, abbot. How may I relate my thoughts to you, when I fear to be compelled again to fornication, lest an intense fire burn up my unfortunate body from the inside?

In the Latin version of this passage, Mary describes the intensity of her emotions in the imperfect tense. The Old English introduces the idea of fearing the thoughts themselves, and brings their implied danger into the present.<sup>70</sup> Thus relating them to Zosimus is no longer simply a matter of facing her own shame, but of being compelled once again to sin. The Old English text also complicates the chronology of Mary's desires when describing other desires. When relating how she continued to long for the wine she used to consume to the point of drunkenness, the Latin Mary still keeps her longing clearly in the past, that is, in the first seventeen years in the desert: 'desiderabam uinum delectabile mihi; erat ualde in desiderium [sic]' (603–604, I desired the wine that was delicious to me; I had a great

longing for it). The English Mary is rather thirstier, with the addition of both 'nu' and 'eac' indicating a deliberate transposition of her need into the present: 'Ic gewilnode þæs wines ... and nu hit is me eac swilce swyðe on gewilnunga' (620–23, I desired the wine ... and now it is also very much in my desires).

If these small changes make the Old English Mary seem less sure in her continence despite the three decades that followed her seventeen years of tormented longing, another passage accidentally erases that intervening period altogether. In it, Mary explains to Zosimus how she fought with sexual temptation by praying to the Virgin Mary:

Semper itaque cordis mei oculos ad illam fideiussorem meam sine cessatione erigebam, deprecans eam auxiliari mihi in hac solitudine et penitentie. Habui adiutorium et cooperatricem ipsam quae genuit castitatis auctorem, et sic decem et septem annorum curriculum, periculis multis, ut dixi, elucians, a tunc ergo usque hodie adiutorium meum Dei genitricis mihi adstitit, uirgo per omnia et in omnibus me dirigens. (633–40)

And so I would always and without ceasing lift the eyes of my heart to her, my guarantor, pleading with her to help me in this desert and penitence. I had as support and fellow labourer the woman who gave birth to the model of chastity. And so, struggling over the course of seventeen years with many dangers, as I said, from then until today the support of God's mother helped me, the virgin guiding me in all things, through all things.

The Latin passage is clear on several points. Mary of Egypt twice describes the Virgin as her helper, giving a sense of the assurance she had when praying for guidance and assistance. Second, the period of her temptation is explicitly confined to the first seventeen years. Finally, the phrase 'a tunc ergo usque hodie' defines the period of time since the seventeen years of active temptation, a period in which the Virgin has guided her completely. The Old English translation of this speech differs in a few suggestive respects:

Symle ic witodlice minre heortan eagan to þære minre borhanda on nydþearfnysse up ahof, and hi biddende þæt heo me gefultumode on þysum westene to rihtre dædbote, þa þe þone ealdor æghwilcre clænnysse acende. And þus ic seofontyne geara rynum on mænigfealdum frecednyssum, swa swa ic ær cwæð, winnende wæs on callum þingum oþ þisne andweardan dæg, and me on fultume wæs and mine wisan recende seo halige Godes cennestre. (651–59)

Truly, in my necessity I constantly raised the eyes of my heart to my guarantor, praying to her that she help me in this desert to real penitence, she who gave birth to the source of all chastity. And thus over the course of seventeen years, as I said earlier, I was struggling with many dangers until this present day, and the holy mother of God was a support to me and directed my ways.

Although the context in which the first sentence appears confirms the Virgin's help to Mary, the Old English presents Mary as praying to the Virgin, but unlike the Latin, does not explicitly state that she received that assistance. The more important sense of doubt about Mary's full penitence and cleansing comes later in the passage. The Old English translation has no counterpart to the Latin 'a tunc', and the placement of the Old English 'op þisne andweardan dæg' (until this present day) corresponds to Mary's struggles, not to the Virgin's succour. The suggestion in this mistranslation is that the penitent Mary continued to struggle with her temptations even while the Virgin was guiding her, that her sexual desires endured to the very day when she met Zosimus. This change or mistake momentarily erases the thirty years that we know, according to the Latin version, to have passed between this scene and Mary's meeting with Zosimus. In contrast, a few lines later, when describing how she dealt with the lack of food, the Old English Mary does differentiate between the first seventeen years of struggle and the later years when divine power protected her, with the phrase 'þa sibban op þeosne andweardan dæg' (676–77, since then until this present day) closely translating 'a tunc et usque in hac die' (652, from then and until this day). The cumulative effect of the manipulation of and slippage in time in the Old English translation of the *Life* is a sense that Mary's sexual longings did not end after seventeen years in the desert. Instead, they threaten to inhabit the present, especially when teaching Zosimus requires her to revisit them in detail.

The translation strategies of the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt* persistently highlight the dangers of teaching with desire. Zosimus' education is driven by his fervent longing for his teacher and her story. Mary rewards him with the narrative of an unusual passion, one in which all the usual hagiographic coordinates – body and soul, lust and chastity, pleasure and suffering, even truth and deception – are turned on their heads. Their encounter, with its give and take of compulsion and fulfilment, plays as much in the fissures of the text as it does on the surface. When Mary claims she has taught every 'speakable or unspeakable form of obscenity'

(433, asecgendlic oððe unasecgendlic fracodlicnyse hiwung), one might ask, in Virginia Burrus' words, 'What reader does not at this point strain to imagine the unspeakable?'<sup>71</sup> Like *Solomon and Saturn I* and *Andreas*, the *Life of St Mary of Egypt* invites its readers to fill in the gaps with their own imaginations, to long with Zosimus for a more naked revelation, a deeper mystery.<sup>72</sup>