

IVAN MOODY

ST MARY OF EGYPT AS ICON AND OPERA

There have been, as far as I am aware, a total of three (non-liturgical) musical works dealing with the life of St Mary of Egypt. The first is by the little-known Italian composer Francesco Gasparini, written in 1713, the second by Ottorino Respighi in 1929 and the third by Sir John Tavener in 1992. The present paper discusses these three works in the context of the hagiographical basis of the life of St Mary in both the East and the West, expressed in literary and iconographic terms.

THE LITERARY AND LITURGICAL TRADITION

Let us look first at the literary tradition and, by extension, the liturgical tradition. Briefly, the traditional life of the Saint recounts her dissolute existence over seventeen years in Alexandria and her subsequent boat journey to Jerusalem, where she wishes to venerate the True Cross. She is unable to enter the church, however, being prevented by the Mother of God, and understands that it is her sinful life that prevents her. She therefore turns in repentance to the icon of the Theotokos. Having thereafter been allowed into the church to venerate the Cross, she returns to the icon and hears a voice telling her to cross the River Jordan. She buys three loaves, goes to the river to wash, receives Holy Communion and then crosses to the desert, where she remains for forty-seven years. This is when Zosima, a monk of great spiritual achievements, encounters her, and they ask for each other's blessing. She asks Zosima to return in a year's time and bring her Holy Communion. This he does, and returns yet again another year later, to discover that Mary has departed the earthly life. Lacking the strength to bury her, he is assisted by a lion, who digs a pit. He returns to the monastery and tells the monks the story of the saint.

The literary tradition of St Mary of Egypt is rich and varied. In the East, Cyril of Scythopolis (525-558), who visited her tomb, included it in his hagiography of St Cyricacus, and St John Moschos (c. 550-619) in his "Spiritual Meadow", the *Pratum Spirituale*. St Sophronios of Jerusalem (Patriarch of the city 634-638) wrote a *vita* in which he says that St Mary lived during his own lifetime, and that he heard the story from a monk who was a companion of St Zosima. This has been the traditional source for information concerning her life, and is appointed to be read during Matins on Thursday of the Fifth Week of Great Lent.¹ According to the Synaxarion, St Zosimas of Palestine, who

1 Vita S. Mariæ Ægyptiacæ. PG 1:3-4. English translation available at <http://www.stmaryofegypt.org/files/library/life.htm>. For a modern critical edition of the full text of Voragine, see [Iacopo da Varazze], *Legenda Aurea*, 2 vols., ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, Florence: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo 1998.

buried St Mary, lived during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius the Younger (408-450); the *Vita* says that he was 53 years old when he met Mary; otherwise, there is considerable variation in the attribution of a date to the life of St Mary. The Bollandists give 421 as the date of her death, others as much as a century or more later.

Other sources for her life include St Jerome's hagiography of the 4th century and the Latin translation made by Paul the Deacon in the 8th century. In fact, the story exists in many versions, in the Latin, Greek, Armenian, Syriac and Arabic languages, though there is no Coptic source.

Western versions in languages other than Latin include those by the trouvère Rutebeuf (c. 1245-1295) in French, "Ci encoumence la vie de Sainte Marie l'Egypcienne"², and, importantly, the *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend) compiled by Jacobus de Voragine (1230-1298). This was the text, which describes her simply as "Mary the Sinner", that established the life of St Mary in the West, especially after the invention of printing, when the book was widely translated. Caxton's English translation, for example, first appeared in 1483, and went through no fewer than nine editions.

St Mary of Egypt is one of the three penitent saints who pray to the Mother of God in Goethe's *Faust*: these words were set by Mahler in his Symphony no. 8 as the final appeal of the saints to the Mater Gloriosa. Later artistic works based on her life include *Oratória de Santa Maria Egípcíaca* by the Brazilian poet Cecilia Meireles,³ *Maria Aegyptiaca – ein geistliches Spiel* by Irmgard von Faber du Faur and Ina Lohr,⁴ the poem *Marija Jehyptianka* by Metropolitan Hilarion of Winnipeg,⁵ and two other works by Brazilian writers – the three-act play by Rachel de Queiroz, *A Beata Maria do Egito*,⁶ and the poem by Manuel Bandeira, *A Balada de Santa Maria Egípcíaca*,⁷ whose demythification of the saint completely subverts the Orthodox Christian interpretation of the narrative,⁸ as does her appearance as "Meritet" in Nalo Hopkinson's novel *The Salt Roads*⁹.

2 Rutebeuf's entire extant output may be found in Rutebeuf, *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Michel Zink (Paris: Bordas, 1990); for a remarkable historical, contextual and philosophical discussion of the *Vie*, see Brody Smith, *This is not my Body: Understanding Transcendent Desire in Rutebeuf's La vie de sainte Marie l'Égyptienne*, PhD diss., University of California at Davis, 2010.

3 1957; new edition Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira 1996. This work was apparently written after a composition by the Swiss-Brazilian composer Ernst Widmer (1927-1990), though the present author has so far been unable to confirm this.

4 Kassel: Bärenreiter 1953

5 Paris: Vyd. Nasha Kultura 1947

6 Rio de Janeiro: Serviço Nacional de Teatro 1973

7 *Antologia Poética*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olímpio 1974

8 The poem may be found at <http://poemasdebandeira.blogspot.co.uk/2009/03/balada-de-santa-maria-egipcíaca.html>. An enlightening discussion of this work in the context of popular Brazilian religiosity may be found in by André Caldas Cervinskis, "Religiosidade e Brasilidade em Manuel Bandeira", available at <http://www.moisesneto.com.br/cervinskis.pdf>.

9 New York: Warner 2004. Another modern treatment of the story is that by the Mexi-