Mary Or Michael? Saint-switching, Gender, And Sanctity In A Medieval Miracle Of Childbirth

Katherine Allen Smith
University of Puget Sound, kasmith2@pugetsound.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs

Citation
Mary or Michael? Saint-Switching, Gender, and Sanctity in a Medieval Miracle of Childbirth

Katherine Allen Smith

Medieval pilgrims making the dangerous journey from the Norman-Breton coast to the island monastery of Mont-Saint-Michel would have passed a tall stone cross rising out of the sands about halfway between the mainland and the north shore of the Mont. In the unlikely event that the visitors had not already heard the story of this monument, the so-called “croix des grèves,” they were sure to hear it—and perhaps even see it reenacted—once they arrived at their destination, since the miracle it commemorated was one of the most famous in the shrine’s vast store of legend. Popularly known as the “Peril,” the miracle told of a pregnant woman who had come on pilgrimage to the shrine in the time of Abbot Hildebert I (1009–17). As she was making her way across the sands toward the abbey at low

1. An earlier version of this article was read at the 38th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in May 2003 in a panel on “The Cult of Saint Michael the Archangel in the Middle Ages.” Susan Wade brought up important questions at an early stage that helped shape my thinking on the gendered imagery in the different versions of the Peril, and successive drafts of this article have benefited enormously from the perceptive comments and questions of Penny Johnson and Mary McLaughlin. I am also grateful to the anonymous reader for Church History for providing additional references and suggestions that helped me to clarify and expand upon the arguments that follow. All scriptural quotations are from the Douay-Rheims version; all other translations, except where noted, are my own.

2. The seventeenth-century historian Thomas Le Roy (sacristan of Mont-Saint-Michel from 1646–48) described the cross in his Les curieuses recherches du Mont-Saint-Michel, 2 vols., ed. Eugène de Robillard de Beaurepaire (Caen: Le Gost-Clérisse, 1878), 1:106. Le Roy states that Abbot Hildebert I had this monument erected soon after the miracle had taken place, and that it was continually maintained and periodically repaired by the monks of the abbey through the fourteenth century. Le Roy himself claims to have seen the cross in the seventeenth century, by which time it remained submerged by the tides except on rare occasions.

3. In a fragmentary late medieval liturgical play from Mont-Saint-Michel, the end of a script for the performance of this miracle (presumably by monks of the abbey) is found. This text is edited by Eugène de Robillard de Beaurepaire as Les miracles du Mont Saint-Michel: fragment d’un mystère du XIVe siècle (Avranches: A. Anfray, 1862), 22–24.

Katherine Allen Smith is an assistant professor of History at the University of Puget Sound.

© 2005, The American Society of Church History
Church History 74:4 (December 2005)
tide, a sudden storm blew in from the sea, carrying the tide in its wake. In her frantic efforts to reach the shore before the pilgrims’ path was submerged, the woman went into labor and was unable to escape the quickly rising waters. According to the version of this story recounted to generations of pilgrims to Mont-Saint-Michel, the abbey’s patron Saint Michael took pity on the unfortunate woman and made a dry space for her to wait out the storm in the midst of the sea, preserving her from harm while she was safely delivered of a healthy son. The boy was christened “Peril” in commemoration of his dangerous birth, and in gratitude to the archangel his mother designated him for the priesthood.

I. The Double-Life of a Medieval Miracle

This miracle has the distinction of being claimed by various medieval writers for not one but two very different saints, the archangel Michael and the Virgin Mary, and accordingly gave rise to two distinct textual traditions in the Middle Ages. The versions of the Peril that credit Michael with saving the pregnant pilgrim consist of a small group of five texts composed between the mid-eleventh and early fourteenth centuries, whereas the dominant tradition in which Mary plays the principal role is represented by at least thirteen redactions dating from the early twelfth to mid-fifteenth centuries. Such double-narratives, labeled hagiographical “doublets” by one scholar, are quite commonly found in the Lives and miracles of medieval saints, a fact that has not escaped modern students of medieval Christianity. Since such pious borrowing has long been accepted as a characteristic of medieval hagiography, however, individual instances of the practice have attracted little serious attention. My reading of one such “doublet” suggests that a great store of evidence bearing on medieval clerical mentalities lies imbedded in these texts and may be extracted by means of careful analysis. The double-life of the Peril, the two traditions of which differ quite markedly, makes it an ideal lens through which to examine the relationship between gender and sanctity in medieval miracles, and more specifically to consider how and

4. See the appendix at the end of this article for a chronological list of edited versions of the Peril, including full bibliographical citations. Although I have endeavored to locate all of the printed versions of the miracle, there may well be additional ones that I have not uncovered.
5. In his study “Les ‘doublets’ en hagiographie latine,” Analecta Bollandiana 96 (1978): 261–69, the most thorough examination to date of this phenomenon, Baudoin de Gaiffier noted that Hippolyte Delehaye was the first to point out the frequency with which medieval hagiographers borrowed vignettes—and even entire vitae—from one another. Ibid., 261–62.
why a male and a female saint might be imagined to perform the same miracle in very different ways.\(^6\)

This essay explores how medieval clerical writers and their audiences might have understood the implications of such saint-switching, and suggests some ways in which a close reading of these two competing versions of the Peril might further our current understanding of medieval definitions of gendered sanctity and gendered sin.\(^7\) In what follows I suggest that the substitution of one saintly patron for another—in this case a female saint for a male one—profoundly changes the meaning of the Peril story, and that as a result these two versions would have provoked a startlingly different set of associations in the minds of medieval readers and listeners. I believe that the divergent meanings of the Michael- and Mary-versions of the Peril may be explained partly by the different personae attributed to these two intercessors by medieval Christians, but should also be read in the context of medieval clerical anxieties about female chastity, sexual sin, and the paradoxical nature of pregnancy as the source of both mankind’s original sin and promised salva-

6. Although angels were technically sexless, scriptural depictions of them as men and iconographical traditions that portrayed angels as male ensured that Michael was generally coded as male. Representations of Saint Michael in the medieval manuscripts and lead pilgrims’ badges of Mont-Saint-Michel show him as a winged male warrior armed with a lance, shield, and sometimes the scales of judgment (with which the archangel was believed to weigh the souls of the deceased). On scriptural and iconographical depictions of angels and their influence on the medieval clerical—and popular—imagination, see David Keck, Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28–36.

