

2016

# The Storie of Asneth: Purity, Home, and Encountering Difference in the Middle Ages

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The *Storie of Asnetb*: Purity, Home, and  
Encountering Difference in the Middle Ages

by

Daniel J. Kimmel

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

(September 2016)

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This is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English.

The *Storie of Asneth*: Purity, Home, and Encountering Difference in the Middle Ages  
By Daniel J. Kimmel

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Date Approved

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*I would like to thank*

*Suzanne Edwards, who went above and beyond the call of duty in advising this thesis,*

*Halley Washburn, who has read every word I have ever written without complaint,*

*And Matthew Chelf, my comrade-in-arms, who taught me the meaning of solidarity.*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to uncover the critique of pieties of purity in the fifteenth century Middle English *Storie of Asneth* in light of Levinas's ethical theory of encountering difference and intersectional feminism. A little known text that, when studied, has all too often been reduced to predominant understandings of the ways in which medieval Christianity sought to homogenize cultural and religious alterity on the basis of purity and pollution beliefs, this thesis argues that the *Storie*, when considered in the complexity of its encounters, offers up a unique, non-reductive model of encountering difference that shifts our understanding of medieval Christianity's attitude toward the "other." As such, the *Storie of Asneth* deserves broader academic attention and canonization insofar as it adds to the complexity of the medieval tradition. Engaging the complex relationship between tropes of virginity, motherhood, and cultural, racial, and religious difference, the *Storie of Asneth* registers the ethical problems embodied by the valorization of virginity in the medieval canon, even as it imagines new possibilities for cross-cultural encounters not marked by the reductive violence inherent in systems founded upon and verified by epistemological and ontological purity.



The *Storie of Asneþ*: Purity, Home, and  
Encountering Difference in the Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>

“Purity is the enemy of change.”—Mary Douglas<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The *Storie of Asneþ* is an understudied 15<sup>th</sup> century Middle English text for at least three reasons. First, as Russell A. Peck notes in his introduction to the text, the Middle English translation survives in only a single manuscript—Ellesmere 26.A.13 in the Huntington Library. The lack of extant copies makes it difficult for scholars to group the text thematically with others and to discern for what reason it may have been translated into Middle English in the first place; we have little historical or textual context in which to orient the *Storie*, other than the known fact that it was translated at the behest of and owned by wealthy 15<sup>th</sup> century women. Secondly, the manuscript’s source materials pose a significant problem. The *Storie* has a long and complicated manuscript history beginning in second century Hellenic Alexandria where it was originally composed in Greek by whom scholars widely assume to be a member of the Hebraic community within the city and who may also have been a Christian convert (demonstrated by the author’s intimate knowledge of both Jewish midrashic tradition and Christian typologies). Between the second and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *Storie* was translated into various languages, including Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic, Slavic, and Latin, most famously excerpted by Vincent of Beauvais in his Latin *Speculum historiale* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, before being translated into the Middle English by an unknown scribe. Though scholars like Henry Noble McCracken, who rediscovered the text in 1910 and transcribed it for dissemination, and R.A. Dwyer have attempted to discern from which of

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<sup>1</sup> This is an unrevised thesis. Forthcoming revisions of this thesis are expected, including a conference presentation and possible preparation for submission to journals.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted as an epigraph by Louise O. Fradenburg in her important article “Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the Prioress’s Tale;” *Exemplaria* 1.1 (1989), pg. 69.

the Latin manuscripts the Middle English *Storie* was translated, the verdict is still contested and in many ways, due to lack of definitive evidence, undecidable. This makes it difficult to establish the text's relationship to its own provenance and manuscript history. Thirdly, the *Storie* poses a challenging generic problem. Scholars like Ruth Nisse and Cathy Hume have argued that the text consists of a blend of hagiography and crusader romance and have attempted to advance an interpretive paradigm based off of this categorization. Even so, I have found that accepting these generic categorizations too quickly may cause us to miss what her text accomplishes beyond either genre and deserve reconsideration. Because of the combination of the above difficulties—single extant copy, complicated history, and generic difficulty—the academy has largely ignored the *Storie of Asneth*,<sup>3</sup> even though biblical, philological, and literary scholars have lavished much attention on the *Storie's* historical predecessors, especially the Greek, Syriac, and Latin translations.

The above not insignificant challenges surrounding the *Storie of Asneth*, however, should not lead scholars to continue undervaluing the text. When Henry Noble McCracken “rediscovered” the *Storie* and painstakingly transcribed it from the Ellesmere manuscript for publication—an effort that, again and regrettably, garnered little attention—he rediscovered something special: in the text's own words, the *Storie of Asneth* stands “soleyn...withal” (68), and I feel compelled to make a case for its irreducible value for at least two reasons. First, the *Storie* represents an interesting anomaly in the narrative history of encountering religious and cultural difference within the medieval Christian tradition. Ruth Nisse—working with the twelfth century Latin *Liber de Asneth*—contextualizes Asneth's narrative in the intensifying debate over matters of authentic Jewish conversion prior to the

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<sup>3</sup> Russel A. Peck's “Introduction” to the text for the Middle English Text Series (1991) and Cathy Hume's article in *Medium Aevum* (2013) are the only two widely available and relatively recent pieces of scholarship on the Middle English *Asneth* that this scholar was able to find.

expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. In a crusader era wherein ethnic and religious difference was often encountered with violent eradication or forced conversion (read assimilation), Nisse suggests that the *Liber de Asneth* represented a model “phenomenology of conversion” that enabled Christians to determine the authenticity of a particular convert’s profession of faith: Asneth, Nisse suggests, was a model “type of the convert,” a spiritual litmus test (748). While brilliant, I believe that Nisse’s overall argument is symptomatic of something troubling within medieval scholarship in general: the tendency to reinscribe medieval Christian models of encountering difference within the dominant drive to erase difference by means of violence or other forms of erasure (such as “conversion,” insofar as conversion can signify the project to homogenize and occlude alterity). But the dominant Augustinian reduction of other religious traditions is not the only narrative of encountering religious otherness circulating in the Middle Ages, and we need to be careful about reproducing this “standard” history of reduction; the history of encountering difference in an ethical way—a history of which, I will contend, the *Storie* is part—has traditionally been occluded. Thus, I surmise, a large part of the lack of interest in Asneth. I, therefore, contend that the *Storie of Asneth* is not simply another tale of reduction but that it instead represents a unique model of encountering difference that does not require the religious and cultural “other” to be eradicated or even converted in the sense that religious and cultural difference is white-washed in an Augustinian idiom. Rather, Asneth’s narrative identifies commitments to ideological and cultural purity as well as methods of violent reduction as *the* problem fundamentally implicit in matters of “conversion” itself; overall, the narrative presents a non-reductive model of encountering difference as an alternative ethical center. Rather than reproduce and proliferate logics of purity, the *Storie* highlights the impurity of identity and

the need for remaining open to that impurity rather than foregrounding the violence of reduction—we need more of this type of narrative canonized.

Second, the *Storie of Asneth* tells us something unique about the possible range of relationships between religion, gender, and sexuality in the Middle Ages. Cathy Hume attempts to untangle some of the meaning of the relationship that the text constructs between religious and gender discourse by placing the *Storie of Asneth* within the context of what little we do know about its female readership. Hume argues that Asneth's narrative functions primarily as an instruction manual for young women striving to develop a noble and pious character by wedding a model of piety with "a conventionally successful married life" (48), or a saint's life for the non-virgin; instead of representing a model "type of the convert" as in Nisse's reading of the older Latin text, Hume's account reads Asneth as a model of the aristocratic "domestic sphere" (51) and, due to this line of reasoning, Hume ultimately brands Asneth's story as "unthreateningly orthodox" (50) to both dominant domestic and spiritual values. While Hume's analysis constitutes a valuable attempt to connect the *Storie of Asneth* with its immediate context, her ultimate conclusion concerning the narrative's passé orthodoxy is troubling: in fact, it is just such a conclusion that contributes to the *Storie's* ongoing undervaluation. Alternatively, I find the opposite: that the *Storie* is threatening of all orthodoxy. Asneth's narrative challenges the spiritual superiority of virginity (and the complex web of power woven around her image) by presenting wifedom and motherhood as a not compromised but superior ethical model through which to think difference. The text thereby inverts the dominant (or should we say orthodox?) spiritual logic of the day. As Gayatri Spivak suggests in "Nationalism and the Imagination," women as wives and mothers can help us to understand "home"—linguistic, ethnic, religious, and

national identity—and to understand the difference between “homes” in terms otherwise than of ontological purity which is all too often codified and represented by “virginity” in the Medieval canon. Asneth enables us to understand “home” in the non-reductive way Spivak suggests, for at the same time that it is reimagining religious difference, it is also reimagining the dominant models of feminine sanctity. Thus, it is important to build on but ultimately move beyond the small body of criticism surrounding the Middle English Asneth as the *Storie* deftly links the concerns of Nisse and Hume regarding matters of religious violence and gender ideologies—the text’s full conceptual force can only be understood in the intersection of these analyses. Only when both strands of analysis are thought together does a different picture of this marginal text emerge, lending it a power to reshape the relentlessly Anglo-Christian canon that often constrains encounters between “others” in a reductive idiom of purity.

