



PROJECT MUSE®

Promiscuous Grace: Imagining Beauty and Holiness with Saint Mary of Egypt by Sonia Velázquez (review)

Kathryn Phipps

Hispanic Review, Volume 94, Number 2, Spring 2026, pp. 357-360 (Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hir.2026.a987585>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/987585>



REVIEWS

VELÁZQUEZ, SONIA. *Promiscuous Grace: Imagining Beauty and Holiness with Saint Mary of Egypt*. U of Chicago P, 2023, 224 pp.

In a compelling demonstration of interdisciplinary research, Sonia Velázquez argues that Saint Mary of Egypt complicates discourses of beauty and holiness at the intersection of religion and materiality. Her provocative title, *Promiscuous Grace*, elucidates Saint Mary of Egypt's challenge to established archetypes of feminine sensuality and saintliness. Velázquez demonstrates that her beauty is not a straightforward sign of holiness—as is the case for the Virgin Mary—nor is it a vain quality that must be purified to turn a sinner into a saint, exemplified by Mary Magdalene. Instead, she argues that Saint Mary of Egypt's "promiscuous grace" enables the "both/and" of paradox to coexist: linking beauty to the grotesque and holiness to promiscuity.

These findings are particularly significant for scholars studying gender in early modernity, as Velázquez departs from scholars of women mystics like Carolyn Walker and Amy Hollywood, who demonstrate the religious meaning of female bodies at the nexus of the senses and the transcendental. Instead, Velázquez examines the didacticism of a saint whose conversion fails to offer transparent lessons on saintliness of the female body, instead embodying instructive paradoxes that invite contemplation. To this end, Velázquez engages emerging trends in feminist theology, dialoguing primarily

with Krista Hughes, to advance our understanding of the centrality of “incarnational poetics” in medieval and early modern artistic and religious production that bridge the divine to the human in paradoxical coexistence (9).

More broadly, the work intervenes at the nexus of art history, literary studies, and religion. She joins David Morgan and other scholars of religion to prove “things matter” (6) by bringing new attention to the question of aesthetics—particularly the beauty of the female body; and vice versa, she contends “religion matters” to art history and literary scholarship (2). While she links early modern predominance of representations of Saint Mary of Egypt to the theological problematization of images during the Reformation, the work is not—as she states—a historical exposition of the development of Saint Mary of Egypt’s cult (9). Instead, she asks us to consider the complexities between grace as beauty in form and as holiness that permits relationship between the divine and the human, contending grace “would seem to be promiscuous by definition” (19).

Moreover, “promiscuous grace” conceptually speaks to her methodology, inviting readers to “think with” Saint Mary of Egypt and engage a marked fluidity between form and meaning, materiality and spirituality. She defines grace “as that which bridges the putative divide between holiness and sensuality” (19), and promiscuity as “moving forward (pro-)” through “mixing and assembling (*miscere*)” (9). While the geographic scope of her corpus centers on seventeenth-century Iberia, she blends visual, verbal, and aural materials with a fluidity that makes for engaging and contemplative reading. She integrates prose, painting, prints and theater with careful attention to form to examine how beauty and holiness operate in tandem, paradoxically bound together with their opposites: ugliness and beauty, youth and old age, sinfulness and holiness.

Her argumentation integrates this notion of promiscuity in her corpus, which blends genres with astute attention to form. First, she engages hagiographical narratives in prose and verse, dedicating two chapters to the verse biography of Saint Mary of Egypt, *La vida de Santa María Egipciaca*, an anonymous Spanish text from the thirteenth century. She examines a series of seventeenth-century portraits of Saint Mary of Egypt by Jusepe de Ribera, and then examines the performative embodiment of visual and verbal representations in Juan Pérez de Montalbán’s play *La gitana de Menfis, Santa María Egipciaca*. She concludes by shifting geographically and temporally away from early modern Spain, to consider the portrait of Saint Mary of

Egypt in Honoré de Balzac's *Le chef-d'œuvre inconnu*—attesting to the endurance of Saint Mary of Egypt's complication of ideals of holiness and beauty.

