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## **Confessing in Old English: The *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt* and the Problem with Penance**

Erica Weaver

“Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake  
and dress them in warm clothes again.  
How it was late, and no one could sleep, the horses running  
until they forget that they are horses.”

- Richard Siken, “Scheherazade”

“Tell me” makes for a slippery beginning. It conjures a tête-à-tête, sure, but in Siken’s poem, any seeming tenderness disappears before the implicit violence signaled by the eponymous addressee: Scheherazade, who must wield her storytelling to ward off execution in the Islamic Golden Age frame-tale narrative now known as *One Thousand and One Nights*. This isn’t ordinary pillow talk, then. Like Siken’s bodies and horses, the verb *to tell* is itself evocative and even risky. Telling, or not telling, can be dangerous. Think of telling a secret, telling someone off, or, riskier still, telling on someone else. And it is certainly true that nothing good ever follows from the warning, “I am going to tell you something.” In both senses of the word (discrimination between possibilities and communication), it can be difficult to tell what’s going on. So, what can we *do* with telling, and especially with the act of telling about yourself to another person in pursuit of your own preservation—in short, in another word, with confession? How should we proceed when we can’t seem to induce a text to tell us much of anything at all? Or when the dangers of speaking become more overt both in the present and in the past, when even the act of telling risks obliterating rather than affirming the self?

In the Old English *Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*, confession jeopardizes everything. Likely translated from Paul the Deacon's *Vita Sanctae Mariae Egyptiacae* in the tenth century, the sometimes-salacious text centers on Mary's voracious sexual appetite, conversion, and subsequent decision to take to the desert ca. 373 CE, where she is later encountered, naked, by the elderly monk Zosimus, who chases her through the sands until she condescends to speak with him. Whereas Scheherazade's speech stays death, however, Mary's threatens annihilation. By her reckoning, she has spent 47 years in isolation and recounting her earlier exploits threatens to reawaken their accompanying desires. At several points, she tries to break off her confession of them, frightened that 'þas mine word ægðer gewemmað ge þe ge þas lyfte' ['these my words pollute both you and the air'] (Magennis 2002, 84.406–7). Even as Zosimus presses her not to cut short 'swa halwendre gerecednysse' ['so healing a history'] (84.410–11), for Mary, confession thus raises a fundamental question: How can you be sure that the words purify rather than pollute? Does the recitation really negate the experience or merely rehearse it in another form?

This is a particularly fraught negotiation here, because Mary and Zosimus' penitential exchange is itself enabled not by divulging her shame but by covering it. Indeed, Mary laying bare her mind—and with it her earlier sexual (mis)adventures—is diametrically opposed to her earlier insistence on covering her naked body. Pausing mid-flight, she explains that she cannot turn to face Zosimus because, as she succinctly puts it, 'þa sceame mines lichaman hæbbende unoferwrigene' ['I have my body's shame uncovered'] (74.255–6), so that he must throw her his cloak if he wants her to engage with him. And yet, what she must then reveal is precisely the supposed shame of her body, visible not in her naked flesh but in her act of confession.

The Latin *Vita* even specifies that the latter is somehow authorized by the former, with Mary conceding, ‘Tamen nudum meum corpus uidisti, denudabo tibi et opera meorum actuum’ [‘Because you have seen my naked body, I will expose for you the works of my deeds’] (168.369–70). Or, one shame leads to another, so that the very act of feeling ashamed tacitly invites its rehearsal. The *Life* thus dramatizes the shifting nature of what is and is not visible, shameful, or sharable, with Mary’s previously uncovered body now cloaked and her previously private thoughts revealed. Moreover, just as confession presupposes some kind of sin, so too does Mary’s nakedness require her accounting, and just as her nakedness makes her vulnerable, so too does her confession. In both, she is exposed and therefore at risk of violation.

Confession thereby crystallizes as a genre of mindfulness that is inescapably embodied and always potentially both physically and psychically dangerous. Indeed, one of the *Life*’s major preoccupations is the ways in which penitential texts can help make visible internal sins like desire and even temptation writ large, felt as they are within the mind and only sometimes acted upon by the limbs. Of course, one way to mitigate the inherent difficulty of conceptualizing such internal sins is to make them inhere as much as possible in specific parts of the body, as in the widely circulated confessional prayer *Deus inaestimabilis misericordiae* attributed to the eighth-century scholar Alcuin of York. Taking a slow inventory from head to toe, the prayer requires readers to take stock of the sins of their knees, back, and even kidneys in confronting what they were bent for and what even their organs worked for. Above all, confession must be thorough. The Old English poem *Christ III* and Blickling Homily 10 even go so far as to imagine bodies turning into glass on Judgement Day, so that their sins

become retroactively visible, with what is spoken in confession re-inscribed on the sinning bodies at resurrection (Stodnick and Trilling, 2010, 349–50). In anticipation of this eventual transparency, some early confessional guides thus attempt to regulate self-examination by moving inch-by-inch across the body in an effort to re-master the lips, tongue, and—above all—the ever-roving mind, which authorizes and animates all other sins. Confession thus retains a ‘metaphorical physicality’, which the Old English *Pastoral Care* vividly depicts as ‘the washing of the mind’s hands (*modes honda*) in the basin of the priest’s mind (*sacerdes mod*)’ (Saltzman, 2019, 73–4).