One final thing before mapping out the trajectory of my argument: it would be good form to note that Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical theory of holding one’s self or one’s “at home” open to transformative encounters with the “Other,” which he pursues in *Totality and Infinity*, catalyzed this project’s inception and continues to haunt these pages. Making this admission may grieve those historicists who believe that modern theory has little business consorting with medieval literature, or who are at least wary of the possibly reductive alignment of the two spheres; such an alignment can and sometimes does run the danger of rendering opaque the ways in which the text wants itself to be understood and how the text may have been construed by its immediate readership. However, following Louise O. Fradenburg, there are also “certain cases” wherein the “differences between modernity and the Middle Ages might... enable, rather than disable, interpretation” (69). I contend that the

*Storie of Asneth*, especially in light of its complicated history and vague classification, represents such a case perfectly: Levinas's theory lends some much needed interpretive purchase on an otherwise difficult text. In addition, again following Fradenburg, proceeding with a careful eye toward historical context even while attempting to "understand medieval texts in ways sometimes different from the ways in which those texts seem to understand themselves" (72) can be ultimately productive and is, to say it crassly, not always a bad thing. In fact, such an approach has the potential to highlight a medieval text's continuing relevancy, especially that of a text that has been passed over so often. Seeing as this project is an argument for Asneth's continuing relevancy and, even more, a case for her narrative to play a more important role in the medieval canon at large, my methodology here of wedding modern ethics to an ancient text seems most appropriate. Even so, to do justice to those who might be wary of my approach, while Levinas has acted as a spring-board into the argument that follows, I have attempted herein to subordinate my theoretical underpinnings to the language of the text itself by striving to be much more interested in what the *Storie* can teach my Levinasian thinking rather than reduce Asneth's narrative to a Levinasian idiom (which would be to entirely miss the point). As Levinas's theory fails to offer a rigorous consideration of gender, ethnic, and religious otherness, it is necessary to move beyond his work as a framing theory, even as I build upon it, in order to allow Asneth space to offer up to our understanding the bounty she has to give.

This reading of the *Storie of Asneth* will proceed in four separate sections. In "On Virginity," I will explore how Asneth is structured by purity prior to her encounter with Joseph; in doing so, I will consider how the text poses commitments to purity as its central ideological problem. In "On Sameness," I will articulate how the text understands the logic

of purity and the tactics of reductive violence that regimes of purity deploy in order to render alterity legible; furthermore, I will articulate how the text renders the logic of purity and its tactics inadequate to formulating an effective ethics of encountering difference. In “On Difference,” I will develop and understanding of the text’s alternative to an ethics of purity by demonstrating how Asneth’s transformation into a mother and the “Refuge of Many” offers up an ethical model that takes difference and exposure at its starting place. Finally, in “On Mothers,” I will discuss how Asneth redefines our understanding of the Virgin Mary, and reshapes the ways in which Mary might signify to fifteenth century readers. Lastly, the reader will note that this scholar does not consider the Middle English text’s “Prologue” nor “Epilogue,” as he is attempting to stick tightly to an analysis of the critique of purity formulated within the narrative, and neither the “Prologue” nor “Epilogue” bear directly on the logic of the narrative proper.

### **I. On Virginitly: “A Critique of Pure Piety”<sup>4</sup>**

The *Storie of Asneth* is not simply a modified saint’s life for married women and marriageable young maidens, and it is not simply a lesser model of piety for those who are not eligible (or who have no desire to be eligible) to attain the rank of the spiritually elite consecrated virgin. To read it as such would be to approach the text from a position that already accepts the dominant image of the Middle Ages as it is shaped in our current canon: to accept *apriori* the assumption, instead of to interrogate the assumption, that the *Storie of Asneth* offers no challenge to the orthodox regime of medieval Christian purity that policed not only women’s bodies, but cultural, ethnic, and religious difference. Indeed, it would be

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<sup>4</sup> For this phrase, I am indebted to John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 65. In that book, he writes, whether in jest or earnest, that he intended to write “a treatise titled a critique of pure piety” after he retired: to my knowledge, that treatise has not yet been written. Consider the *Storie of Asneth* its classical-medieval prototype.

to render the *Storie* fangless, or “unthreateningly orthodox” (Hume 50). Instead, we must interrogate how the *Storie* matches up with the “standard” medieval history of encountering difference and I find that, rather than presenting erotic desire, marriage, and motherhood as a spiritually and ethically compromised position in relation to virginity, the *Storie of Asneþ* challenges the systems of purity that deploy the “virgin” as their ethical epitome and that rest the veracity of their teachings on her inviolacy. I hope it need not be argued that to challenge the supremacy of the trope of the virgin is no small gesture.<sup>5</sup> As is well known, theologians and poets ranging from the earliest Christian writings to those of the late Middle Ages invested a vast amount of energy into codifying virginity as the state of spiritual and moral excellence: from St. Ambrose’s influential *De Virginibus*—among the first to evangelize the merits of virginity at length—to Chaucer’s “Second Nun’s Tale,” in which St. Cecilia famously demands chastity of her newly-wedded husband, virginity is extolled as the exemplary spiritual life. Even William Langland, in his extensive meditation on spiritual truth and poverty, nodded to virginity’s moral superiority, clearly ranking virginity, widowhood, and marriage in descending order of spiritual merit in his complicated allegory of the Tree of Charity.<sup>6</sup> To perhaps put too fine a point on it, St. Paul, in a statement often interpreted as a concession to those whose flesh is weak, begrudgingly admitted that there could even be a state *other than* virginity for the Christian in his letter to the Corinthians (even if his reasons for doing so are apocalyptic): “I say to the unmarried, and to the widows: It is good for them

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the connection between Asneþ, purity, and theological truth, in *Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus’ Marriage to Mary the Magdalene* (2014), Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson controversially speculate that the Syriac translation of Asneþ is an encoded gospel that reveals Jesus’ marriage to Mary Magdalene and their subsequent children. The persuasiveness of their overall argument aside, Jacobovici and Wilson uncover a powerful alliance between virginity and the way that the Church’s truths are structured and defended. The controversial reception of the book points to an uneasy structure of feeling surrounding Jesus’ (much like the Virgin Mary’s) sexuality, giving some sense that if Jesus had married and had children—that is, had he been sexually “impure”—he could not have been the Savior.

<sup>6</sup> *Piers Plowman*, C-Text, Passus XVIII.83-99: “Thenne is Virginite, more virtuous and fairest, as in heuene/ For that is euene with angelis and angeles pere.”



if they so continue, even as I. But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to be burnt.”<sup>7</sup> In St. Paul’s formulation, marriage acts as a last-ditch safety net to protect against eternal fires—but virginity, self-containment, is to be like the angels, an earthly denizen with one foot already in the heavenly realms, the conduit and epitome of “true” spiritual power.

On a more communal scale, moreover, the image of the virgin was painstakingly fashioned to signify a defender of the purity of the Church and the Church’s teachings. Ambrose, for example, figures the virgin as a defender of all Christendom in acutely militant language: “Thus, turreted with the precious fortifications of the saints, she will not only repel hostile invasions but also provide trusty defences for good merits” (2.6.43).<sup>8</sup> The virgin’s task was not only to maintain and defend the purity of her own body, but as a representative body of the Church, theologians extended the power of her purity to function as a watchtower that wards against “hostile invasions,” a flexible phrase interpreted variously across the ages to fit the contemporary enemy. Ambrose’s analogy helps make sense of as to why the Virgin Mary was often referred to and depicted as *castellum*, “a town with a high tower and a surrounding wall ‘for the protection of the citizens within’” (Fulton 261, referring to Honorius’s *Sigillum sanctae Mariae*) and why the Marian tradition was often implicated in justifications of anti-semitism: if anyone attempted to defile the Virgin, her “citizens,” or the veracity of the Church for which she stood, there would be hell to pay (both here on earth and afterwards). The virgin, especially the Virgin Mary, became a powerfully pathetic image around which to accrue distrust of the non-Christian “outsider,”

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:8-9. All biblical references refer to the Douay-Rheims.

