

Metamorphosis Roundtable

Cristina Noacco, *La Métamorphose dans la littérature française des XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), p. 58

[...] tandis que la tradition antique de la métamorphose avait développé, grâce surtout à l'œuvre d'Ovide, un art détaillé du récit de la transfiguration, donnant à voir pousser, écaille par écaille et plume par plume, le nouveau corps des héros et des héroïnes des *Métamorphoses*, les esprits médiévaux (et leurs calames) reculent devant l'évocation du moment où s'effectue le passage d'un état à un autre, d'une forme à une autre, d'un aspect à un autre.

[...] whereas the Antique tradition of metamorphosis had developed, largely thanks to the work of Ovid, a detailed art of the tale of transfiguration, which allowed one to see the new bodies of the heroes and heroines of the *Metamorphoses* growing scale by scale and feather by feather, medieval minds (and their quills) recoil from evoking the moment when the passage from one state to another, one form to another, one appearance to another takes place.

***La Vie de sainte Marie L'Egyptienne. Versions en ancien et moyen français*, ed. Peter F. Dembowski, Publications Romanes et Françaises, 144 (Geneva: Droz, 1977), T version, ll.157-92**

De sa biauté, de sa figure,
Se com ele est en escriture,
Voil un peu dire le samblant,
Anchois que je trespas avant,
Car a cel tens, en icel regne
Ne vit nus hom plus bele feme ;
Ne onc contesse ne roïne
Nen ot el front plus bele crine.
Reondes avoit les oreilles,
Mais blanches erent a merveilles,
Les iex cler et sosrians,
Les sorchix noirs et avenans,
Bouche petite par mesure
Et pie le regardeüre,
Le face terre et coloree,
Com le rose qui sempre est nee.
Ja el nés ne el menton
N'aperceüssieés mesfaichon.

En som le col blanc com ermine
Li undoit le bloie crine.
Les mameles de cele dame
N'estoit pas menrres d'une pome.
Desous le goule, en le poitrine
Ert blanche conme flor d'espine.
Blans bras avoit et blances mains,
Les dois reons, grailles et plains.
Gent cors avoit et bien mollé,
Sous l'aïssele lonc le costé.
El n'iert trop grant ne trop petite,
Ja sa faichon n'en iert escrite ;
Ja la biauté de ceste dame
Nen iert escrit par nul home.
Tant iert courtoise de parler,
Riens n'i avoit que amender.
A plaindre fait tel criaature
Quant del Creator n'avoit cure.

Before I go any further, I want to say a little about how she looked, about her beauty and her figure, just as it is written in the story, for in those days and in that land no man had ever seen such a beautiful woman ; no countess or queen had such a beautiful head of hair. Her ears were round but they were wonderfully white, her eyes were bright and smiling, her eyebrows black and comely, her mouth perfectly small, her gaze sweet, her complexion tender and perfect just like a blooming rosebud. You could see no blemish on

her nose or cheek. Down her neck, which was white as ermine, flowed her blonde locks. The lady's breasts were not smaller than apples. Her chest, above her bosom, was as white as hawthorn. She has white arms and white hands, with rounded, smooth and shapely fingers. She had a beautiful soft body along her flanks and belly. She was neither too large nor too small, so that never has her likeness been written about; never has the beauty of this lady been written about by any man. She was so courtly in her speech that there was nothing to improve. Such a creature who cared not for her Creator is indeed to be pitied.

La Vie de sainte Marie L'Egyptienne, T version, ll.621-662

Si souler furent tout usé
Et tout si drapel deschiré.
Li cors de li remaint tout nu,
N'avoit drapel ne fust rompu.
Li chars de li mua coulor
Qui ains ert blanche conme flor
Que par yver, que par esté
Tout li noircirent li costé.
Coulor mua se bloie crine,
Blanche devint com une hermine.
Le bouce li fu atenvie
Et environ toute noirchie.
Et avoit tant noir le menton,
Conme s'il fust taint de carbon.
Atenevié furent li oel,
N'i avoit ore point d'orguel.
Se vos veïssies les oreilles,
Molt par vos presist grans merveilles,
Car noire estoit et decrevee
Le blanche char toute muee.
Noire et muee ert la poitrine,

A escorce samblant d'espine,
N'avoit plus char en ses traians
Ne mais com il a en uns gans.
Les bras, les mains et les lons dois
Avoit plus noirs que nule pois.
Ongles avoit longes et grans
El les retailloit a ses dens.
Li ventres li estoit caoit,
Petit de despense i metoit.
Li pié li erent decrevé,
En plusors lius erent navré,
Car el ne se gardoit d'espine,
Quant ele aloit par la gastine,
Che li ert vis sien esciant
Que ele n'i failloit nient
C'uns de ses pekiés li caoit
Quant une espine le pongoit.
Por chou estoit ele molt lie
Quant ele souffrot le hasquie.
N'est pas merveille se iert noirchie,
Car molt demenoit aspre vie.