For Mary, this proves especially challenging, so that the *Life* takes shape around the attempt to reckon with her sinful thoughts by means of confession, even as that same act of confession threatens to resurrect the very thoughts she took to the desert to overcome. Accordingly, as her narrative moves closer to the *Life*’s present, Mary’s self-inventory grows increasingly precarious. When Zosimus asks, ‘mihtst þu swa manegra tida lencgu oferfaran, þæt þu ne freode þone bryne þære flæsclican gehwyrfednysse?’ [‘could you make it through the length of so many hours without thinking lovingly of the ardor of carnal inclination?’] (96.605–7), Mary actually becomes frightened. To begin with, Zosimus’ choice of words is unsettling, with *gehwyrfednes* signifying not the usual ‘conversion (to Christianity)’ or ‘turning of sinners to God’—the pivotal shift that restructured her life—but a decidedly physical turning away from Mary’s spiritual attainments in favor of a reversion to her earlier conquests (Cameron et al., 2018). She answers him *gedrefedu* [‘disturbed’] (96.608) and cautions, ‘Nu þu me axast þa ðincg þe ic swiðe þearle sylf befortige, gif me nu to gemynde becumað ealle þa frecednysse þe ic ahrefnode and þære unwislicra geþanca þe me oft gedrefedon, þæt ic eft fram þam ylcan

gepohtum sum geswinc þrowige' ['Now you are asking me about things that I myself especially dread, if all of the hazards that I endured and the foolish thoughts that often vexed me come to me now in memory—that I once more from those same thoughts might suffer a certain temptation'] (96.608-12). One of the chief roles of the confession is of course to make penitents feel their own sins as well as their resulting vulnerability, but as this passage reveals, the confession does not only make Mary feel the consequences of her sins; it also re-enlivens them. As Irina Dumitrescu demonstrates, '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. Thus relating them to Zosimus is no longer simply a matter of facing her own shame, but of being compelled once again to sin' (Dumitrescu, 2018, 153). Much like censorship, confession therefore requires the further circulation of the very vices it seeks to expunge. As Judith Butler notes in her account of North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms' attempts to prohibit National Endowment for the Arts funding for 'obscene' projects, and in particular the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, 'efforts to restrict or prohibit pornographic fantasy end up inadvertently but inevitably producing and authorizing in their own discursive actions precisely the scenes of sexual violence and aggression that they seek to censor ... These prohibitions of the erotic are always at the same time, and despite themselves, the eroticization of prohibition' (Butler, 1990, 190).

So, while all confession is incumbent on learning to neutralize the initial temptation—thereby retroactively emptying one's earlier life of its feelings, Mary's difficulty in doing so reveals confession's complicated and insufficiently theorized relationship to both affect theory and the history of

the emotions. For, what does she confess but affect? Indeed, as Diane Watt and Clare A. Lees underscore, 'As an early manifestation of the affective in a religious text that makes something of both male and female same-sex desire, we might describe this *Life* as a queerly affective hagiography' (Watt and Lees, 2011, 67). To answer Zosimus' most difficult question, Mary does not have to reexamine her actions but her yearning, and her greatest struggle is with draining these thoughts of their emotional force. To confess successfully, or to be able to recount the central events of one's life without nostalgia or wish for repetition, is thus to anesthetize oneself from the initial feelings while simultaneously combatting the fresh pain of remorse. Indeed, confession is only successful when you commit to non-committance: to never doing that particular sin again. And it requires speaking of desire without desire.

By acknowledging the lingering vitality of Mary's longings, the *Life* complicates this sublimation of sinful thoughts, which always threaten to rupture the genre that seeks to contain them. For this reason, Mary can easily relate how she overcame her cravings for fish, wine, and *sceandlicra sceopleoða* ['louche poems'] (98.627), but she cannot answer Zosimus' larger demand. Instead, she interrupts her confession with a crucial question: 'Ara me nu, abbud. Hu mæg ic ðe gecyðan mine geþances, ða ic me ondræde eft genydan to þam geligre, þæt swyðlice fyr minne ungesæligan lichaman innan ne forbernde?' ['Forgive me now, abbot. How can I make known to you my thoughts, which I worried compel me again to sex, so that a strong fire might not incinerate my unfortunate body inside?'] (98-100.642-45). Seemingly, it is all well and good for her to talk about rejecting food and verse; it is quite another thing for her to tell Zosimus all of her sexual fantasies. What she risks is self-immolation. Indeed, the injunction

to share her innermost thoughts may seem especially unnerving coming as it does after his pursuit of her across the dunes; his irrepressible curiosity about her sexual past; and the inescapable intimacy of their present encounter, which as Dumitrescu observes, takes place far away from any observers and constitutes an intensely familiar exchange between just two. The *Life* thus asks: Is it actually possible to safeguard the purifying protocols of confession from the risk of sexual violation?