<sup>8</sup> Ramsey 104.

the religio-cultural pollutant.<sup>9</sup> In order to benefit from the shelter of the virgin's sealed walls (and, through her intercession, to benefit from Christ's salvific work), one either had to accept ideological erasure through (sometimes forced) conversion, or risk being labeled as an infection and expelled from Christian society (as testified to by the expulsion of the Jews in 1290), or be eradicated (like the numerous Jewish and Muslim dead during the Crusades). Erasure, expulsion, and eradication are the dominant tactics for encountering difference known to systems of purity and we see these tactics replicated time and time again throughout the medieval canon as it is now shaped: assimilation of alterity by any means necessary. To great effect, the image of the virgin was militarized through excessive exaltation, her purity deftly managed and deployed as a defense against the impurities of difference embodied by the foreigner and the stranger and as an iconic catalyst to instigate reductive measures. To me it is clear that any breach of this spiritual tower would not only be a challenge to sexual norms, but a threat to the logic of orthodoxy itself and to an entire regime of epistemological and ontological purity built upon and secured by the bodies of bound femininity.

Yet, the *Storie of Asneth* offers just such a challenge and rends just such a breach in the medieval Christian logic of purity by razing the proud image of the Virgin as sealed tower and transfiguring it into the *exemplum* of the Mother as an open-walled "Refuge of Many" (in fact, Asneth's story goes so far as to redefine what the Virgin Mary herself might signify to a Christian and non-Christian audience—more on this below). Asneth's (hi)story

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<sup>9</sup> Louise O. Fradenburg notes the "intimacy of connection between anti-Semitism and medieval legends of the Virgin" (85) insofar as the Virgin Mary "figured, for the Middle Ages, the inviolacy of the mystical body of the Church, the unassailability of its belief, and its perdurability throughout history" (88). Referring to Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Fradenburg writes that "pollution beliefs"—for example, defiling the virgin representing the purity of the mystical body of the Church—"are meant precisely to *marshall* outrage, to arouse moral fervor, and strengthen social structure" (84). For example, while writing this thesis, I received an urgently worded email from "Catholic Online" marshalling outrage against the "Satanic Desecration of Mary" in a Black Mass to be publicly held in Oklahoma City on The Feast of the Assumption of Mary (August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

offers up a different tactic of encountering difference: exposure and hospitality. But in order to see the challenge Asneth offers to the regime of purity and the alternative tactics it deploys, one must first see how the text poses purity (Asneth's virginity) as its central interpretive problem, not as an orthodox and necessary step on a pious young maiden's trek to holy matrimony (which would be to read it against Cathy Hume's suggestion that the narrative functions primarily as a domestic primer). Because the *Storie* is, as Ruth Nisse suggests, predominantly concerned with conversion and repentance, it would be good practice to determine from what state Asneth is converted (virginity) and that sin of which she repents (devotion to purity) first. For this, we must begin from the beginning.

It is quite clear that ontological purity and orthodox devotion structures Asneth before she ever meets and is "converted by" Joseph to Judaism, a perhaps unsettling starting place in comparison with standard Christian conversion narratives that mark a movement from sin (impurity), to renunciation, to a new and sinless life as a purified being. The opening lines that describe both Asneth and her dwelling (what Levinas might call her "at home") closely ally her with readily recognizable tropes of the virgin maiden: forgetting for just a moment that Asneth is Egyptian, and that she prays to Egyptian gods, one might say that Asneth is the model of pure Christian (feminine) piety from the start. Familiar in tales of *fin amor*, Asneth is described as incredibly beautiful and desirable (as forbidden fruit always is), "the most comely creature/ Of Egipt" (50-51)—so beautiful that all the noble princes of Egypt battle one another for her. But like Ambrose's Virgin of Antioch,<sup>10</sup> Asneth withdraws from the world of men and hides her beauty behind veils and high walls: she is "soleyn... withal/ dispisyng eche man deynusly, and proude of her corage" (68-69). Asneth despises men, confident in her free-spiritedness and independence ("corage") from them, requiring

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<sup>10</sup> *De Virginitibus*, 2.4.22.

only her gods and fellow virgin handmaidens. Furthermore, Asneth is “without ony blame” (49): like Lot in the midst of Sodom and Gomorrah, she is blameless and without any blemish or fault. She prays to her “Egipt godis... everi day” (76, 78), offering them daily sacrifices and regarding them with great fear and reverence (77). And, like a Christian who might wear a crucifix around their neck in honor of their god, she wears a richly wrought necklace full of gemstones “grave” with the names of her Egyptian deities, “plesant to here entent” (124-126). Asneth is a model of the religious devotee, conscious and proud of the energy she puts into protecting the purity of her body and of her worship—to consort with men would be to distract her from the divine. At this point, one might surmise that a fifteenth century Christian reader would think that the *only* thing amiss is that Asneth (like the Jews) worships the wrong divine being(s): if only one would nudge her in the right direction—if only she worshipped in a Judeo-Christian fashion--she would be a shoe-in for sainthood.<sup>11</sup> However, as the narrative progresses and as we shall see, the narrative suggests that it is Asneth’s fervent dedication to an exclusionary regime of purity, not the name or referent of the regime itself (Egyptian pantheon, Judeo-Christianity), that is Asneth’s only fault.

Not only is Asneth already framed as a model of pure piety, and as if we needed more convincing that she is indeed already fashioned as “perfect” in a recognizable Judeo-Christian idiom, Asneth is closely linked to the typology of the holy virgin—and to the Virgin Mary—through the tropes of the *hortus conclusus* and *fons signatus* (the enclosed garden and the sealed fountain). The above tropes, closely associated with consecrated virgins throughout the medieval canon, are derived from Song of Songs 4:12: “My sister, my spouse,

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<sup>11</sup> This scholar, for one, is more than prepared to argue for Asneth’s canonization, both within the Academy and the Church, but for other than orthodox reasons.

is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up” [Hortus conclusus soror mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus]. Rachel Fulton notes that the medieval Marian liturgy is an extended meditation on the Song of Songs,<sup>12</sup> and from Ambrose’s *De Virginitate* to the much later *Pistil of Swete Susan*, the appearance of a young maiden in a walled garden immediately signified an exemplar of purity and piety to the medieval reader. Asneth’s home—her “at home”—signifies precisely that. Within the walls of Asneth’s tower,

...ther were planted in the side the halle trees faire behonge  
With frutes that were delectable, and fair leves amonge,  
And a cundite beside the halle that ran as cristalle cleer,  
That moisted the trees lustily and dide to hem gret chere. (99-102)

Asneth’s home is a nostalgic reminder of the lost purity of Eden, with luscious fruits and a crystal-clear river secured by walls “wonder hic” (96): she is, literally as well as tropologically, a virgin residing within a walled garden complete with a sealed fountain. Combine this with Asneth’s later figuration as the *sponsa Christi*—she marries Joseph who is, after all, a Jewish man called “the sone of God” (666)—and the fact that she is renamed “Refuge,” a title often associated with Mary, one rapidly arrives at the conclusion that not only is Asneth one among many ethical exemplars emerging through the trope of consecrated virginity, but she is, as the Virgin Mary is the virgin of virgins, the “Old Testament” example of examples in regards to pure piety. Asneth is utterly unique, “soleyn... withal”: she is the Egyptian Mary, second to none, from the start.