Her shoes were all worn out and her clothes torn. Her body was left naked; there was not a piece of clothing that was not ripped. Her flesh, which has previously been white as a lily, changed colour; exposure to winter and summer completely blackened her sides. Her fair hair changed colour and became as white as ermine. Her mouth thinned and almost completely blackened. She had a chin that was as black as if it had been stained with coal. Her eyes were dimmed; now there was no pride in them. If you had seen her ears, you would have been greatly astounded, for they were black and ruined, their white flesh transformed. Black and changed was her bosom, which resembled the bark of a thorn bush; there was no more flesh on her breasts than there is on a glove. She had arms, hands and long fingers blacker than any pitch. She had great long nails which she clipped with her teeth. Her belly was shrunken; she put very little in it. Her feet were broken and wounded in several places, for she did not avoid the thorns when she was walking in the wilderness – it seemed to her that she was not remiss in this regard and that one of her sins was erased whenever she was pierced by a thorn. For this reason she was very happy when she suffered pain. It is no surprise that she was black, for she led a very harsh life.

La Vie de sainte Marie L'Egyptienne, X version, §2, ll.1-8

Moult estoit belle de grant biauté de cors, de vis et de toutes autres façons en tel maniere que nul n'i seüst que reprendre. Et pour ce que elle se sentoit si belle, vouloit elle faire touz ses vouloirs. Ne ne li souvenoit de Dieu, mes habandonnoit son cors a touz ceus qui en vouloient, fussent freres, fussent parent, ne li chailloit a qui ; que au tans de lors n'estoit si legiere fame de son cors conme elle estoit a fere folie.

She was very beautiful with a body, face and other features that expressed such great beauty and in such a way that nobody knew how to reproach her. And because she felt herself to be so beautiful, she wanted to do whatever she liked. Nor did she remember God, but instead abandoned her body to all those who wanted it, whether they were brothers or kinsmen – it made little difference who they might be. In those times there was no woman so immodest or sexually wanton as she was.

La Vie de sainte Marie L'Egyptienne, X version, §28, ll.1-16

Ses drapius furent touz usez et ses soulerz, si traveilla son cors toute nue. Et devint sa char toute noire pour la froidure de l'iver et pour la chaleur d'esté, qui avant estoit plus blanche que let. Sa face avoit toute brullee et sa bouche toute nergie et le menton avoit si noir conme se ce fust charbon. Si oil estoient atenvoïé, sa poitrine iert toute mossue et sembloit escorce d'espine noire tant estoit noire. Les bras, les mains, les dois avoit plus noir que nule riens et avoit les ongles grans. Li ventres li ert touz cavez. Li pié estoient touz decrevez et estoit plaiiee en moult de leus, car elle ne se gardoit ne d'espine ne d'autre chose tant conme elle aloit en la gastine. Et li estoit avis pour voir que, quant une espine la poingnoit, que elle perdoit uns de ses pechiez et pour ce en estoit elle liee. N'est pas merveille se elle estoit noire, car moult menoit aspre vie, povre despense fesoit.

Her clothes and her shoes were worn out, so her body suffered completely naked. Her flesh, which had been whiter than milk, became completely black through the cold of winter and the heat of summer. Her face was all burnt and her mouth all blackened and her chin as black as if it had been made of coal. Her eyes were dimmed; her bosom was hairy and so black that it looked like the bark of a black thorn bush. Her arms, hands and fingers were blacker than anything and she had long nails. Her belly was all hollow. Her feet were all ruined and injured in many places, for she did not protect herself from the thorns or anything else when she was in the wilderness. And it truly seemed to her that when a thorn pierced her she shed one of her sins and she was therefore quite happy. It is no wonder she was black, for she led a very harsh life and consumed little.