7. In the past fifteen years the literature on the relationship between gender and sanctity in medieval thought has grown dramatically. The pioneering work of Caroline Walker Bynum on high-medieval women saints in Northern Europe (Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987]) and that of Suzanne Wemple (Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500–900 [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981]) on early medieval Francia remain influential. Two more recent important works by Jo Ann McNamara (Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996]) and Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg (Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998]) have mined the huge numbers of medieval biographies, or vitae, of women saints in order to identify broader trends in the changing definitions of gendered sanctity over the course of the Middle Ages. Much attention has lately focused on holy women and their male amanuenses, with a particular focus on the question of male projection of ideals onto their subjects; recent approaches to this topic are exemplified by the collection of essays in Catherine M. Mooney, ed., Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), in particular Mooney’s excellent introduction and her essay on Saint Clare of Assisi. On gender and devotion to particular saints’ cults in the later Middle Ages, see the essays and bibliographical references in Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe (London: Routledge, 2002).
tion. Finally, both versions of the miracle bear witness to their male authors’ investment in reinforcing gendered codes of behavior in the minds of their imagined clerical and lay readers and listeners.

Miracles like the Peril comprise a rich and still relatively unexplored trove of textual evidence for the history of medieval mentalities;9 this story and others like it were copied over and over by both monastic hagiographers and compilers of moralizing exempla tales, the latter of whom often translated such stories into the local vernacular to facilitate their use in public preaching.10 Vernacular versions of both traditions of the Peril would have been heard by mixed lay audiences of men and women,11 and the story was continuously read—and rewritten—in a number of languages by (predominantly clerical) male writers throughout the medieval period. As a miracle recounted to pilgrims at Mont-Saint-Michel, or as an exemplum incorporated into a sermon on one of the feasts of the Virgin, the Peril was intended not only to promote a particular saintly intercessor but also to convey specific messages to laymen and women concerning licit and illicit behaviors. Although many extant redactions of the miracle are Latin texts produced by clerics that have no express preaching purpose, at least nine, or half, of the eighteen versions I

8. Medieval misogynistic views that depicted women’s sexuality as uncontrollable and polluting have been explored in several recent studies; for surveys of medieval clerical views of men and women’s sexuality and relevant bibliography, see Joyce Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality,” in A Handbook of Medieval Sexuality, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 81–102, and Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, chapter 5, “Golden Wombs: Motherhood and Sanctity.”

9. On the value of miracles as sources, Ruth Mazo Karras observes that “if there exists such a thing as a general European medieval mentality, the exempla and miracle stories are among the best places to look for it.” See Karras, “The Virgin and the Pregnant Abbess: Miracles and Gender in the Middle Ages,” Medieval Perspectives 3 (1988): 112–32 (at 112).


have located are contained in collections of miracles or exempla intended for the instruction of the laity. 12 Medieval preachers self-consciously tailored miracles to specific lay groups and adjusted the tales’ moral lessons accordingly; exhortations to leave off agricultural labor on high feast days might be directed toward peasants, for example, while narratives destined for elite audiences might be couched in the discourse of courtly love. 13 Like their contemporaries, the clerical hagiographers who crafted the various versions of the Peril intentionally instilled specific moral messages in their narratives and tempered these to suit not only their lay audience but the particular saint to whom they attributed the miracle. Thus, we will see that as a miracle of Saint Michael the Peril set forth a model of wisely obedience and matronly modesty, while as a Marian miracle the tale underscored the Virgin’s ability to redeem even the most sinful women through the power of her own unsurpassed purity.

II. Which Saint Came First?

The content of the Peril story, in particular its emphasis on the vulnerability of pregnant women and the dangers of childbirth, suggests the Virgin Mary as a far more natural choice for the woman’s protector than Saint Michael, a militant, implicitly male defender of orthodoxy. In medieval miracle collections one of the Virgin’s specialties was aiding pregnant women—often women whose pregnancies occurred outside of marriage—while Saint Michael, although technically sexless like all angels, 14 was implicitly and commonly understood to be a male saint, more at home on the battlefields of heaven

12. These are as follows: Guillaume de Saint-Pair, Roman du Mont Saint-Michel; an anonymous Anglo-Norman verse version, Manuscrits français number 375, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; Gonzalo de Berceo, Milagros de Nuestra Señora; Jacobus da Voragine, Legenda Aurea; Alfonso X of Castile, Cantigas de Santa Maria; The South English Legendary; an anonymous exemplum collection entitled Ci nous dit; Jean Gobi, Scala coeli; and Jean Miélot, Miracles de Nostre Dame. For modern editions of these works, see the appendix at the end of this article.
14. Angels were believed by medieval theologians to have been created prior to the existence of sex difference, ushered in by the creation of the first man and woman; for
and earth than in the role of midwife. The body of observed customs leading up to the birth of a child in medieval Europe was the exclusive province of women; in the final weeks of their pregnancies respectable women were expected to withdraw into an all-female world of mothers, sisters, aunts, and midwives, and keep to a specially prepared lying-in chamber, away from all physical and visual contact with men.\textsuperscript{15} While the Virgin Mary’s own unique immunity from the pains of childbirth made her, along with Saint Margaret and her own mother Anne, one of the particular patrons of the birthing chamber,\textsuperscript{16} Saint Michael would seem to have no more right to invade the secret female world of childbirth than any other male figure.

Given the strong medieval associations between Marian devotion and rituals of childbirth, the fact that the story was originally associated with Saint Michael, and only later pilfered by monastic hagiographers for the cult of the Virgin, is rather surprising. The origins of the Peril story are somewhat murky; the four earliest extant versions are all attributable to monastic authors writing in northern France or England between roughly 1060 and 1150. Two of these are found in texts originating from the scriptorium of Mont-Saint-Michel: an anonymous Latin miracle collection composed around 1060,\textsuperscript{17} and the \textit{Roman du Mont Saint-Michel}, an epic poem in Old French recounting the abbey’s history and legends written in the mid-twelfth century by Guillaume de Saint-Pair, a monk of Mont-Saint-Michel.\textsuperscript{18} These two versions of the Peril closely resemble one another and probably served a common purpose, namely the edification of pilgrims who expected to hear of the miracles performed by Michael at his Norman shrine.\textsuperscript{19} In these texts from Mont-Saint-Michel the archangel is of

\begin{footnotesize}

\begin{enumerate}
  \item The offering of special prayers or candles—the lengths of which were determined by the circumference of the pregnant supplicant’s midsection—to these saints were common birthing-chamber rituals. See Schunenburg, \textit{Forgetful of Their Sex}, 230–31.
  \item The version in the eleventh-century \textit{miracula} of the abbey is edited in Le Roy, \textit{Les curieuses recherches}, 1:888–90, and that in the \textit{Roman du Mont Saint-Michel} at lines 3,532–710.
  \item Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which the Latin \textit{miracula} would have been made available to pilgrims, the preface to the \textit{Roman du Mont Saint-Michel} explicitly
\end{enumerate}