In addition to posing an exemplar of pure piety as the one who needs to undergo “conversion,” the text is equally aware of the instability and vulnerability of Asneth’s ontological and ethical purity despite the text’s other efforts to contain her within the trope of pure, devout virginity (in fact, the text later poses this instability and vulnerability as the

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<sup>12</sup> See chapter Five, “The Seal of the Mother Bride,” in Fulton’s book, *From Judgement to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*.

source of her post-conversion strength). For one thing, the text suggests the fundamental vulnerability of the patriarchal mobilization of the “virgin as ethical exemplar” by belying the sheer amount of force that must be expended in order to maintain the epistemological and ontological boundaries of purity signified by bound femininity. Reminding one of an anchoress’s cell, the tower in which Asneth lives and prays is annexed to her father’s house: god forbid proud, independent women ever be removed too far from the gaze of the father, whether they be the purest “creatures” alive or not. Though Asneth is proud of her independence, her “home” is dependent on her father’s house, and her storeroom stocked by the bounty of her father’s “feeld of... heritage” (118) upon which her subsistence depends. Furthermore, in addition to its wondrous fortifications of stone—stone being a substance that signifies yet betrays the human desire for a permanence, as Jeffrey J. Cohen’s book *Stone: an Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015) attests—the tower is sealed by four great iron gates that are formidably defended by “eyhtene men” (98). The text, at the exact moment it exalts the virgin Asneth, reveals that Asneth’s origin and “at home,” the *bortus conclusus* and *fons signatus*, are figures of an unstable ethical structure of purity built and defended entirely by the men who surround it and attempt to bind it continuously.<sup>13</sup> Would it not be truly subversive of the father’s orthodoxy to raze the garden’s walls and to unseal the fountain, that their shade and sustenance might be freely available to all without entry fee (one is reminded of the New Jerusalem of Revelation 22:1-2, for example, with its welcoming gates opened wide and its fruit and water free for “for the healing of the nations”)? Such an unsealing would require an utterly different type of “conversion” than the one often

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<sup>13</sup> John D. Caputo reflects on the endless expenditure of energy required to maintain metaphysical systems in *Against Ethics*: “Metaphysics suffers the systematic misfortune of containing what it cannot contain, of harboring what it cannot harbor... like a man who has swallowed something he cannot digest” (73). Levinas’s phrase for what cannot be contained in patriarchal systems and what cannot be “digested” (it is no accident Caputo used “man” here) is the irreducibility of the Other.

imagined is required by Judeo-Christian systems of purity to pass beyond the pearly gates (which is the type of conversion requiring, as Ruth Nisse might say, a passport “phenomenology” to verify its veracity; 748); the unsealing would require a conversion to a state, a way of being, that does not require a foundation of truth bound by purity. The latter is the model of conversion that the *Storie of Asneth* offers.

And so as if to underscore not only the instability and vulnerability of Asneth’s purity and, by extension, the efficacy of purity as a basis of an ethics of difference itself, a constitutive and irreconcilable disruption resides at the very heart of the way in which the text structures her. The text states that Asneth is

Not lyke the dowhtres of Egipt in here resemblance,  
But assemblynge the Hebrees in colour and cuntenance.

Of stature semeli as Sare, specious as Rebekke,  
Fair formed of feturis as semblyng to Rachel (52-55)

Though Asneth is Egyptian by virtue of her Egyptian father and mother, she *appears* to be, and derives her surpassing beauty from the fact that she appears to be, Hebrew “in color and countenance.” Not only this, but Asneth is here registered in the roles of the great Hebrew Matriarchs, a list of matriarchs from which she is often excluded because the inclusion of an Egyptian matriarch in the lineage of the Jews would trouble the purity of Jewish blood and, by extension, the Judeo-Christian religion (especially since Egyptians were often, among others, troped in scripture as the misguided idolaters par excellence).<sup>14</sup> The most obvious reading of this moment might be to suggest that though Egyptian, Asneth is Jewish at heart

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<sup>14</sup> Russel A. Peck, in his introduction to the text, notes that the kernel of the narrative surrounding Asneth originated in a midrashic context that was particularly concerned with Asneth’s Egyptian blood. As a mother of no less than two of the twelve tribes of Israel, the “mesalliance” between Joseph and Asneth was an object of serious concern to Jewish theologians, as the purity of the Hebrew bloodline was at stake (1). In some midrashic accounts, their solution was to make Asneth the child of Dinah, a Hebrew woman, who was raped and inseminated by Shechemites in Genesis 34 (the rape of Dinah is eluded to later in the *Storie*, 755-56). The child of the rape, Asneth, was then, depending on the account, abandoned and found by or given to the priest Potiphar to be raised in the land of Egypt.

(that is, “in being”) as signified by her Hebraic appearance; therefore, she is already primed to receive the true religion from her encounter with Joseph. Furthermore, it may be an attempt to “whitewash” the radical nature of her Egyptianness, an attempt to tone down the threat Asneth poses to religious purity by signifying from the start that she is “one of us” (though she doesn’t know it yet). However, there is no doubt that in the *Storie*, Asneth is the full-blooded “dowter dere” of two Egyptian parents, making the tension in the description of her appearance all the more startling. Reintroducing an Egyptian Matriarch into the religious heritage of the Judeo-Christian tradition—especially one so closely tied, tropologically, to the Virgin Mary—reveals that the tradition itself is a cross-cultural work, a construction of alterity built by strange encounters. Any attempt to purge that tradition of the “other” in the name of purity so as to white-wash over its cross-cultural origins, to bind it with laws and theologies that govern sexuality, and that attempt to tropologically seal it within walls “wonder hie” (96) would be to cut the tradition off from the ground of its own history and being. Asneth’s *Storie* is a history attempting to document and testify to the tradition’s cross-cultural origins. Lastly, these lines reveal that though Egyptian, Asneth is already, from the start, Jewish by virtue of her Hebraic countenance; and though later converted to Judaism (Joseph’s religion), she remains Egyptian (as we will see). Asneth’s hypostatic union of Egyptian-Jewishness forecloses the possibility for the logic of purity to close in on itself once again: like the windows in her tower through which she will “encounter” first Joseph and then the divine angel, Asneth must open her walls and then remain open in order to channel divine grace. The *Storie of Asneth* is then, at its heart, a “critique of pure piety,” or of the piety of purity (Caputo 65).



If one needs any further convincing that purity—and the ethical, epistemological, and ontological structures that rely upon purity for their veracity and power—is the central problematic of the text, one need only look at Asneth’s later prayers of repentance in which she repents, turns away from, specifically, the sin of her proud virginity. Tucked away in Asneth’s second prayer of penance, which she utters after she and Joseph, unlike St. Cecilia, consummate their marriage and have children, Asneth reveals the reason for her “conversion.” The reason is not the fact that she now understands that she had worshipped false gods instead of the true “one.” Nor is it that she realizes that she was then too Egyptian, but is now rightfully Jewish (and, if Nisse’s argument is persuasive, now rightfully Christian). Her reason for converting, her sin, was her devotion to maintain the purity of her status and worship. In her own words, Asneth repents that she carried on “dispyngne every man on erthe with errour” (701), including Joseph whom she claimed could never be good enough for her because he is a “herdis sone of Chanan” (a poor Hebrew instead of a rich Egyptian; 150). Her prayer marks her virginity—and its complicit pride, solipsism, and violent reduction of alterity—as her sin. Though this peculiar repentance will make more sense after considering her encounters with Joseph and the angel, the radical nature of Asneth’s prayer cannot be overstated. It is a prayer that is not at all reflective of what we might consider to be a traditional convert’s penitential rites, and this moment alone should cause us to halt and to question our assumptions. Asneth’s “conversion”—her encounter with alterity—is catalyzed by his peculiar penance, and transfigures her from a sealed-off storehouse of pure virtue into the “refuge” of those who repent of their devotion to purity. Moreover, Asneth becomes the “refuge” of those who repent of their willingness to use

violence in order to abduct and reduce alterity in the name of purity. But I get ahead of myself: to Asneth's encounters and transfiguration we now turn.

## II. On "Sameness": the Reductive Encounter

When two different systems of purity clash, it is inevitably a violent, reductive encounter with one side most likely losing out. To risk a short flight into Levinas, when the "I" meets the "other"—however the difference is marked—the initial impulse of the "I" is to reduce the other, to digest its alterity, and to inscribe over the other with one's own idiom so as to make it/them intelligible in one's "own" onto-epistemological schema. The drive with which the "I" reduces the other in order to make it/them intelligible operates primarily by identifying similitude, an overlap of sameness, between the other and what one already "knows"—after reducing it/them to the same, the other can then be assimilated and managed. Though the *Storie of Asneth* knows nothing of Levinas, it knows an awful lot about how systems of purity operate and about the reductive tactics deployed when commitments to purity are privileged when encountering difference (i.e. erasure, expulsion, and eradication); equally, the text commits itself to uncovering the violence and inadequacy of purity's reductive drive and offers an alternative response. The *Storie* continues its critique of purity by modeling two separate types of encountering difference: the initial reductive encounter between Asneth and Joseph, and what I will call the transfigurative encounter—the non-reductive encounter—between Asneth and the "divine," during which she learns something holier than being pure.