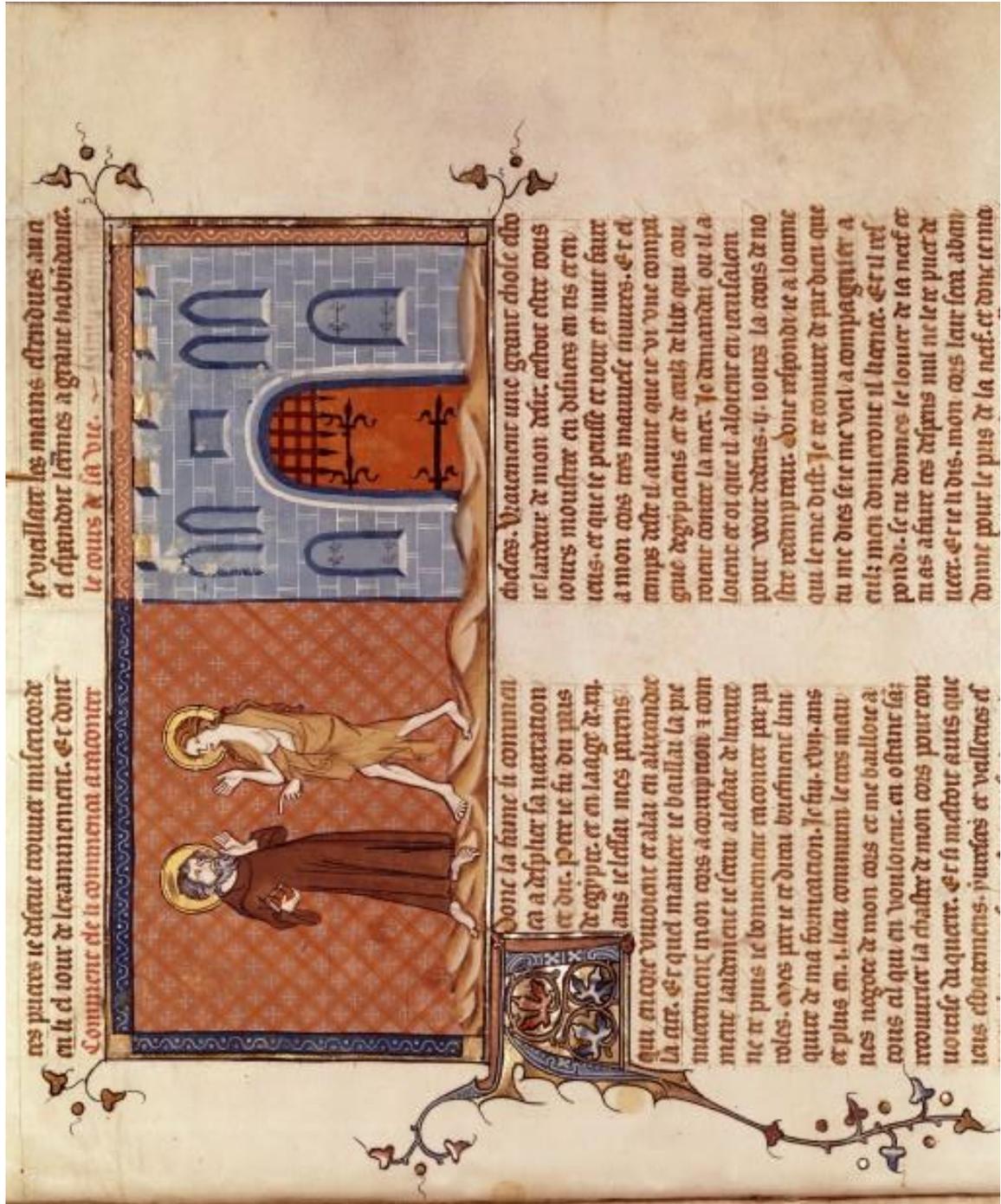
BNF, f. fr. 241, fol. 96v. Version L²: translation by Jehan de Vignai of the chapter on Mary of Egypt in the *Legenda aurea*. Text c. second quarter of the 14th century.



BNF, f. fr. 412, fol. 221. Z version: translation of Sophronios' version, but uncertain source. Text c. 1250.



BNF, f. fr. 183, fol. 69. X version: abbreviated prose version of T intended for a legendary. Text dated to the beginning of the 13th century.



BNF, Arsenal 5080, fol. 407. Manuscript not mentioned by Dembowski. Translation of Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum historiale*.