As Andrew P. Scheil has noted, these tensions and ambiguities comprise ‘the subversive character of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*’, as ‘the text constantly raises expectations (both in the audience and in Zosimus) that are deferred or overturned entirely’ (Scheil 2000, 140). But the issue is not only making known her thoughts; it is also thinking them at all. Unlike the confession that helps to formulate the self in Michel Foucault’s influential account, Mary’s risks undoing the self instead (Foucault, 1978). As a particular kind of time travel, the act of revisiting the past, even if only in memory, threatens to alter the present beyond recognition. Recollection thus contorts time and risks unmaking the present self in favor of the earlier, abjected one. And, by dwelling on confession’s simultaneous intimacy and vulnerability, its inadvisability and perhaps even its impossibility, the *Life* reveals that the danger of confession is always enduring temptation.

Though the act of confession requires self-control, the memory that makes it possible can prove recalcitrant, always threatening to re-enflame the confessing mind. So, confession might sometimes neutralize, but it also retains its capacity to engulf and overwhelm, or even incinerate. Because of this, it is a genre that is intimately connected to mortality and therefore an incredibly intimate genre. It can be a kink or an *ars poetica* (and of course “the Confessional” now designates its own school of mid-twentieth-century

American poetry). Here, it is worth noting, too, that in *The Life of Saint Mary of Egypt*, the English is itself a translation of a Latin *vita* based on a Greek life of a long-dead saint, an echo of an echo of the original confession as it was whispered across the sands. Confession is transitory, ephemeral, always a one-off and never intended to be repeated in quite the same way, like all theater. It breaks upon the palate the way communion wafers do. Yet, the *Life's* dramatization of the difficulty—and intimacy—of its articulation renders the original moment palpable, even as it overwrites it. Mary's act of confession accordingly flickers behind the representation of confession in her *Life*, which transforms the private and ephemeral into the public and enduringly pedagogical. And yet, even as the *Life* teaches confession, it foregrounds its possible violences with unflinching frankness.

This makes the *Life* an unusual text in the corpus of surviving Old English: in a literary archive in which women, and especially women of color, too often remain unheard, Mary's testimony as a Black woman saint offers a powerful challenge to confessional assumptions and protocols, on the one hand, and to our ideas about the remit of early medieval English literature, on the other. In more recent works, I like to be rubbed raw. Old English is famously reticent, withholding: usually a cagey archive for thinking about acts like confession, which is itself more thoroughly studied in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. 'The lyric', with its first-person speakers telling about themselves, is even a doubtful category for most scholars of early medieval England. And it is undeniably true that unlike the erotic lyric or the fabliau, early medieval penitential texts are usually cold and clinical—about as sexy as a gynecological exam. Yet, as Carolyn Dinshaw and Gillian R. Overing have underscored, when we insist on reading premodern texts as somehow sealed off in time, with the centuries between us and them now a

hermetic film that insists we can never *quite* come into contact, what we risk is not really reading anything, present or past, correctly (Dinshaw, 2012; Overing, 2013).

Indeed, for all of its supposed reticence, as the *Life* itself testifies, Old English literature engages extensively with the penitential tradition. Monastic practices of confession originate in Egypt with the Desert Fathers and Mothers such as Mary herself (incidentally now the patron saint of penitents). As a discrete genre, however, the penitential first survives from late-sixth-century Ireland, and the form soon made its way to England and the Continent—and then into Old English (Meens, 2014). Offering handbooks for priests seeking to elicit confessions from their pastoral charges, these early Latin, Old Irish, and Old English penitentials are kaleidoscopic; they take a given sin and spin it into a litany, forming ‘some of the most ambitious encyclopedias of vice ever composed’ (Jurasinski, 2015, 22). But the threat of the catalog is always that it will rupture, especially given the inescapable tension between the needs (and actions) of individual penitents and the impersonal nature of lists of vices. So, although it is often said that personalized, individual prayers do not survive from the early Middle Ages, as with the *Life*’s enduring intimacy, even the most generic confessional text is crafted to mediate individual experience.