To one another, Asneth and Joseph represent the image of alterity, the foreigner, the "straunger" (148). Their initial encounter with one another condenses cultural, religious, and

gender difference, and the ways in which each respond to the encounter with one another reveals two methods of responding to alterity: while Joseph's response reveals the patriarchal will to "correct" and preserve systems of purity, Asneth's response (her penance and transfiguration) deconstructs purity and offers a model of hospitality that takes harboring difference as its starting point (more on this later). Though one might say that Joseph is, without knowing it, a little Jewish-Egyptian himself—he is, after all, a Jew in a high place of power in Egypt, and his raiment and title (170-181) simultaneously suggest the messianic "sone of God" (666) and the Egyptian sun god—there is no doubt that he is just as committed to maintaining the purity of his Jewish identity by suppressing difference (both within and without himself) as Asneth is to preserving her Egyptian identity. Though Joseph is in power over nearly all of Egypt, he is careful not to be "conversant" with them in their religious worship, food, and sexual liaisons (212); he follows strictly the "commaundementis" of his "fadir" (231), avoiding all women—especially Egyptian women, who inexplicably throw themselves at his handsome self, driven only by "wanton wikkednesse" (223)<sup>15</sup>—with the same zeal with which Asneth proudly despises "eche man" (69). Though he dwells among the Egyptians, he takes great care not to dwell *as* one of them or to inhabit an Egyptian "place" or "at home" (all connotations of "conversant"). Joseph refuses, in any way, to operate as an Egyptian. In fact, Joseph's utter commitment to "the presence of his pure clenness" (225) and Asneth's virgin superiority constitute the *only* overlap of sameness these two particular "alterities" share. The text makes this clear through Asneth's father, Putifar, who time and time again attempts to leverage their equal commitment to purity as a tactic to bring them together. To Asneth, Putifar says that Joseph is "A maide clene as ye be, so virgine he ys speciale... hatynge alienes and unclene wymmen,

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<sup>15</sup> The epitome of patriarchal wish-fulfillment.

as thou in thi nature” (143, 249). Beyond the question of *how* “virgine” one must be until one is “speciale,” Joseph exhibits quite an impressive suitor profile: he is a virgin who is fastidiously committed to preserving his socio-cultural purity, hating foreigners and despising the sexually promiscuous. These are all things that Asneth cherishes in her “nature,” so Putifar thinks, an outgrowth of the excellence of her purity. But, to repeat, when two systems of purity clash, it is bound to get ugly.

Even though Putifar clearly did not suspect such a thing to occur, it is the commitment to purity devoutly observed by both Asneth and Joseph, their only overlap of sameness, that drives each of them to reduce and reject one another upon their first encounter: to one another, they are the alien, the socio-cultural impurity, the sexual threat. Asneth makes her position toward Joseph quite clear when she rejects Putifar’s marriage deal by claiming that Joseph is nothing but a “herdes sone of Chanan”—a poor shepherd boy from beyond the Egyptian border—a fugitive slave, an alien that worships a strange god, a jail-bird and would-be rapist (149-151). Putifar has only to mention Joseph’s name, a Hebraic name, and despite listing Joseph’s current credentials—“he ys governour to save Egipt” (142)—Asneth reduces Joseph to what she thinks she “knows” about the Hebrew people. In fact, Joseph’s presence in Egypt, so close to the heart of Egyptian power, only heightens Asneth’s distrust of this “straunger,” attributing his escape from prison and rise to power to nothing but trickery and deceit: Joseph is nothing but a “drewe redere” (157), a fortune teller, one who preys on minds by telling them what they wish to hear. Despite Asneth’s apparent moral and ethical perfection from the start, her violent reduction of Joseph reveals the ethical impoverishment at the heart of value-systems founded on purity. It is Asneth’s deep recognition, once she finally *sees* Joseph, of how wrongly and reductively she read

Joseph's Jewishness that eventually redeems her and redeems her reader by providing an alternative response to difference: she responds by repenting of her hasty reduction of Joseph to an Egyptian characterization of the Hebrew people, and instead opens herself up to a genuine encounter with and acceptance of his alterity (which eventually leads to her transfigurative encounter with the divine).

Joseph, on the other hand, is equally reductive of Asneth, but his response to the correction of his misperceptions does nothing to redeem himself (nor us)—or, perhaps, Joseph's response to correction redeems us by revealing, as was said before, the violence inherent in the patriarchal drive to adjust and preserve fragile systems of purity rather than to dispense with them. When Joseph first sees Asneth, who is standing in her tower window, beautifully dressed, he asks Putifar: "What woman was sche that in the window stod/ Of the cenacle as I cam in?" (215-216). Hastily, proving that the question was purely rhetorical—purity never waits for alterity to explain itself, but offers its own answer on alterity's behalf—Joseph immediately asks that Asneth be removed entirely from Putifar's house, to which Joseph has just arrived as an honored guest. Explaining to Putifar that he fears the "infeccon of femenyng insolence," and deducing that Asneth must be one of those wanton "dowtres of dukys grete/ Of Egipt" (220-221), he demands that she be "voyde" (expelled; 225) from his pure presence (and from her own home). Joseph thinks that Asneth is nothing more than a foreign whore.

Though Joseph's assumptions about Asneth's sexual nature are decidedly wrong (as we know), his response to seeing her standing in a window reveal just how powerfully cultural stereotypes overlay difference and foreclose on the possibility of encountering alterity in a constructive way. Though the reader, as the discussion above noted, associates

Asneth with the spiritual merit of virginity and understands that, tropologically, Asneth is aligned with the Virgin Mary, Joseph interprets Asneth's "figure" as another renowned character in Judeo-Christian history: Jezebel. The association between Asneth and Jezebel at the very moment Joseph sees Asneth for the first time would have been readily apparent to a fifteenth century Christian, as Jezebel was and continues to be the trope for the sexually promiscuous foreigner and corrupter of (masculine) religious purity. Jezebel was a Phoenician who, upon her marriage to King Ahab, brought her foreign polytheistic cult with her to Jerusalem and "perverted" the worship of YHWH. Though there is no evidence in the scriptures that she was ever unfaithful to her husband, Jezebel is commonly interpreted as an idolatrous seductress, an enemy of godly men, one who wars against the prophets, defiles sacred places with idols, and misguides the anointed king. After King Ahab's death on the battlefield (1 Kings 22:34-35), when Jehu, the newly anointed king and a pure, godly man, went to go kill Jezebel, it is written: "But Jezebel hearing of his coming in, painted her face with stibic stone, and adorned her head, and looked out of a window" (2 Kings 9:30). Sitting in a window with painted face and full adornment—the shadow of Asneth—may seem an odd way to await one's killer; however, the tradition holds that Jezebel was trying to seduce the new king in an attempt to lead yet another godly man and his kingdom to ruin. Interestingly, if Asneth is Jezebel in this moment, Joseph is Jehu, her "killer," one who must either remove (exterminate) her or "purge" (convert) her of her alterity, both a certain kind of death. In one figure, Jezebel, we have the conflation of foreigner, seductress, and idolater—the embodiment of "the infeccion of femenyng insolence" (221). The script continues: "And Jehu lifted up his face to the window, and said: Who is this?" (2 Kings 9:30)—or, in Joseph's words, "What womman was sche that in the wyndow stod...?" (215).

The Jezebel “type,” the painted woman in a window, would have been very familiar to readers of the original, second century Greek text and beyond. When Joseph looks up and sees a well-adorned woman in the window staring down at him, he beholds a “Jezebel”: he fears not only her potential sexual promiscuity, but the religious and cultural promiscuity that follows from intimacy with foreigners—Asneth’s foreignness is, for him, the source of her threat, and must be “voided” (as his commitment to purity cannot help but demand).

Joseph’s perception of Asneth’s purity along the lines of a powerful idiom signifying moral pollution reveals just how unpersuasive differing systems of purity are to one another: one woman’s virtue is another man’s sin. Joseph’s reduction of Asneth’s “virtue” reveals the foreclosure of the possibility for true encounter and communication between “others” that base the power and truth of their way of being on ideals of purity. By way of comparison, consider the opening of the thirteenth century *Ballade: A Dalida, Jhezabel, et Thays* by Oton de Granson:

If Lucrece, the very worthy Roman,  
Or the virtuous Trojan, Hecuba,  
Or Elie, who was of such quality  
That willingly did she keep herself chaste,  
Were now to come back to life again,  
Today there is so much malice and envy  
That one would compare them, it seems to me,  
To Delilah, Jezebel, and Thaïs. (1-8)

This poem, other than *The Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*, is one of the few references to Jezebel in medieval literature that directly links her in comparison to other models of virtue. In the *Ballade*, ancient and virtuous royal maidens—like Asneth—are reduced to Jezebels and Delilahs by Judeo-Christian understandings of what counts as

currently virtuous and right. In the same way that the text marks how Joseph reads Asneth's understanding and enactment of Egyptian virtue as impure, Granson laments that Lucrece's Roman virtue and Hecuba's Trojan virtue would be read as perversion by "today's" Christian reader. Both Joseph's response to seeing Asneth and the *Ballade* reveal the woeful inadequacy of perspectives of purity for constructing an ethical model for cross-cultural encounters. When Jehu sees Jezebel in the window, he commands that she be thrown down from her high tower, "voided" from his presence through death, and she is eaten by dogs (2 Kings 9: 33-37); likewise, when Joseph sees Asneth, he demands that she be voided from his presence (figuratively, he throws her to his ideological dogs). Ethics of purity cannot help cast the other out the window.