\end{footnotesize}
course the hero of the story, which stands out from the other early miracles of the abbey as the sole act of mercy attributed to his intercession.20 With the exception of the Peril, eleventh- and twelfth-century texts produced at the shrine emphasize Saint Michael’s raw, elemental power and penchant for vengeance over his capacity for benevolence. Although at first glance a childbirth miracle seems strangely out of place among the other early miracles of Mont-Saint-Michel, its very incongruity may have made its original inclusion in the collection vitally necessary. Placed at the end of a series of narratives stressing the archangel’s awesome power in both the eleventh-century miracula and the Roman du Mont Saint-Michel, this remarkable tale would have served to reassure both the abbey’s monks and the pilgrims who visited them that their angelic patron was in fact capable of acts of mercy as well as displays of power.21 When the Peril was first committed to writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the monks of Mont-Saint-Michel were actively engaged in promoting their shrine as a pilgrimage destination, an endeavor in which the compilation and dissemination of miracles complemented the collection of (necessarily noncorporeal) relics of the archangel, the expansion of the architectural fabric of the shrine, and the construction of a number of hospices in the surrounding area for the accommodation of ever-increasing numbers of pilgrims.22

Two other near-contemporary versions of the Peril survive in the Miracles of the Virgin compiled by the English monks Dominic of Evesham and William of Malmesbury in the first half of the twelfth century. These collections coincide with the great upsurge of Marian veneration that took place in Europe during the High Middle Ages, a period when the practice of appropriating the miracles of other saints

20. Of the thirteen stories contained in the collection just three are acts of mercy or healing: the Peril story and two additional accounts of healings performed by the relics of Bishop Aubert of Avranches, the legendary founder of Mont-Saint-Michel. The remaining ten narratives describe acts of vengeance and displays of power on the part of the archangel. For the full collection of narratives, see Le Roy, Les curieuses recherches, 1:873–92.

21. I have adopted the distinction between “acts of power” and “acts of mercy” from Benedicta Ward’s study, Miracles and the Medieval Mind. For a more detailed explanation of these classifications, see Ward, chapter 3: “Miracles at Traditional Shrines: St Faith, St Benedict and St Cuthbert.”

for the Virgin’s emerging cult was fairly common. Both authors include the Peril among the “elements-series” of Marian miracles, an early grouping of stories intended to demonstrate her mastery over the elements of fire, air, earth, and water, the last being the function of the Peril story. The Marian miracle collections of Dominic of Evesham and William of Malmesbury, both of whom belonged to monastic communities under the Virgin’s patronage, are among the earliest Western examples of this hagiographical genre that reached its fullest development on the Continent in the thirteenth century. In their hagiographical borrowings both Dominic and William looked to a tradition of homiletic literature for the Virgin’s feasts that incorporated tales of her intercession taken from the Lives of other saints; in the tenth and eleventh centuries both the Anglo-Saxon abbot Aelfric and Fulbert, the great liturgical innovator and bishop of Chartres, had extracted Marian miracula from other texts for use in their homilies, and Dominic of Evesham took this practice a step further, “borrowing” a miracle not previously associated with the Virgin from another saint. The transfer of the Peril from Saint Michael to the Virgin may have suggested itself to Dominic through the association of the two intercessors in textual and iconographic traditions relating to posthumous judgment, an association that had become widespread in

23. On the “marialization” of miracles in this period, see Guy Philippart, “Le récit miraculaire marial dans l’Occident médiévale,” in Marie: Le culte de la Vierge, 566–67. For two such instances of the Virgin supplanting Saints Peter and James in stories originally associated with the cults of these two saints, see The Stella Maris of John of Garland, ed. Evelyn Faye Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946), 169–70 (n. 14), and 199–200 (n. 50).


25. Malmesbury was rededicated to the Virgin under the abbacy of Aelfric (ca. 965–77), whose Marian writings would certainly have been known to William of Malmesbury; Evesham had been dedicated to the Virgin at its foundation in the eighth century. On devotion to the Virgin in Anglo-Saxon England more generally, see Mary Clayton, The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), (see 133–37 for the trend of rededicating churches to the Virgin after the tenth century). Clayton’s analysis of the Marian homilies of Aelfric and Fulbert and discussion of the place of miracles in these texts is at 235–52.

26. According to J. C. Jennings, Dominic of Evesham’s collection (which slightly predated and strongly influenced William of Malmesbury’s own Marian miracula) represents a turning point in the development of Marian miracles, since “no longer are St. Basil, St. Cyriacus or St. Odo of Cluny given predominance, but the Virgin’s miracles have been extracted from their Lives and she has been raised to primary importance.” See Jennings, “Origins of the ‘Elements-Series’,” 91.
England as well as on the Continent by the eleventh century.\(^{27}\)

Furthermore, Dominic’s choice to retain the setting of Mont-Saint-Michel for the reinvented miracle may have been influenced by the fact that the Norman monks had recently constructed and were actively promoting a secondary pilgrimage of the Virgin on the nearby island of Tombelaine, which pilgrims were encouraged to visit on their way to or from the great shrine on the Mont.\(^{28}\)

Remarkably, Dominic of Eveham himself offers evidence that he knew of an earlier version of the Peril story; this was most likely the one contained in the eleventh-century miracle collection of Mont-Saint-Michel, since the *Roman du Mont Saint-Michel* had not yet been completed by this time.\(^{29}\) After relating how the pregnant pilgrim was saved from the dangers of the sea by the Virgin Mary, who uses her full sleeves to protect the woman from the raging waters, Dominic adds a postscript to the effect that “although it is reported that Saint Michael the archangel protected a certain female pilgrim from danger in the midst of the waves of the sea, it is the Mistress of the World [that is, the Virgin] who saved *this* woman from impending death in

\(^{27}\) Michael was credited with the weighing of souls and the guardianship of heaven (tasks also sometimes assigned to Saint Peter), while the Virgin was imagined to intercede on behalf of sinners who would otherwise be condemned, originally by pleading with the archangel (or Peter) and in later centuries by dropping her rosary into the scales to tip them in the sinners’ favor. On the tradition of this association in Anglo-Saxon England, see Clayton, *Cult of the Virgin*, 253–54; for the development of this belief and its iconography more generally, see Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 413–34, and Jean Fournèe, “L’archange de la mort et du jugement,” in *Millénaire monastique du Mont Saint-Michel*, 3:76–87.

