

HARLOTS OF THE DESERT. A STUDY OF REPENTANCE IN EARLY MONASTIC SOURCES by **Benedicta Ward SLG. Mowbray. 1987. Pp. ix + 113. £8.95.**

In this attractive book (with a moving dedication) Sr. Benedicta Ward focusses her study of the theme of repentance around translations of the lives of five figures, all but the first taken from early monastic literature. The motif of the prostitute turned ascetic has always been a powerful one, for a number of reasons; in the first place, the very paradox of the 'harlot of the desert' demonstrates how repentance is a possibility too for those whom conventional society in all ages has hypocritically regarded as representing the nadir of depravity; but, more importantly, in monastic circles (where these narratives chiefly flourished) the motif served as a rebuke to the monk whose own life of repentance was so sluggardly by comparison.

After an excellent introduction, with well chosen quotations from early Christian writers, Sr. Benedicta takes the figure of St Mary Magdalene as the biblical model of repentance—a model who, as she shows, is a creation of later tradition fusing together different biblical personages, and not to be found in any single passage of the New Testament.

As a 'liturgical icon of repentance' St Mary of Egypt is chosen, a figure around whom many different narratives have gathered. The text selected for translation here is the Latin translation of the seventh-century life by Sophronios, patriarch of Jerusalem. Although the experience of conversion was dramatic and sudden in this as in the other cases, the present life well brings out (in ch. XIX) how the subsequent life of repentance was often one of great struggle against the memories of the past.

Next comes the deservedly popular story of the actress Pelagia of Antioch, who ended her life disguised as a monk outside Jerusalem. In the introduction Sr. Benedicta beautifully brings out the deep relationship of love between Pelagia and bishop Nonnus, by whose preaching she was converted.

The short and stark narrative of Thais, while shocking to modern sensibilities, nevertheless serves to illustrate how the deep-felt repentance of a prostitute was seen as deserving of even greater glory than the ascetic life of that great hero of the desert fathers, St Antony.

The final piece, on Maria the niece of Abraham, is another vividly told narrative which, though it originated in Syriac, nevertheless proved very popular in the Latin Middle Ages. Unlike the other heroines of this book, the orphaned Maria started out living the life of a recluse in a cell adjoining that of her uncle, but, having been seduced and raped by a visiting monk, she then projects upon herself the guilt of the rapist and in her self-disgust and despair of forgiveness she disappears off to a brothel. Ultimately her uncle discovers her whereabouts, visits her disguised as a soldier, and rescues her by persuading her that forgiveness is still possible.

The lives of Pelagia and Maria will already be familiar to some readers from Helen Waddell's *The Desert Fathers* (translated from Latin, as are all the texts in the present collection); they also feature in a slightly different form, translated from Syriac, in another recent collection, by Susan Harvey and myself, entitled this time *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*.

Though set in the distant past and belonging to a very different culture, all these narratives possess a timeless quality which, with Sr. Benedicta's sensitive introductions and fluent translations, lends them an immediacy which will readily appeal to the modern reader as well.

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