Furthermore, Joseph's reaction to Putifar's correction only underscores the text's rejection of the type of reductive encounter that systems of purity enact on alterity. After Putifar exclaims that Asneth is not a threat to Joseph's purity but a virgin like him and that she is "non alien, but of herinne" (237)—perhaps insinuating that it is Joseph, not Asneth, who is the "alien" here—Joseph rejoices in Asneth's purity and admits her into his clean presence. Joseph receives a correction to his misperception, but a correction that only serves to fortify—not undermine—his commitment to the ideals of Jewish purity. Fundamentally, Joseph remains unchanged, adjusting his perception of Asneth to fit what he understands to be the superiority of his current worldview situated on the horizon of purity. When Putifar urges Asneth to greet Joseph with a friendly kiss—a bodily encounter that would bring Joseph much too close to a miscegenative encounter with Asneth's Egyptianness—Joseph once again rejects her, not on the basis of her sexuality, but due to the fact that she remains a foreigner culturally and religiously. Pushing Asneth away, he says



Sothly, unsemynge and unsittyngge hit ys  
To the man that schulde serve God, and with his mouth Hym blesse,  
And ete the blessed brede of lyve, and drinke of His chalis,  
Ony womman, alien or straunger for to kesse (257-260)

Though Joseph revises his decision to “void” her—to exterminate her like Jehu did Jezebel, or purge her from his presence like the Jews from England in 1290—he insists that he, a man who would serve the Jewish God, cannot kiss her until she too becomes Jewish.

Accepting Putifar’s minor correction, he falls back upon the final tactic of purity: to insinuate the need for Asneth’s conversion, or assimilation, to his pure Jewishness. Then, he departs. Joseph’s departure marks, one final time, the inability of purity to abide for long in the presence of alterity, Asneth’s not yet “clean” enough Egyptian presence, without retreating to recuperate itself: the law of purity is fragile and must retreat from the “leper.”

When Joseph returns, Asneth will be changed through her miraculous “conversion,” and Joseph will marry her; but this is not to say that Asneth will become “like” him.

Alternatively, Asneth is moved to cast not herself but her Egyptian idols (the emblems of her understanding of what constitutes a pure worldview) out of her tower window as well as the food sacrificed to “here godes of goold and silver” (312), and it is the food—the emblem of her devotion to purity—that is promptly eaten by “straungeris houndis” (320). Asneth does not cast her commitments to Egyptian purity out of her tower window simply to adopt Joseph’s Jewish purity—rather, she casts out the idol of “purity” itself, the true “Jezebel.” (as we shall see in her transfigurative encounter with divine alterity now).

### III. On Difference: the Transfigurative Encounter

Asneth's response to the realization that she has woefully misperceived and enacted ideological violence against Joseph's Jewishness and her consequent encounter with the divine marks the ethical heart of the text, wherein the *Storie of Asneth* offers up an alternative model for encountering difference that does not rely upon the tactics of purity but, instead, takes difference and exposure as its starting point. Asneth's renaming—her transfiguration by the divine into the “Moche of Refute” (Refuge of Many; 462)—and Asneth's motherhood offers, in addition, an ethical exemplar to rival with and replace that of the orthodox, consecrated virgin who cannot help but expel impurity (difference) from her presence.

Briefly, before moving on to the divine encounter, however, one must note that Asneth's decision to “convert” does not arrive at the compulsion of Joseph's actions or persuasions, and this is important because it removes Asneth's conversion from the traditional narratives of conversion in which one recognizes (or is forced to recognize) the superiority of a competing system of epistemological purity; that is, it removes Asneth from the line of reductive force that systems of purity levy against one another in their attempts to totalize. Unlike with Putifar, Joseph does not place his interpretation of what he holds to be the right perception of the world into Asneth's mouth. Asneth's transformation is not a product of direct external force. In David Cook's online translation of the Greek text,<sup>16</sup> as well as within the Latin text that Russel Peck consults, Joseph preaches at Asneth after rejecting her for remaining too Egyptian, telling her “about the God of Israel and His power to give life and His superiority over Egyptian idols” (Peck 57). But Joseph's preaching is

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<sup>16</sup> Cook's online translation was the only widely available English translation of the older Greek text to which this scholar had access.

conspicuously absent from the Middle English *Storie*. Russel Peck suggests that it is an “eyeskip error” of an otherwise “careful” scribe (57), but—whether error or intentional omission (which is possible, since the omitted lines contain only Joseph’s preaching and nothing more)—the absence of Joseph’s attempt to convert Asneth via the Judeo-Christian logic of religious supremacy removes him, in a direct sense, from Asneth’s transformation. She is not led to conversion by Joseph’s teaching of “right” knowledge, but by something else entirely: the force of her desire for, or her exposure and responsiveness to, the beauty of Joseph. In her own words, “For as the fyssh by the hook ys take by distresse,/ So ys beauté drow me to hym by vertuus providence” (710-711); Asneth’s recognition that Joseph is beautiful despite the fact that he is other (the recognition that something or someone can be both beautiful and other), or rather her desire for the beauty of alterity, leads to her transformation. Furthermore, Asneth recognizes that her desire for Joseph (the other) cannot be acted upon if she clings to her own prior commitment to “Egyptian purity,” but this in no way means that she assimilates herself to Joseph’s “Jewish purity” either. As we shall see, she instead becomes more fully hybrid, Egyptian-Jewish, an exemplar of dwelling and rejoicing in difference.

The claim that Asneth does not simply exchange one system of purity (Egyptian) for another (Jewish) is supported by the fact that, after Asneth communes with the angel and is miraculously transformed into the “Moche of Refute” (462), Joseph returns and for a second time, he does not recognize who Asneth is. Seeing her basking in divine light and a new “beauté briht” (601), Joseph is taken aback and asks, “Who art thou? Telle me anon riht.” (604). Joseph reframes and reiterates, but with a difference, his initial question “What woman was sche that in the window stod/ Of the cenacle as I cam in?” (215-216). The

difference, though the question is most obviously different in verbage, is two-fold: first, he no-longer directs the question to a patriarchal third party to explain who she is on her behalf and, secondly, following on the first and unlike in the case of Putifar, Joseph no longer has a ready-made answer to his own question. Instead, his own understanding has been struck mute in the glow of Asneth's alterity; he is unable to gloss over her in his own idiom. Logically, one might assume that if Asneth had simply converted to Judaism—to Joseph's system of purity—especially aided by her already Hebrew countenance, Joseph would have recognized Asneth immediately as one of "his" own. In fact, in the Greek original, he does recognize her immediately: "And when Joseph saw her, he said to her, 'Come to me pure virgin, for I have had good news from heaven, explaining everything about you'" (18.2) In the Greek text, Joseph's perceptual sovereignty is not challenged: not only does he recognize her and praise her for being truly "pure" at last, but he is able to tell her everything about herself. In the *Storie*, however, Joseph can only wonder at the face of the other, having been brought to his own limit, and ask, "Who art thou?" (603). Asneth's explanation of herself is therefore (finally) placed in her own mouth: she answers Joseph, saying that she is no longer Asneth (whom he called Jezebel), but the "Cité of Refute" (610). Despite her "conversion," she has not been made merely the "same," a mere "androgynous reflection" of Joseph's Jewish beauty (Nisse 752): instead, Asneth is invested with her own light and beauty, to which Joseph is now exposed and drawn. Asneth has been transfigured: she has been both re-figured as open city instead of sealed tower, and has "changed places" with Joseph, who is now not aggressively reductive in the presence of a competing system of purity, but is instead drawn toward her by an encounter with unassimilable alterity, on the same level, face to face. The light with which Asneth now shines, like Christ's mountain transfiguration in

Matthew 17, signifies that Asneth has been commissioned and empowered to carry out a new ministry: the ministry of refuge, of harboring and nurturing alterity within her Egyptian-Jewish “*cité bild of joye*” (558).