\(^{28}\) Interestingly, the “croix des grèves” was located at the halfway point between Tombelaine and the larger Mont-Saint-Michel. Paul Gout provides a convenient map showing the relative positions of Tombelaine and the cross vis-à-vis Mont-Saint-Michel in his *Le Mont Saint-Michel*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Colin, 1910), 1: plan III (facing page 38). On the Virgin’s shrine at Tombelaine, which was founded in 1137 and consisted of a priory and pilgrims’ church staffed by monks from the nearby abbey, see Jacques Dubois, “Les dépendances de l’abbaye du Mont Saint-Michel et la vie monastique dans les prieurés,” *Millénaire monastique du Mont Saint-Michel*, 1:662–65.

\(^{29}\) J. C. Jennings suggested that Guillaume de Saint-Pair’s version of the Peril was “the original version of the ‘Childbirth at Sea’ story” appropriated by Dominic for his collection. The secure dating of the *Roman du Mont Saint-Michel* to the early part of the abbacy of Robert de Torigni (1154–86), however, seems to rule out the possibility that Dominic of Eveham was familiar with Guillaume de Saint-Pair’s version of the Peril. For a fuller examination of Dominic of Eveham’s collection and its sources, see Jennings, “Origins of the ‘Elements-Series’”; on the dating of the *Roman du Mont Saint-Michel*, see Jean Blacker, “Monastic History in a Courtly Mode? Author and Audience in Guillaume de Saint-Pair’s *Roman du Mont-Saint-Michel* and the anonymous *Histoire de l’abbaye de Fécamp*,” in Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture: Selected Papers From the Seventh Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 261–99.
the waves.”30 In this striking passage Dominic all but acknowledges his pious theft of the miracle. Though he clearly distinguishes between the rival Michael-version and his own retelling of the tale, Dominic does not explicitly privilege one version over the other, nor does he deny the legitimacy of the archangel’s miracle; the medieval reader is free to believe in both stories—and in the efficacy of both saints—equally. Dominic’s lack of concern with establishing the primacy of his own version of the Peril reflects the very different approaches of medieval and modern scholars with regard to multiple versions of a text. Because medieval hagiographers did not necessarily equate the oldest version of a text with the most authoritative version,31 there is no reason why the original miracle involving Saint Michael would automatically take precedence over the Peril’s retelling as a miracle of the Virgin.

III. The Peril as a Miracle of the Archangel Michael

The earliest versions of the Peril involving Saint Michael32 leave no room for doubt as to the piety and worthiness of the pregnant pilgrim. She is identified as a respectable matron (matrona or dame) from the Norman town of Lieuvin, who makes the journey to the shrine in the company of her somewhat less devout husband.33 At first, the woman’s entreaties for her husband to join her on pilgrimage are met with stern refusals, but she becomes “enflamed with a true desire to [visit]


32. These are the versions in the eleventh-century miracula of Mont-Saint-Michel and the Roman du Mont-Saint-Michel.

that saint” and begins to “urge him constantly to fulfill her [wish].” Finally, “defeated by his wife’s prayers,” the husband agrees to make the journey with her, after having put her off until the time for her delivery had nearly arrived.34 After the couple and their companions pay their visit to the shrine and begin the return trip across the sands to the shore, a violent thunderstorm overtakes them, and in the ensuing panic the pregnant woman is seized with labor pains and cannot move any further. The poor matron’s companions and even her husband choose to save themselves, abandoning her to the mercy of the rising sea. It is only after her husband has altogether disappeared from the scene that Saint Michael comes to the woman’s rescue, causing “the waves of the sea [to] flow around her in the shape of a crown” and creating a completely dry space “large enough for her to occupy with outstretched arms.” Within this miraculous shelter, the matron gives birth to a son, “a strong boy whom she washed in the waves of the sea.”35

Although we are assured that “because she had sought him devoutly, Saint Michael endeavored to be a very prompt helper in that crisis,” and his presence is attested by the miraculous diversion of the waters, the reader never actually sees Saint Michael in this account, nor does the poor woman who receives his help. Although both versions of the miracle from Mont-Saint-Michel are richly detailed, nevertheless they omit any physical description of the archangel; it is only after looking for one in vain that the reader realizes Michael never actually appears in the story. The great depth of the trench in which the woman lies and the swirling waters that surround her form a protective barrier not only between the woman and the threatening waters but also between her and the saint. This is the case as well in the Roman du Mont Saint-Michel, where the pilgrim dramatically emerges from the ocean cradling her newborn son in her arms and proceeds to recount her experience in detail to her stupefied companions, who had been searching the beach in the hopes of recovering her body for burial: “Listen Sirs, and I will tell you how I was saved, [and how] God blessed me. The whole time that the sea was here, it seemed as though there was a curtain (cortine) all around me; it was even


35. Ibid., 889: “Pelagus itaque altius accrescens in immensum quasi quemdam circa eam profundissimum effect ut pateum: nec una gutta sui introrsus per totum ipsius circuli defluente spatium. . . . Talis, itaque ut sic dictum sit, tuta munimente vallii, ibidem iam secura peperit, eniumque puerum ejusdem pelagi undis abluit quod ad abluendum ut aqua hauriri poterat.”
whiter than snow on a bough, and had the appearance of a wall (mur) that the sea could not breach.”

The blinding whiteness of the protective curtain-wall is the most striking descriptive element here; suggestive of superhuman—or angelic—purity, it denotes the presence of the archangel Michael, whose appearances at Mont-Saint-Michel in this period almost invariably took the form of a bright, amorphous ball of light or fire. Elsewhere in the Roman du Mont Saint-Michel Guillaume de Saint-Pair envisions his monastery’s angelic patron as being “like a torch that is lit on all sides.” Rather than having Michael appear as a man—a guise that could potentially violate medieval lying-in decorum, the montois poet transforms the archangel into a purifying “curtain” of light, a kind of phosphorescent birthing chamber. This narrative technique preserves the modesty of the pilgrim and obviates the possibility of polluting physical—or visual—contact between her and her angelic protector, contact that would be difficult to avoid if Michael appeared in the story as he typically did in medieval iconography, as an armed male warrior.

Pictorial depictions of the Michael-versions of the Peril also convey the strong sense of a spatial separation between the pregnant woman and her saintly intercessor, who maintains a respectful distance from the protected birth he has made possible. For example, a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Catalan retable now in the collection of the Musée des arts décoratifs at Paris shows an anthropomorphic Saint Michael reaching out to divert the water from the woman and her child by means of a long pole or spear, thereby avoiding any direct, potentially dangerous contact between them. In this image both the woman and the archangel seem to be assiduously avoiding making eye contact with one another. That medieval authors and artists alike would take pains to separate the body of an angel—the purest of all beings—from one of the most polluting of all bodies—that of a woman in labor, is hardly surprising. At least some male saints followed the lead.