One Old English confessional text is even intimately personalizable. The note instructs would-be confessors to teach an everyday confessional prayer to laypeople, beginning, ‘Man mot hine gebiddan swa swa he mæg ond can, mid ælcum gereorde ond on ælcere stowe. Nu is her on englisc andetnyss ond gebed, ac se ðe þis singan wylle, ne secge he namare on bære andetnyssse þonne he wyrrende wæs forþon ðe ure hælend nele þ[æt] man on hine sylfne leoge, ne eac ealle menn on ane wisan ne syngiað’ [‘One

may pray just as he is able and knows how to, in every language and in every place. Now, here is a confession and prayer in English, but whoever wishes to sing this, say no more in his confession than what he did because our Lord does not wish for anyone to falsely accuse himself, nor do all people sin in the same way’] (Förster 1942, 8–10). It is a note meant to instruct, but it begins to self-destruct almost immediately instead. If we accept the refreshingly inclusive opening (perhaps an echo of a line from Ælfric of Eynsham’s *De oratione Moysi*), the ensuing note presents more problems than it purports to solve. That is, if it is perfectly acceptable to pray in any manner, epistemological framework, language, or location, then a scripted confession and prayer hardly seems necessary, particularly when it comes with such a decidedly cautionary note.

Indeed, even the recitation of this note for would-be confessors can itself constitute another sin—penitents beware. Whereas in Foucault’s account, the act is about uncovering the truth, in Old English, it could be just as much about telling lies. Would-be confessors must not let themselves get caught up in “singing” so much as they must take care that their vocalization proceeds in step with their experiences. Above all, they must actively pray only those bits that pertain to their own actions. So, the text acknowledges that just as prayer can differ across languages and settings, so too can sins, with everyone committing their own unique combinations. Hence, the very idea of a confessional formula becomes problematic. Whereas Mary’s confession threatens to obliterate the self, the instructions here threaten to make even the most earnest confession a dangerous fiction.

Consequently, the stock confession not only risks overwhelming the always-individual experiences that it seeks to articulate; it is also fundamentally unreadable, because readers are explicitly requested to stop

reading at the moment of beginning the text. To read, or to sing, well in this context is thus to know precisely when to lift your eyes from the page. And to read poorly—that is, to read closely and to sing without interruption—is to hazard false confession. The text thus inverts the usual reading paradigm, as the instructional note itself becomes a script for only partial recitation. To be used correctly, it must not be sung to completion—a particularly troubling edict, given that the text now survives as the preamble to a prayer in one manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A.iii) but only as the conclusion in another (London, British Library, Royal MS 2.B.v).

Moreover, even as the note purports to offer a script for relaying the relentlessly personal and changeable, it presents a series of unsettling dyads. Introducing confession, it foregrounds *false* confession. *Singan* [‘to sing’] (or, in this case, to confess) is disturbingly echoed by *singian* [‘to sin’]. And as in the *Life*, desire proves difficult to schematize precisely both for ‘se ðe þis singan wylle’ [‘whoever wishes to sing’] and for the god who *nele* [‘does not wish’] for false inventories—both indirect invitations to sin. The incompleteness inherent in the genre thus allows the guide to provide a paradoxical means of disrupting normative textual and religious practices. Even as it attempts to codify experience and devotion, the text champions differing abilities, knowledges, languages, places, and even ways of sinning, ultimately offering an infinitely adaptable manual whose readings prove fluid and changeable, as when later women readers—and confessors—altered the pronouns in prayers and other regulatory texts copied for men (Bugyis, 2017).

But what I wonder now is how it is possible to make a confession count as individually true even, or perhaps especially, when your life depends on it. Medieval confessions could largely be subsumed in the collective script

without issue, but those now unfolding in courtrooms and interrogation cells, in interviews in detention centers, and at meetings between individuals and the forces of the state cannot. Indeed, to take one pressing example, the confessions required by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) must be absolutely individual, identifiable claims to asylum.

When I first began this essay, with Mary of Egypt, I thought that there was something sexy about confession, and there certainly can be, but only until we remember that confession is also dangerous and rarely voluntary. Even as the discourse of confession takes on the erotic charge of the experiences it seeks to control (à la Butler's account of censorship), it retains their capacity for violence. Moreover, a turn to the present reminds us that even the Old English confessional text is a matter of life and death for the Christian soul. And so, in concluding, I am not going to confess but to proclaim: My thinking on confession cannot be separate from thinking about my brother in jail or of friends who are undocumented—of what it means to be “documented,” to tell successfully about yourself—and above all now of a twenty-three-year-old woman from El Salvador, who carried her toddler across the Rio Grande fleeing unspeakable violence, and now asks only, ‘I really hope you listen to my story, because it is all I have left’ (Weaver et al., 2019).

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