The nature of Asneth’s new ministry as the “*Moche of Refute*” will be more clearly understood when considering Asneth’s encounter with the divine. In this encounter, Asneth is instructed that she cannot nourish the other in her midst from her own cultural storehouse, but must instead receive and learn from difference. Asneth learns from the angel that the “*straunger*” must be allowed to speak on its own behalf, offer its own explanation, speak to us how best to be nourished, and not be reduced to the needs of her own community. Asneth also learns that the non-reductive encounter with difference involves risk, requires exposure, a receptive posture, and freely given trust, which is what some call faith in things not yet “*verified*,” for to verify would be to assimilate into an already accepted system of knowledge: one must have faith in the stranger who surprises us through our epistemological vulnerabilities. After Joseph departs, Asneth finally recognizes the impoverishment that lurks at the heart of purity: “*Asneth abood soul alone with sevene virgines clene*” (273). Despite the fact that she is *with* seven pure virgins—seven pure spiritual exemplars—she is utterly alone, surrounded by nothing but the “*same old same old*.” The difference introduced by Joseph’s presence has receded, and light and color has been drained from life: or, perhaps, Asneth is now simply aware of how monotone and dead—sepulchral white, like homogenized milk—purity is. However, Asneth’s newfound loneliness, in which she recognizes the poverty of her condition now and hitherto this moment, places her in the posture of penitent receptivity required for transformation. Responding to and enabled by Asneth’s posture of receptivity, the angel arrives through her

tower window (the window being symbolic of the very point of vulnerability at the heart of all systems of purity despite their best efforts to defend themselves viciously and vigorously). For one to be transformed by what is “divine” within the stranger, by what shines in the face of the other, one must assume that one does not already have the answer and interpretation for every new encounter: one must be open to what the stranger can teach.<sup>17</sup> As the epigraph to this paper suggests, for life, learning, and change to occur, purity must be laid as low as Asneth in the midst of her penitential prayers.

Furthermore, the angel’s “gift” of teaching to Asneth reinforces, again and again, the above lesson of encountering difference with transformative receptivity (and I call it a gift because a gift cannot be demanded, but arrives unexpectedly, concealed in wrapping paper that prevents our foreknowing). One of the first things the angel asks Asneth to do is to wash the ashes (the mark of her sorrow) off of her body, but when she attempts to conceal herself with a veil—when she attempts to take up once again the posture of defensive purity—he commands her to uncover her head, for she, in her difference, is “fair to se” (448). The angel teaches her, so to speak, that the face of the other must not be occluded, erased, hidden behind (or kept out by) high walls and armed men. When the angel asks her for a honeycomb to eat, Asneth—who has a masterful account of what lies within her cultural storehouse, as Hume notes—claims that she does not have such a thing, but the angel demands that she have faith and check again. When Asneth scours her larder once again, she is surprised to find a honeycomb miraculously provided by the angel (526). Not only is this a lesson in listening to, risking to trust, the voice of the other, but a lesson in the

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<sup>17</sup> If my reading does not seem to pay enough attention to the language of Asneth’s lengthy penitential prayers or the angel’s miracle, it is for two reasons: first, it is because I am attempting to pay attention to textual details that have not been adequately considered in the already limited scholarship on the *Storie of Asneth* and, secondly, I am attempting not to stray too far afield from the present inquiry concerning how Asneth transforms our understanding of medieval models of encountering difference. Many analyses of Asneth’s narrative could and should be (and, I hope, will be) written that build upon the lacunae herein.

fact that listening to the stranger in our midst can reveal and provide resources that one could not provide for one's self or one's community "sool alone" (273). Finally, after Asneth eats of the honeycomb, the angel proclaims that "blessed be they" that come to God through Asneth in the same mode of "holy penance" through which she passed, for they shall "ete of this comb" and learn the self-same lessons (545-546). With that, the angel announces, cryptically, that Asneth's "vertu" shall "never faile" and her "juvente schal have non age" (555-6). Asneth's youth shall never age, and she shall never die, but she shall become a "cité bild of joye, withoute endynge" (558), armed not with walls and weapons but with an open heart and faith in the stranger. Asneth has been transformed into the emblem of an eternal city where those who repent of the violence of purity will find refuge, and their sorrow turned to joy and everlasting life. Furthermore, a small but brilliant textual detail: though the text is careful to note Joseph's death, Asneth never dies (her death is neither documented in the narrative, nor within the scriptures). Such a detail is perhaps to say through not saying that though every virgin tower can be defended for a time, but eventually crumbles, the city with open walls built of "joy," not stone—the mark of an elusive, static permanence—provides the image of a model of encountering difference that can survive the seismic flux of the ages. In repenting of purity and receiving the name of "Refuge of Many," Asneth has been transfigured from virgin to welcoming mother (and she does indeed become a mother, shortly after, to two of the twelve tribes of Israel).

The non-reductive, receptive encounter with difference modeled by Asneth's communion with the angel is a radically different model of encountering difference than the models constructed and deployed by purity that are represented, again and again, throughout the medieval canon. For this reason alone, the *Storie of Asneth* is of exquisite value.

Furthermore, Asneth, a motherly refuge, helps us to transform what Gayatri Spivak calls the “obvious narrative of marriage” (289) through which power is concentrated and linguistic, cultural, religious, sexual, *et cetera*, purity is maintained through the management of bloodlines through female sexuality. The text resists reducing post-conversion Asneth to pure Jewishness: her children of the tribes of Israel are irreducibly Egyptian and Jewish. Asneth’s *Storie* reveals what the tradition desires to occlude: that she is the Egyptian-Jewish matriarch of Judeo-Christianity (which is no small thing), and that, revealed as such, she is invested with an abiding, receptive power that extends beyond the *Storie* (that is, beyond history articulated solely in a white European Judeo-Christian idiom). Asneth’s marriage to Joseph and her progeny with him binds Egypt to Israel, and bind both, through the Christian tradition, to Western Europe with an insuperable bond, whether the classical, ancient, or modern police of purity like it or not. She will always be there to disrupt their efforts and to welcome the stranger they despise; one might even call this Asneth’s “Egyptian girl magic.” Asneth’s children, and the children of the tradition in which she is a Matriarch, are of mixed-blood, poly-lingual, and powerful—and, insofar as the fifteenth century reader of her text belonged to the Judeo-Christian tradition, her text reveals that they, too, are one of her children.

As a final note on the above, my reading of Asneth’s transformation may seem to be an entirely too idealistic gloss of Asneth’s post-conversion significance. Asneth’s new-found power of “refuge” might be read differently and more traditionally (that is, reductively), if supplicants had to get on their knees and cry to Asneth for mercy in order to benefit from the shelter of her hybrid powers. Desperate supplication is a gesture that Louise O. Fradenburg suggests passively reinforces the superiority of she who is supplicated (and the



superiority of the tradition she represents); in countless anti-semitic legends of “Marian Motherhood,” Fradenburg notes that “the virgin’s willingness to intercede for those so abject as to be otherwise beyond hope of inclusion into the body” represented a “specially triumphant” act of Christian self-aggrandizement because the “perfidious Jews” who come to her had finally fallen so low as to forego their stubborn pride and recognize Her (and Her Son’s) one true power (90). But, and this is the stroke of genius hiding so patiently within the last third of the poem, the *Storie* resists all attempts to appropriate and consolidate Asneth’s sheltering wings for the Judeo-Christian tradition alone. After abducting Asneth in order to turn her over to the lascivious desires of Pharaoh’s oldest son, Gad and Dan run and hide from the wrath of Asneth’s avengers. They have aided in the will to abduct and rape another man’s wife which is, in the schema of patriarchal purity, a defilement of domestic space and control (the sacred heart of “purity,” where sexuality is bound). The ultimate penalty for their act is almost certain death, because a regime of purity must “kill” that which opposes its laws. Gad and Dan, as I see it, have three choices: accept their lawful death, flee and hide, or supplicate the one they have wronged (Asneth) for mercy. Each of these three choices would legitimate the power structure that that has decided that they must die for their wrongful penetration of the purity of the domestic space. Indeed, they choose to hide; they do not supplicate Asneth for mercy. But she extends her refuge to them—her captors—anyway. In a commanding voice, Asneth interrupts the law of purity with a transcendent act of mercy: “Ye schal not now do this thyng” (864). As Fradenburg notes, and if Asneth’s aegis of “motherhood” were more traditionally “Marian,” Gad and Dan would have had to supplicate on their knees at her feet, so abject as to be unworthy of being redeemed except through begging the one they have wronged; however, Asneth’s free gift of mercy *to those who*

*did not even ask*, to those who dwell outside of the “proper” borders of the kingdom of heaven and of purity’s law, throws the gates of Judeo-Christian mercy open-wide. Her ethical example instructs her reader to do likewise.