36. Roman du Mont Saint-Michel, lines 3,687–95: “Seignors, oiez; / Si vos dirai cum sui guarde, / Se dam-le-Deu me benée. / Tant cum la mer ici esteit, / Avis me fut que il avelt / Une cortine entor met blanche / Molt plus assez que nos sor branche; / A semblance de mur esteit, / La mer passer ne la poisit.”
37. Biblical precedents of angels as “a burning fire” (Ps. 103:4) probably inspired these descriptions of apparitions of the archangel at Mont-Saint-Michel, which appear in chronicles and miracle stories from the eleventh through fifteenth century.
38. Roman du Mont Saint-Michel, lines 2,859–60: “cum un brandon / Qui est espris tot environ.”
39. For a reproduction of this retable, along with a discussion of its stylistic elements and probable provenance, see Monique Blanc, Retables: la collection du Musée des arts décoratifs (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1998), 60–61.
of ordinary men in shunning the company of parturient women; the thirteenth-century Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach told a story of how an image of Saint Nicholas that hung in a noblewoman’s lying-in chamber “turned its face to the wall, as though to avoid seeing the woman in her labor.” For medieval Christians the physical act of childbirth served as a reminder of humankind’s Fall, the blame for which clerics typically placed on Eve, whose surrender to temptation ushered into the world all of the evils—lust, mortality, want—that continued to plague men and women in the present. Women’s labor pains were the legacy of “Eve’s curse,” signaling as they did the arrival of another infant tainted by the original sin of the female womb. In this context, a celestial being’s assumption of the role of midwife would have been shocking, perhaps even repugnant to many medieval readers or listeners. Thus it is safer for clerical writers like Guillaume de Saint-Pair to render Saint Michael’s participation in the miraculous birth implicitly rather than explicitly, thereby preserving the traditional boundaries separating the exclusively female realm of childbirth from the world of male action.

Although Saint Michael never comes into physical contact with the pregnant matron, he nonetheless provides a counterpoint to the woman’s neglectful, almost villainous husband. While the pilgrim’s husband first endangers his wife by delaying their trip until the time of her confinement, and later abandons her to the elements in order to save himself, the saint becomes her protector and even, in one remarkable version of the story, keeps the woman with him in the sea

40. Caesarius of Heisterbach, The Dialogue on Miracles, trans. H. Von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1929), 2:77 (bk 8, ch. 76). It should be noted that the aid of certain male saints might be invoked by medieval women in labor; for example, Michael E. Goodich has shown that fourteenth-century Italian matrons called on the Dominican Saint Peter Martyr to ease the pains of childbed, though he does not mention any cases of the saint taking an active role in childbirth miracles by appearing in the lying-in chambers of the women in question. See Goodich’s Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century: Private Grief and Public Salvation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 87–89. Ronald C. Finucane found that Thomas Becket and Saint Louis IX were both credited with saving several women suffering labor complications, but again none of these miracles featured either male saint appearing “in person” to the women concerned; by contrast, Finucane mentioned another case in which the husband of a parturient woman waiting outside the lying-in chamber saw an apparition of Saint Dorothy of Montau entering his wife’s room, as if to assist the midwives already within. See Finucane’s The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 27–35.

for a whole year. In the *South English Legendary*, a Middle English collection of hagiographic texts from the late thirteenth century, the intimacy between Saint Michael and the pregnant woman takes on an entirely new aspect:

and she was preserved in the deep sea through the grace of Saint Michael. None of you could have done it so well, by God! Neither she nor her child went hungry, for they had [a supply of food] that cost them nothing—fish to eat and drink enough, though of course it was raw. And she floated for so long in the great sea that it is a wonder they did not die. Saint Michael was a good protector, when all has been said.

In this remarkable passage the archangel not only protects the pilgrim during the vulnerable period of her labor and delivery; he actually creates a makeshift home for her and her child, supplying them with food and drink and effectively filling the usual functions of a husband rather than those of a saintly intercessor.

Medieval readers familiar with Scripture would have identified in the Peril story yet another level of meaning, far removed from the all-female realm of midwifery and childbirth. In this exegetical reading, the Peril becomes a symbolic reenactment of the twelfth chapter of Revelation, a passage that highlights Michael’s role as the defender of the Church against the forces of evil:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. And being with child, she cried travailing in birth, and was in pain to be delivered. . . . And behold a great red dragon, having seven heads, and ten horns: and on his heads seven diadems. . . . and the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to be delivered; that, when she should be delivered, he might devour her son. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with an iron rod, and her son was taken up to God, and to his throne. . . . And there was a great battle in heaven, Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels: And they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in


43. Ibid.: “And saue was in þe deope se / Þoru grace of sein Michel / For God þer nis non of ðou / Þat hure couþe habbe iwest so wel / Ne so iued hure ne hure child / Þat necostnede worþ a strau / For þei heþæl hadde viss & drinke inou / æ witeþ wel it was rau / And to fleote so in þe grete se / wonder þat heo nas ded / Sein Michel was a god wardein / wane we habbeþ al ised.”
heaven. And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, who is called the devil and Satan (Rev. 12:1–9).

Monastic exegetes identified each element of this extraordinary vision with an appropriate biblical antecedent, so that the pregnant woman represented the Church (or the Virgin Mary), her twelve-stared crown the apostles, and her son Christ, who will return to earth at the final judgment.44 Cast as a metaphor for this apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, the Michael-versions of the Peril story fail to exploit the narrative’s potential for human drama and intimacy that, as we will see, characterize the Marian versions of the miracle.

In the Michael-versions of the Peril, it is the matron’s respectability and piety that render her an eligible recipient of the normally stern archangel’s mercy. Her desire to visit the island sanctuary of Mont-Saint-Michel is motivated by her devotion to its angelic patron rather than by any desire to expiate sins through a penitential journey. Even the would-be pilgrim’s unquestioning obedience to her churlish husband signals her possession of the supreme wisely virtues of obedience and modesty; she would hardly think of leaving home without his permission, much less traveling alone at the risk of being taken for a woman of loose morals. If the Michael-versions of the Peril story are clerical celebrations of married virtue, however, the redactions of the miracle involving the Virgin Mary offer a moral lesson of a very different nature.