For readers of *Hispanic Review*, her first chapter, "Image Theory According to Saint Mary of Egypt," is particularly significant in challenging a dominant presumption of the didactic immediacy of religious images in the Catholic tradition. As an image of the Virgin Mary is central to Mary of Egypt's conversion, Velázquez analyzes retellings of the legend that provide theological and artistic defenses of the use of images that do what she terms the "dream of immediacy," referencing the didactic potential of images for instructing an unlettered populace. Instead, she argues that Francisco Pacheco's *Arte de la pintura, su antigüedad y grandeza* (1649) reveals that even in a Catholic treatise that generally affirmed the didactic utility of images as immediately perceptible and emotively persuasive, "something about Mary of Egypt troubles painting's effect of immediacy" (34). She uncovers a similar usage in her earliest source, which dates back to the Fourth Lateran Council, where Peter the Reader recounted Mary of Egypt's conversion in defense of the use of images, not because seeing is believing, but "because every ugly stitch of mediation is visible, images pave the way not to a transcendent elsewhere but rather to a manifestation of the divine through grace *here*" (36). This is what she terms the "image theory according to Saint Mary of Egypt," and she devotes attention to the messy "stitches" of material form in the remainder of her argument.

Throughout the work, Velázquez "thinks with" Saint Mary of Egypt by taking promiscuity of form to her own argumentation, blending words and images to invite readers into a deeper contemplation of beauty and holiness. For instance, she reads an ekphrastic sonnet by Natasha Trethewey that describes Diego Velázquez's *Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus* to elucidate an integration of holiness and the quotidian to argue that the kitchen maid "becomes a powerful figuration of grace's reach" in both representations (41). In another instance, she demonstrates how Mary of Egypt paradoxically bridges two dominant archetypes of beauty and holiness, transposing an allegorical reading onto W. E. Hill's *My Wife and My Mother-in-Law*, an optical illusion that shows a young and an old woman integrated into one argumentative image.

Altogether, Velázquez composes a hauntingly provocative window into the multidimensional contours of beauty, gender, and religion in Early Modern Iberia. Whether coming to the book from Hispanism, Gender and Sexuality

Studies, or Religion, when readers respond to the introduction's subtitle, "an invitation to imagine," they will discover in her argumentation the same methods she contends that Mary of Egypt's legend requires: careful, contemplative encounters between words and images that eschew immediate and transparent didactic lessons, to instead ask us to stop and slowly consider "a type of beauty and holiness capable of holding all these contradictions" (17)—contradictions beautifully encapsulated within *Promiscuous Grace*.

KATHRYN PHIPPS
Bryn Mawr College

CHRISTINA KARAGEORGOU-BASTEA. *Beyond Intimacy: Radical Proximity and Justice in Three Mexican Poets*. McGill-Queens UP, 2023, xi + 203 pp.

At a recent concert by Argentinean pianist Adrián Iaies, I found myself with an obstructed view of the performer's hands, but a clear view of his face. What might have been a less than ideal vantage point on the artist's performance turned out instead to be a remarkably clarifying position. For although we might expect a pianist to channel the energies of a performance through the hands, Iaies's facial expressions made it abundantly clear that he was in constant conversation: with himself, with his instrument, with composers and performers from the past, with his own prior performances and recordings, and with the discoveries and surprises he happened upon during the course of his live performance, which irradiated outwards from his facial expressions to the audience's unexpected insight. To hear his playing without seeing his face was to witness a performance of marvelous artistry; to watch it play out over his facial features was to gain a sudden glimpse into the conversations taking place in and through and around an artwork.

Similarly, Christina Karageorgou-Bastea's invigorating study *Beyond Intimacy: Radical Proximity and Justice in Three Mexican Poets* puts us face to face with her chosen poets, helping us to see and hear the animated conversations in which they engage. Plunging the reader into the often intransigent yet always absorbing writings of the Mexican poets Abigael Bohórquez (1936–1995), Myriam Moscona (b. 1955), and Gloria Gervitz (1943–2022), Karageorgou-Bastea shows how their poetry pursues a quest for community, for justice, for memory, and for possible futures. She delves deeply into the languages, voices, and subjects that surround these poets, probing the question of relationality,