#### **IV. On Mothers: Asneth and Mary as Intertestamental Matriarchs**

The consistent Marian imagery deployed in association with Asneth may initially tempt us to reduce Asneth to the ways in which the Virgin Mary signified meaning to medieval Christians and to Christians today. But, having demonstrated how the *Storie* resists such reductions, we are enabled to read Mary according to an Asnethian hermeneutic instead. We are enabled to reimagine how Asneth transfigures what the Virgin Mary might signify to her devotees (reimagining Mary through Asneth is one of the ways in which Asneth’s undying power might live on). I see that Asneth reimagines the significance of Mary in at least two ways: first, Asneth allows us to situate Mary within a multi-cultural lineage that ruptures the tendency to figure Mary as the white mother of a white Christ and, furthermore, that uncovers the cross-cultural encounters that energized the formation of Judeo-Christianity. Secondly, Asneth allows us to treat as primary (instead of secondary) Mary’s status as a “mother,” a status often subjected in the Judeo-Christian tradition to the status of her virginity..

As to the first re-imagining, even as Asneth was commanded to lay down the occlusive veil of purity, Asneth commands us to lay down the veil of the white-washed idiom of purity behind which Mary is often hidden (and through which idiom Mary is often mobilized against difference). That is, Asneth allows her reader to place Mary within a long lineage of Matriarchs that together represent the polyblend fabric out of which the Judeo-Christian

tradition is constructed, and that the tradition tries its hardest to bleach away in accordance with the law “Thou shalt not wear a garment that is woven of two sorts.”<sup>18</sup> Asneth places Mary in proximity to Mary’s own alterity, and, in doing so, ruptures the aggressively Anglo-Euro-centric tendencies of the Western tradition, allowing for a broader definition of the community (*castellum*, walled city) which Mary might signify; the community given form in Mary, read through Asneth, has the potential to include even those who do *not* supplicate for Mary’s intercession (that is, those who are not subject to Christendom’s laws). In this, the *Storie* is not quite unique: similar to how the *Storie* places Asneth’s Egyptian-Jewishness firmly within the lineage of powerful Jewish Matriarchs, the only other reference to Asneth in Middle English does precisely the same for Mary. John Lydgate’s poem, *To Mary, the Queen of Heaven* reads thus:

O bussh unbrent, shewed to Moyses,  
 Iudith the secounde, þat saued al Israel,  
 Assenek off Egipt, of beaute pereles,  
 Souereyn Sara of refut and cheeff Rachel  
 For our Sauacioun salued bi Gabriel... (33-37)

Lydgate’s lines of effusive praise intimately link Mary to a whole host of Matriarchs of differing origins, including one (“Judith”) who is often erased from the lineage by certain ideas of what constitutes a “pure” Christianity (like Judith, so too is Asneth labeled “apocryphal,” albeit even more-so “hidden away,” accepted in no canonical list). Yet Lydgate proudly positions Mary as a queen among the Egyptian, Jewish, hidden queens of Judeo-Christianity. Placed as she is in close proximity to Asneth and to the others, Mary’s fundamental Jewishness is (re)revealed. In a tradition that often “forgets”—tactically, no doubt—that Mary, and by extension Jesus, was Jewish before she was “Christian,” the *Storie*

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<sup>18</sup> Leviticus 19:19

(and Lydgate's poem) enable us to see the Jewishness, even the Egyptianess, of Christianity's founding *Mother*. Mary, read through Asneth's refashioning of the tropes associated with her, becomes the Matriarch of a Judeo-Egyptian-Christianity.

Therefore I think it is correct, for different reasons, when Nisse calls both Asneth and Mary "intertestamental' figure[s]" (752) who dwell within the "liminal space" between the Old and New Testament. They are "intertestamental" not because Asneth acts as a foreshadow or "type" of the Mary to come, thereby ratifying the belief that Mary is the fulfillment of Jewish scriptures as Ruth Nisse reads it (this would be to reduce Asneth to a Marian typology). Rather, they are "intertestamental" because they hold hands across, and therefore deny the reality of, the supercession. Asneth and Mary, Judith and the Jewish Matriarchs, woven in close proximity prevent the closure of the tradition and prevent any claims to its "purity" and superiority which might catalyze violence in the name of its defense or evangelization. Read in such a way, Mary can no longer be mobilized so easily against the alterity that she herself now begins to signify through Asneth's critique of purity, thereby eviscerating the power of pollution beliefs and regimes of purity that use the Virgin Mary as their crux. One is reminded of the words of Gayatri Spivak's mother in response to Spivak's disgust and rejection of an English inflected by the "accent of upstate New-York": "Dear, it is a mother tongue" (284). It is *a* mother-tongue: not "the," and maybe not "your" mother-tongue, but one among many—and it is perfectly acceptable for them to coexist. Recognizing and affirming multiple mothers—mother tongues, mother idioms, Egyptian, Jewish, Christian—within the Judeo-Christian tradition is what the *Storie* is all about. The tongue of the Mother Mary, transformed through Asneth, is no longer a single tongue, but one that speaks with many voices. One could even say, the more mothers, the "Mary-er."

Speaking of mothers, the second way in which Asneth's narrative allows us to reimagine what Mary might signify to medieval readers is this: Asneth, through her refashioning of Marian tropes, allows us to place the primacy on Mary's maternity instead of her virginity. More often than not, Mary is hailed as a virgin before mother—she is the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. One exception might be Chaucer's Marian Prologue to the Prioress's Tale: "O mooder Mayde, O mayde Mooder free!" (467); but, as one can see, he quickly "corrects" the syntactical order of "mayde" and "mooder" to more accurately reflect the orthodox, returning quickly to the praise of her purity. In fact, so "virgin" was Mary—that is, so separated from what regimes of purity imagine to be the impurity of sexuality—that even her conception in the womb of her mother, St. Anne, warranted the articulation of a special doctrine: the "Immaculate Conception," in which the sexual act of Mary's parents transmitted to her no sin. But reading Mary through Asneth allows her reader to take up a much more affirmative view of female sexuality and of motherhood: rather than "motherhood" being a shameful thing from which Mary needs to be exempted—she is a virgin *even though* she is Mother—motherhood becomes a powerful intercessional role in and of itself, second to none. In such a reading, marriage and motherhood no longer takes third place after virginity and widowhood, a lesser but still permissible vocation for those women who choose not to live a life of spiritual elitism. Instead, the Mother Mary, along with the Mother Asneth, fashions the maternal as an exemplary, and even superior, place from which to advance ethics of encountering difference and building community. The Mother Mary does not demand that the "other" be expelled, exterminated, or erased, but welcomes the sojourner in her eternal city to feast at her table. Asneth lays Mary's virginity low, and empowers her maternity in its stead; in a sense, Asneth becomes the shadow of Mary's

penance (indeed, one of Asneth's name is "penaunce," *metanoia*; line 468), preceding Mary always, reminding her devotees to repent of the violence done to the other in the name of her "purity."

## Conclusion

If there are any omissions in the analysis above, as there certainly are, I pray you, as the translator prayed his "maystresse" (itself a very Marian intonation), "grave hem with yowr glose" (31). That is, add your tongue to mine and make this a more wholesome work. This study marks but the beginning of what this scholar hopes is a renewed interest in the *Storie of Asneth*, in which, perhaps, each of my theses above are systematically interrogated, found wanting, and rejected. If so, let it be; for even then Asneth will no longer be quite so easily occluded from the canon of medieval literature, the discourse of the academy, or Judeo-Christian history (and there is some triumph in that), for we will be forced to finally see her. But of one thing I am certain: that Asneth, taken in all of her complexity—gender ideologies, cross-cultural encounters, tropes of virginity, tropes of maternity, conversion, purity—does not easily allow us to read the history of medieval Christian's encountering difference quite as reductively as we may have become accustomed to do. Asneth does not allow us to easily annihilate her significance by placing her in a history of "conversion" read, time and time again, as the medieval Judeo-Christian drive to homogenize or totalize alterity. Asneth will neither be easily reduced to a Jezebel, nor a Mary. A matriarch in her own right, this scholar firmly believes that Asneth ruptures the reductive drive and the history that that drive tells of itself, thereby providing an alternative model of encountering difference based in maternity, vulnerability, and exposure instead of in purity, virginity, and enclosure. If we

wish to hold on to our assumptions, we must at least first reckon with her, the Egyptian-Jewish presence “hidden” at the heart of classical-medieval Christianity, face to face. Asneth can no longer be ignored, (still) unknown and forgotten.

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## Vita

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