IV. THE PERIL AS A MIRACLE OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Unlike Saint Michael, the Virgin Mary was perfectly at home in the role of midwife; after all, the primary events in her own life were her sinless conception and delivery of Christ. Unlike the ordinary daughters of Eve for whom childbirth was characterized by physical suffering, Mary’s delivery of Christ was imagined by medieval men and women to have taken place without any of the agony or immodesty that ordinarily accompanied such events.45 Medieval men and women

44. For the Glossa Ordinaria’s standard interpretation of these elements, see J.-P. Migne, ed., Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina, 221 vols. [hereafter PL] (Paris: 1844–66), 114: 731–32. The woman clothed with the sun was also sometimes interpreted as the Virgin Mary (who was in turn a common metaphor for the Church); for an edition and French translation of several medieval Latin exegetical texts concerning this passage, see Guy Lobrichon, “La femme d’Apocalypse 12 dans l’exégèse du haut Moyen Âge latin (760–1200),” in Marie: Le culte de la Vierge, 407–39.
45. On the Virgin’s delivery as imagined by medieval men and women writers, see Atkinson, Oldest Vocation, 111–13. The Virgin’s painless delivery was celebrated in liturgical prayer as well, as in the following sequence from the English Sarum Missal: “But, O how happy and joyous, O Mary, was the dialogue between you and the angel, by which life came forth for the whole world. / But your most blessed childbirth, free
might see the Virgin’s own painless experience of childbed reenacted in
the “mystery” of the Nativity sponsored by craft guilds on major Marian
feasts such as the Annunciation or Assumption.46 Many of the most
popular medieval miracles of the Virgin involved childbirth scenes in
which the Virgin attended the expectant mother in the capacity of mid-
wife,47 such performances generally featured a male actor suffering the
pains of labor on a couch modestly hidden behind a curtain, and finally
giving birth to an “infant” in the form of a doll displayed to the spectators
by another actor playing a female midwife.48 The popularity of childbirth
motifs in Marian miracles is attested by the inclusion of no fewer than ten
birthing scenes in the immensely popular fourteenth-century collection
of the Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages,49 in which the Virgin
herself or another woman—a mother or mother-in-law, professional
midwife, or servant—serves as attendant to the expectant mother. Like
the Peril, several of these tales feature husbands who abandon their
wives at a crucial moment, either when the onset of their labor is
imminent or when labor pains have already begun.50

The Virgin’s association with pregnancy and childbirth was also
evoked by the most common medieval Marian relics, in the form of tiny
vials of her milk, or the girdle she was believed to have worn during her
conception or delivery; hundreds of samples of the Virgin’s milk
crowded monastic treasuries throughout medieval Europe, while com-
peting examples of her girdle were displayed to medieval pilgrims at

---

46. Gibson, “Scene and Unseen,” and Theresa Coletti, “Purity and Danger: The Paradox of
Mary’s Body and the En-Gendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery
Cycles,” in Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature, ed. Linda Lomperis and

47. On the theme of the Virgin as midwife, see Karras, “The Virgin and the Pregnant
Abess,” 122–24.

48. For the details of medieval nativity plays as performed in fourteenth-century northern
France, see Dorothy Penn, The Staging of the ‘Miracles de Nostre Dame par Personnages’ of

49. Penn, Staging of the Miracles, 29, 94–95. In the Cangé collection these are as follows: 1
(“Infant Given to the Devil”), 2 (“Pregnant Abbess”), 5 (“Nativity”), 15 (“Revived
Infant”), 18 (“Theodoric”), 29 (“Queen of Hungary”), 30 (“Jehan le Pauu”), 32 (“King
Thierry”), 37 (“King’s Son”), and 39 (“Clovis”). Other well-known Marian miracles
involving pregnant women are the “Jewess in Childbirth” and “Incest” (in which a
mother becomes pregnant by her son), both of which appear in Vincent of Beauvais (as
well as multiple other medieval collections), Speculum Historiale, ed. and trans. Michel

50. Penn, Staging of the Miracles, 58. Penn notes that irresponsible husbands are stock
characters in many of these tales, “credulous and quick to suspect the infidelity of their
wives,” or prone to go off on pilgrimage at inopportune moments.
Chartres, Paris, Le Puy, and elsewhere. Believing that they would be enabled to conceive or guaranteed an easy labor, female pilgrims in particular vied for the privilege of viewing and even—for the lucky few—touching, the holy shift or ceint, whose very name declared its close association with pregnant or ceinte women.51 Birthing talismans in the form of lead badges stamped with an image of the Virgin’s girdle and shifts that had been pressed against a specimen of the holy ceint could even be purchased at Marian shrines like Chartres; passed from one anxious mother-to-be to another, these were believed to ensure the Virgin’s protection for the fortunate wearers.52

As a general rule, Marian miracles show the Virgin to be concerned with the plight of women placed in danger as a result of dangerous or illicit pregnancies. Many of the best-known high medieval Miracles of the Virgin involved women who conceived outside the bonds of marriage—pregnant abbesses, nuns, victims of incest, and simply unfortunate single women frequently appear among the recipients of her special favors.53 Given the strong connection between the Virgin and women whose pregnancies were shameful in some way, I find it significant that none of the versions of the Peril involving the Virgin make any mention whatsoever of the pregnant matron’s husband, who plays such an important role—arguably creating the circumstances of the miracle by his abandonment of his wife—in the Michael-versions of the same story. The husband’s removal from the narrative may reflect the concerns of authors such as Dominic of Evesham to make the Peril better fit the mold of a typical Marian miracle.54 In the textual tradition of the Peril involving the Virgin, the woman is invariably described as “a certain poor woman (quaedam mulier paupercula),” who comes to the shrine “in the midst of a crowd of pilgrims” but is neither identified with a particular place of origin

51. A detailed history of the Virgin’s veil, the Byzantine predecessor of the holy ceinte, and of the uses and significance of such Marian relics for women, has recently been written by Annemarie Weyl Carr; see “Threads of Authority: The Virgin Mary’s Veil in the Middle Ages,” in Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001). For the uses of the Virgin’s clothing and milk in the medieval West, see Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Vintage, 1976), 278–79. The Old French words are much closer than the modern French “ceinture” (belt) and “enceinte” (pregnant).
52. Schulenburg, Forgetful of Their Sex, 230–31.
nor given the protection of a family;\textsuperscript{55} in short, she lacks all the trappings of the respectable matron possessed by the woman in the Michael-versions of the tale. While medieval listeners would, no doubt, have sympathized with the pregnant pilgrim of the Michael-versions as a pious matron exposed to danger through her husband’s negligence, the pilgrim becomes even more pitiable in the Mary-versions—as a pregnant, single woman traveling alone, she is even more in need of the intercession of the Virgin, who was well known to have a weakness for fallen women who accorded her the proper devotion.

While the interaction between Saint Michael and the pregnant woman is generally portrayed as cautious and indirect, the Virgin’s intercession in the miracle is comparatively intimate and natural. Taking the pregnant woman under the ample sleeves of her dress, Mary fashions an intimate bower for her to lie in—a very different space from the deep trench surrounded by swirling waters or the curtain of glowing light described in the Michael-versions of the story. William of Malmesbury describes how the Virgin creates “a most pleasant place, which her sleeves made like a bridal chamber (thalamus) scented with the sweetest odor of balsam.”\textsuperscript{56} An early-fourteenth-century English miniature from the Queen Mary Psalter in the British Library depicts the Virgin’s sleeves as delicate hangings surrounding a watery bed upon which the pilgrim reclines.\textsuperscript{57} The area within the Virgin’s sleeves becomes a womb where the pregnant and implicitly sinful woman’s body may be purified and shielded from the threat of

\textsuperscript{55} Dominic of Evesham’s description, which is echoed almost verbatim in the versions of Gil de Zamora (\textit{Liber Mariae}, ed. Fidel Fita, \textit{Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia} 17 [1885]: 121) and the “Pez” collection (\textit{Liber de miraculis Sanctae Dei Genereticis Mariae}, ed. Bernard Pez, reprint Thomas Frederick Crane [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1925], 25), is as follows: “turbi ad eius limina properantibus, ac iam in medio arenarum maris positis, affuit inter ceteros quaedam mulier paupercula, vicino partu omnino iam gravida.”

\textsuperscript{56} William of Malmesbury, \textit{De laudibus et miraculis S. Mariae}, ed. José A. Canal as \textit{El Libro “De laudibus et miraculis Sanctae Mariae” de Guillermo de Malmesbury} (Rome: Alma Roma, 1968), 159: “In mediis fluctibus locus sit amoenissimus, cui virginis manica fit thalamus, spuria balsami odorem suauissimus.” The wording of this passage is strongly reminiscent of Deuteronomy 33:12, which describes how “the best beloved of the Lord shall dwell confidently within him: as in a bridal chamber shall he abide all the day long, and between his shoulders shall be rest.”

Moreover, Mary Virgin’s before had both against above aware even additional choice chastity 776 60. 59. 61. from the the the the life.?2 Oxford Clarendon, Dictionary The Vierge omnes dieval Brepols, For For 268; For 121. and Colonial Mexico, as described by Amy G. Remensnyder in her article on “The Colonization of Sacred Architecture: The Virgin Mary, Mosques, and Temples in Medieval Spain and Early Sixteenth-Century Mexico,” in Monks & Nuns, Saints & Outcasts:...
Another narrative difference separates the two traditions of the Peril: although the Michael-versions of the Peril specifically state that the miracle occurs only after the woman and her husband have paid their visit to the shrine and thus fulfilled their vow to the saint, in the Mary-versions the woman is saved from drowning by the Virgin before she has completed her pilgrimage and only reaches the shrine after she has given birth to her son with the Virgin’s help. This variation reinforces the sense that in the Marian miracle the pilgrim’s sins are forgiven by contact with the Virgin’s inviolate body—Ecclesia rather than through a visit to the actual shrine of Mont-Saint-Michel. When Mary causes the waters to recede so that the woman can make her way to shore with her newborn child, the crowd of pilgrims who had been on their way to honor Saint Michael at Mont-Saint-Michel now proceed to enter the abbey singing the praises of the Virgin, and demanding that the monks ring their bells and sing her praises in gratitude for the miracle that has just taken place. The monks accordingly offer up the following prayer, derived from the text of Psalms 68:16–17:

O how merciful you are, our holy mistress Mary. Give succor, Virgin Mother of God, to we who are miserable sinners hoping to enter your service, so that ocean storms may not drown us, nor the depths swallow us, nor the pit oppress our souls, but rather let us be helped and comforted by your most merciful kindness and your holiest intercession, so that we may serve the true king who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

The Glossa Ordinaria, an exegetical source well known to monastic writers like Dominic of Evesham and William of Malmesbury, interprets these verses as a warning to sinners who are beset on all sides by temptations:

Verse 16—The depths. [The depths] of the sins that devour souls, whence: “The wicked man when he is come into the depth of sins, condemns (Prov. 18). . . . And if you strike [a blow], if you do not close the mouth of the pit above you, if you do not close your mouth,

---

63. Compare the wording of Psalms 68:16–17: “Let not the tempest of water drown me, nor the deep swallow me up: and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me. Hear me, O Lord, for thy mercy is kind; look upon me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies.”

64. Dominic of Evesham, De miraculis, 268: “O quam pia es, Domina nostra sancta Maria. Succere ergo, Virgo Dei genitrix, et nobis miseris peccatoribus famulis tuis in tua misericordia sperantibus, ut non nos demerget tempestas aquae, neque absorbeat nos profundum, neque urget super nos puteus os suum, se tua misericordissima pietate et sanctissima intercessione adiuti ac confortati, serviamus vero regi, qui vivit et regnat per immortalia saecula. Amen.”
but make confession and say: ‘Lord, I have called out to you from the depths,’ you escape . . .’

Verse 17—Hear me, O Lord. He who, with the dangers of mankind set before him, prays ‘Hear me, Lord, because thy mercy is kind,’ not because I have deserved it . . . Mercy is as sweet to the afflicted as bread to the hungry. Affliction comes; God delays to assist in order that desire may move [the sinner] and that help may be sweet [to him].

“Calling out from the depths,” the pregnant pilgrim, like the sinner imagined by the monastic exegete in the above text, renders herself worthy of God’s mercy as mediated by the Virgin; shielding her from the depths of her sin that threaten to engulf her, Mary redeems this poor woman as she had done so many others who seemed unworthy of her intercession.

Finally, several versions of the story conclude that “this miracle of the mother of God was written down by the monks of the place” so that it would not be forgotten. The ending of the story thus effectively forces the monks to acknowledge the Virgin’s triumph over their own patron, Saint Michael, at the very doorstep of his own shrine, and by implication the supremacy of the Peril story in its reinvented form as a miracle of the Virgin over its earlier incarnation as a miracle of the archangel. The Virgin’s superior claim to the Peril miracle, and by implication Saint Michael’s unsuitability in such an intercessory role, is upheld by the clerical authors who put the celebratory hymn into the mouths of the monks of Mont-Saint-Michel.

V. CONCLUSION: GENDERED SIN AND GENDERED SANCTITY IN THE PERIL

This comparison of the two traditions of the Peril story has suggested that the substitution of one saintly patron for another was not a simple matter of switching names but required a series of subtle shifts in the setting and characters of the narrative. What worked as a miracle of Saint Michael would not fit into the Marian miracle mold without certain modifications on the part of subsequent re-tellers of


66. Dominic of Evesham, De miraculis, 268: “Sunt nota fratribus loci sanctae Dei genitricis miracula.”
the tale. Seemingly small differences between the content of these two traditions of the story—the presence or absence of the woman’s husband, for example—would have dramatically changed the way the story was interpreted by medieval readers and listeners. As a miracle of Saint Michael the Peril attested to the celestial mercy that was the reward of virtuous, respectable women, while as a Marian miracle the Peril became part of a genealogy of tales involving sinful women who found a sympathetic patron in the Virgin. It seems to me that the great popularity of the Peril as a miracle of the Virgin compared with the obscurity of the Michael-versions of the same story is in itself significant. Why was the Virgin so successful in her theft of the archangel’s miracle, and what can her triumph tell modern readers about medieval conceptions of sanctity, sin, and gender?

One possible explanation for the Virgin’s ultimate victory over the archangel may lie in medieval perceptions of the personae and relative accessibility of these two intercessors. Neither Mary nor Michael quite fit medieval requirements of sanctity: the Virgin Mary was held to be unique among women by virtue of her freedom from sin, and her intact body was believed to have been assumed into heaven upon her death, precluding the possibility of corporeal relics for her cult; as an immortal, incorporeal angel whose appearance and nature defied human understanding, Saint Michael was similarly unable to provide his earthly shrines with corporeal relics. As a result, the archangel’s medieval shrines—like Marian sanctuaries throughout Europe—promoted his cult through secondary relics; at Monte Gargano in southern Italy Michael’s footprints and his pallium were displayed to medieval pilgrims, as were his sword and shield at Mont-Saint-Michel. 67 While Saint Michael was commonly associated with the dire events of the Last Judgment and the posthumous weighing of souls, and regarded as a stern, impassive guardian of Paradise, medieval Christians habitually invoked the Virgin as the merciful advocate of sinners. Later medieval iconography explicitly juxtaposed Mary and Michael in scenes of judgment, and laymen and women as well as clerics would have been familiar with wall paintings and carvings that showed the archangel weighing souls in a great balance while the Virgin surreptitiously used the weight of her rosary to tip the scale in

the sinners’ favor. Given the respective associations of medieval men and women with each intercessor, the kind, forgiving Virgin may have appeared more likely than the austere archangel to give protection to a helpless pilgrim.

Another possible means by which the Virgin’s effective “conquest” of the Peril may be explained is, as I have already suggested, by reference to medieval expectations regarding the proper roles of men and women, expectations that extended to the saints as well as ordinary Christians. The story of how Saint Michael, the militant defender of orthodoxy par excellence, saved a parturient woman from the dangers of the sea was undeniably a striking miracle, but evidently did not quite conform to medieval clerical ideas of saintly propriety, especially as concerned the interaction of male intercessors with ordinary women. Even if hugely popular male saints like Thomas Becket or Louis IX of France featured in women’s childbed prayers, hagiographers preferred to imagine that these figures worked childbirth miracles invisibly rather than appearing “in person” in the lying-in chamber. Even in the realm of the miraculous, where “God manifested his power and presence by overturning the logical order of things,” angelic midwifery apparently remained too disturbing for comfort. It proved far safer in this case to create a miraculous lying-in chamber in the midst of the sea that mirrored ordinary domestic practice by excluding the prying eyes and unsuitable presence of men, saintly or otherwise.

The comparative success of the Marian tradition of the Peril, I would argue, lies in its conformity with medieval propriety and evocation of a tradition of childbirth miracles involving the Virgin. Medieval clerics and their lay audiences could have comfortably accepted the Peril as a miracle of the Virgin, a familiar patron of the lying-in chamber whose own pregnancy and delivery were dramatized in Scripture, iconography, and liturgical drama. It seems likely

68. For examples of this iconography from late medieval England, see Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), pl. 120–22.

69. I make no claim to have searched exhaustively for evidence of male saintly “midwifery” in medieval vitae; this is simply my impression, and further work on this subject will certainly offer a more nuanced reading of the evidence. My use of Thomas Becket and Louis IX as examples of male saints’ interaction with parturient women is derived from the research of Ronald Finucane on their miracula that involve pregnancy and childbirth in some way. See Finucane’s The Rescue of the Innocents, 27–35.

70. This wonderful explanation of the appeal of miracle stories to medieval sensibilities comes from André Vauchez, The Laity in the Middle Ages: Religious Beliefs and Devotional Practices, trans. Margery Schneider (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 88.
that laywomen in particular, who had some personal experience of childbirth themselves, would have preferred the Marian version of the story and been uneasy at the idea of a male figure—whether an ordinary husband, father, brother, or even a saint—coming to the aid of the pregnant pilgrim. Given the focus of both traditions of the Peril on the dangers of childbirth, it seems likely that laywomen were the story’s intended audience; whether they identified with the respectable matron of the Michael-versions or condescended to pity the fallen woman saved by the Virgin, they assimilated the moral lessons that the clerical writers or preachers of the tale wished to impart. Whether hagiographers made use of the tale as an exemplum to celebrate the rewards of wifely obedience and modesty or to remind less upright women of the heavenly mercy that awaited penitent sinners, the Peril reinforced a deeply entrenched system of gendered morality.

Perhaps most significantly, a comparison of the Mary- and Michael-versions of the Peril demonstrates that in the imaginations of medieval hagiographers and their audiences, the behavior of saints in miracle stories remained inexorably constrained by medieval Christian mores. This remained the case even for saintly patrons like Saint Michael, who was technically neither human nor male, and the Virgin Mary, who was commonly believed to have surpassed the ordinary constraints of her mortality and sex, and thus might be expected to remain unaffected by traditional gender boundaries. In their divergent approaches to the rescue described in the Peril, Mary and Michael were unmistakably coded as female and male, and their respective reactions to the pregnant pilgrim imagined by medieval clerical authors in accordance with their gender roles.
# Appendix: Medieval Versions of the Peril Story in Modern Editions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and Text</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Saint</th>
<th>Modern Edition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
## Appendix: Medieval Versions of the Peril Story in Modern Editions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and Text</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Saint</th>
<th>Modern Edition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfonso X of Castile, <em>Cantigas de S. María</em></td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>ca. 1280</td>
<td>Virgin Mary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>